

Qualitative Research: Design, Methods, & Online Mode

Articles in *Research Design Review* in 2020

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Research Design Review – www.researchdesignreview.com – is a blog first published in November 2009. RDR currently consists of approximately 250 articles and has 780+ subscribers along with over 900,000 views. The 14 articles that were published in RDR in 2020 are compiled in this document. These articles include those pertaining to broad issues in design, such as sample size, as well as more narrow topics concerning specific methods – focus groups, ethnography, in-depth interviews, and case study research – and the online mode.

Additional compilations of RDR articles are available for download. These include: **The In-depth Interview Method: 12 Articles on Design & Implementation**, **The Focus Group Method: 18 Articles on Design & Moderating**, **Qualitative Data Analysis: 16 Articles on Process & Method**, **Qualitative Research: Transparency & Reporting**, **Reflexivity: 10 Articles on the Role of Reflection in Qualitative Research**, and **Methodology**.

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Qualitative Research: A Call for Collective Action



Among the many keynote speakers, presentations, and posters at the [American Psychological Association 2020 Virtual Convention](#) (which is available online until August 1, 2021), the program includes a symposium on “Questioning Qualitative Methods – Rethinking Accepted Practices.” This session includes three presentations: “Do We Have Consensus About Consensus? Reconceptualizing Consensus as Epistemic Privilege” (by [Heidi Levitt](#)), “Is Member-Replication Important for Qualitative Researchers?” (by [Sue Motulsky](#)), and “Is

Checking the Gold Standard of Quality Within Qualitative Research?” (by [Rivka Tuval-Mashiach](#)).

[Ruthellen Josselson](#) serves as discussant for this session. In her remarks, Dr. Josselson uses the symposium theme of “rethinking accepted practices” to discuss the second-tier status or “marginalization” of qualitative research, particularly in the field of psychology, and suggests a way to think differently about working in qualitative research. Josselson begins by acknowledging the core realities of qualitative research. Drawing on the panelists’ presentations – and not unlike an earlier article in *Research Design Review* on the [“10 Distinctive Qualities of Qualitative Research”](#) – she highlights unique aspects of qualitative research such as the multiple, contextual nature of “truth,” the absence of isolated variables to measure, and the impossibility of exact replication. These realities, however, do not or should not condemn qualitative research to the periphery of the research methods arena.

To drive qualitative research away from the periphery and its marginalized status, Josselson offers an approach centered on “collectivism” or the idea of a concerted effort among qualitative researchers to investigate phenomena *together* with the objective of making meaningful contributions toward addressing the research issue. In this spirit, qualitative researchers set out “to know together” the nuances of a research problem along with plausible, useful paths forward. For example, in the analysis and reporting of a research study, Josselson suggests that, rather than simply citing relevant papers in the literature to support the author’s particular hypothesis or method, researchers conduct a more thorough analysis of the topic area and incorporate thoughtful discussions of all research relevant to the research question, including outliers or outcomes demonstrating contrary findings. It is in this way that qualitative researchers can build on each other’s work, foster a collaborative approach to unraveling research problems, and potentially make a more profound impact on tackling research issues compared to isolated research efforts.

Not unlike the various strategies and tactics espoused for raising the quality – the rigor – in qualitative research (e.g., (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Lincoln, 1995; Meyrick, 2006; Morrow, 2005; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Tracy, 2010), embracing a united call to action, where each study builds upon the other and qualitative researchers work together for the “collective good,” helps to elevate the value and significance of qualitative research within the broader research community.

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Here are just a few ideas on how qualitative researchers can work together to help raise the perceived value of qualitative research:

- Build on earlier research and make that the objective of your research.
- Discuss how your approach or design is the same or different than earlier research on the topic area.
- Discuss how your research makes a valuable contribution to a research problem or question.
- Fully disclose the quality features built into your research design.
- Discuss the possible sources of variations in your findings compared to others' research.
- Discuss the opportunities for future research on the research question.
- Be transparent in reporting all aspects of your research.
- Be an advocate for data sharing. As [Anna Tarrant](#) and [Kahryn Hughes](#) discuss in [“The re-use of qualitative data is an under-appreciated field for innovation and the creation of new knowledge in the social sciences.”](#) the utilization of shared data presents

“new directions...for thinking through questions concerning researchers’ formative engagement with existing data, as well as methodological innovations for addressing these. Additionally, the [use of shared data] demonstrates the creative potential of re-apprehending data in new and novel ways, both in how existing datasets may be reused for the purposes of new thinking, but also effective ways of taking existing relationships from previous research forward.”

A conversation on a collective approach to qualitative research is worth having, and one that will hopefully grow and expand among qualitative researchers over time.

Levitt, H. M., Motulsky, S. L., Wertz, F. J., Morrow, S. L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2017). Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity. *Qualitative Psychology*, 4(1), 2–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qap0000082>

Lincoln, Y. S. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(3), 275–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049500100301>

Meyrick, J. (2006). What is good qualitative research? A first step towards a comprehensive approach to judging rigour/quality. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 11(5), 799–808. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105306066643>

Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 250–260. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250>

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 13–22.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>

Image captured from: <https://sites.tufts.edu/ihs/what-worked-fighting-corruption-through-collective-action/>

Sample Size in Qualitative Research & the Risk of Relying on Saturation

Qualitative and quantitative research designs require the researcher to think carefully about how and how many to sample within the population segment(s) of interest related to the research objectives.

In doing so, the researcher considers demographic and cultural diversity, as well as other distinguishing characteristics (e.g., usage of a particular service or product) and pragmatic issues (e.g., access and resources). In qualitative research, the number of events (i.e., the number of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, or observations) and participants is often considered at the early design stage of the

research and then again during the field stage (i.e., when the interviews, discussions, or observations are being conducted). This two-stage approach, however, can be problematic. One reason is that giving an accurate sample size prior to data collection can be difficult, particularly when the researcher expects the number to change as the result of in-the-field decisions.

Another potential problem arises when researchers rely solely on the concept of saturation to assess sample size when in the field. In [grounded theory](#), theoretical saturation

“refers to the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 345)

In the broader sense, Morse (1995) defines saturation as “‘data adequacy’ [or] collecting data until no new information is obtained” (p. 147).

Reliance on the concept of saturation presents two overarching concerns: 1) As discussed in two earlier articles in *Research Design Review* – [Beyond Saturation: Using Data Quality Indicators to Determine the Number of Focus Groups to Conduct](#) and [Designing a Quality In-depth Interview Study: How Many Interviews Are Enough?](#) – the emphasis on saturation has the potential to obscure other important considerations in qualitative research design such as data quality; and 2) Saturation as an assessment tool potentially leads the researcher to focus on the obvious “new information” obtained by each interview, group discussion, or observation rather than gaining a deeper sense of participants’ contextual meaning and more profound understanding of the research question. As Morse (1995) states,



“Richness of data is derived from detailed description, not the number of times something is stated...It is often the infrequent gem that puts other data into perspective, that becomes the central key to understanding the data and for developing the model. It is the *implicit* that is interesting.” (p. 148)

With this as a backdrop, a couple of recent articles on saturation come to mind. In [“A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research”](#) (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020), the authors present a novel approach to assessing sample size in the in-depth interview method that can be applied during or after data collection. This approach is born from quantitative research design and indeed the authors reference concepts such as “power calculations,” p-values, and odds ratios. When used during data collection, the qualitative researcher applies the assessment tool by calculating the “saturation ratio,” i.e., the number of new themes derived from a specified “run” of interviews (e.g., two) divided by the “base” number of “unique themes,” i.e., themes identified at the initial stage of interviewing. Importantly, the rationale for this approach is lodged in the idea that “most novel information in a qualitative dataset is generated early in the process” (p. 6) and indeed “the most prevalent, high-level themes are identified very early on in data collection, within about six interviews” (p. 10).

This perspective on saturation assessment is balanced by two other recent articles – [“To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-size Rationales”](#) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and [“The Changing Face of Qualitative Inquiry”](#) (Morse, 2020). In these articles, the authors express similar viewpoints on at least two considerations pertaining to sample size and the use of saturation in qualitative research. The first has to do with the importance of meaning¹ and the idea that finding meaning requires the researcher to actively look for contextual understandings and to have good analytical skills. For Braun and Clarke, “meaning is not inherent or self-evident in data” but rather “meaning requires interpretation” (p. 10). In this way, themes do not simply pop-up during data collection but rather are the result of actively conducting an analysis to construct an interpretation.

Morse talks about the importance of meaning from the perspective that saturation hampers meaningful insights by restricting the researcher’s exploration of “new data.” Instead of using “redundancy as an indication for broadening the sample, or wondering why this replication occurs,” the researcher stops collecting data leading to a “more shallow” analysis and “trivial” results (p. 5).

The second consideration related to saturation discussed in both the Braun and Clarke and Morse articles is the idea that sample size determination requires a nuanced approach, with careful attention given to many factors related to each project. For researchers using reflexive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke mention 10 “intersecting aspects,” including “the breadth and focus of the research question,” population diversity, “scope and purpose of the project,” and “pragmatic constraints” (p. 11). In a similar manner, Morse includes on her list of eight “criteria” such items as “the complexity of the questions/phenomenon being studied,” “the scope of inquiry,” and “variation of participants” (p. 5).

The potential danger of relying on saturation to establish sample size in qualitative research is

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multifold. The articles discussed here, and the image above, highlight the underlying concern that a reliance on saturation: 1) ignores the purpose and [unique attributes of qualitative research](#) as well as each study, along with a variety of quality considerations during data collection, which 2) misguides the researcher towards prioritizing manifest content over the pursuit of contextual understanding derived from latent, less obvious data, which 3) leads to superficial interpretations and 4) ultimately results in less useful research.

¹ Sally Thorne (2020) shares this perspective on the importance of meaning in her discussion of pattern recognition in qualitative analysis – “...qualitative research is meant to add value to a field rather than simply reporting what we can detect about it that has the qualities of a pattern... it should clearly add to our body of understanding in some meaningful manner.” (p. 2)

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLOS ONE*, 15(5), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>

Morse, J. (2020). The changing face of qualitative inquiry. *International Journal for Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1–7.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920909938>

Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(9), 1212–1222. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004>

Thorne, S. (2020). Beyond theming : Making qualitative studies matter. *Nursing Inquiry*, 1–2.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12343>

Qualitative Analysis: ‘Thick Meaning’ by Preserving Each Lived Experience

My approach to qualitative data analysis has nothing to do with Post-it Notes, clipping excerpts from transcripts (digitally or with scissors), or otherwise breaking participants’ input (“data”) into bite-size pieces. My approach is the opposite of that. My goal is to gain an enriched understanding



of each participant’s lived experience associated with the research questions and objectives and, from there, develop an informed contextually nuanced interpretation across participants. By way of deriving “thick meaning” within and across participants, I hope to provide the sponsor of the research with consequential and actionable outcomes.

I begin the analysis process immediately after completing the first in-depth interview (IDI) or focus group discussion by writing down (typically, in a spreadsheet) what I think I learned from each participant or group discussion pertaining to the key research questions and objectives as well as any new, unexpected yet

relevant topic areas. I do this by referring to my in-session notes (for IDIs) and the IDI or group discussion audio recording. I then give thoughtful study and internalize each participant’s lived experience associated with the research questions and objectives which enables me to gain an understanding of the complexities of any one thought or idea while also respectfully preserving the integrity of the individual or group of individuals. “Preserving the integrity of the individual or group of individuals” is an important component of this approach which is grounded in the belief that researchers have a moral obligation to make a concerted effort to uphold each participant’s individuality to the extent possible in the analytical process.

At the completion of the final IDI or focus group discussion, I begin reflecting more heavily on what I learned from each participant or focus group *in conjunction with* my learning from the other participants or group discussions. This is where I derive thick meaning from otherwise basic, straightforward opinions or ideas. For example, in an IDI study with cancer patients, many participants may have talked about their “relationship” with their physician and the importance of the patient-doctor “relationship” to their overall comfort level with treatment. However, a good “relationship” will be defined very differently by participants depending on the peculiarities of their experiences, including (but not limited to) those related to their lifestyle, cultural, and demographic characteristics. It is the contextual nuances of each journey in the treatment process that will define “relationship.” And it is these distinguishing shades of the patient-physician “relationship” that paint a thick, meaningful understanding of this construct.

At some point I will begin coding the data. Importantly, however, an interview or group discussion will not be coded based on whether, for example, “relationship” was mentioned in response to any

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particular question, but rather the coding will reflect the complete context of the individual. It may happen, for example, that the interview participant talked a lot about the patient-physician relationship at the beginning of the interview but then steered away from this as the interview, and the participant's contemplation, progressed. Indeed, the participant may have come to identify the relationship with the family, not the physician, as being the biggest contributor to a positive experience with treatment, upending the participant's earlier definition of "relationship" as well as the role of the physician.

In essence, the appropriate unit of analysis in a qualitative study is the IDI participant or focus group discussion. Defining the unit of analysis as "the entirety of a research interview or focus group discussion [is] more likely to provide the researcher with contextual entities by which reasonable and valid meanings can be obtained and analyzed across all cases" (see [Qualitative Data Analysis](#)). Other discussions in *Research Design Review* – e.g., [The Qualitative Analysis Trap \(or, Coding Until Blue in the Face\)](#), [The Limitations of Transcripts: It is Time to Talk About the Elephant in the Room](#), [Sample Size in Qualitative Research & the Risk of Relying on Saturation](#) – have expressed a similar view; that is, the depth and richness of our outcomes are not achieved by separating participants from their lived experiences. It is not the deconstruction of personal experiences, thoughts, and ideas into discrete codes or topical clips that is the primary focus of the analysis but rather the personal context of the experiences, thoughts, and ideas we uncover that allow researchers to build a thick stew of meaning within and across participants in answer to the research questions.

Image captured from: <https://goverb.com/discover/>

Strengths of the Focus Group Method: An Overview

The following is a modified excerpt from [*Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 111-112).

Strengths

The unique advantage of the group discussion method is clearly the **participant interaction** and what it adds to (goes beyond) what might be learned from a series of in-depth interviews (IDIs).



When conducted to achieve its full potential, the back-and-forth dialogue among the participants benefits the researcher (and the quality of the data) in several important respects:

- A dynamic group discussion will often stimulate spontaneous ideas and personal disclosures that might otherwise go unstated in an IDI.
- A relaxed, interactive, as well as a supportive (e.g., homogeneous) group environment can be conducive to discussing sensitive topics (e.g., a discussion of the immigration process among recent Chinese immigrants to the United States).
- As participants exchange opinions, they

consider their own views in relation to others’—which may encourage participants to refine their thoughts. In this way the group interaction gives the researcher insight into how people think about the topic(s) being studied and on what basis opinions may change. For example, in a focus group with college students who are considering various study-abroad programs, some participants might change their criteria for selecting one program over another after hearing other participants’ considerations. This discussion would help the researcher identify the important aspects of study-abroad programs that may impact students’ decision making.

Participant interaction, or the social aspect of focus group discussions, can be a particularly important advantage when conducting research with **vulnerable and underserved population segments**. For instance, women’s studies researchers such as Wilkinson (1999) believe that focus groups offer feminist psychologists an important research approach over other psychological research methods because they (a) come “closer to everyday social processes” (p. 227) and are less “artificial” than other methods; (b) are highly interactive, which “produces insights that would not be available outside the group context” (p. 229); and (c) reduce the moderator’s “exploitation” of the research by shifting control of the discussion to the participants. Other researchers have found the social nature of focus group discussions to be conducive to investigating societal constraints and health needs among Emirati women (Bailey, 2012; Winslow, Honein, & Elzubeir, 2002).

There are two other important strengths of the group discussion method: (1) it allows for the **presence of observers**, especially in the face-to-face (in-person and sometimes video) mode; and (2) it increases the likelihood that **a wide range of attitudes, knowledge, and experiences** will be captured in one group session. Whereas most qualitative research methods can conceivably

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accommodate observers, observers tend to take on a particularly engaged and active role in group interviewing. Face-to-face focus groups are traditionally conducted at a facility equipped with a one-way mirror (and online video group platforms also offer a client backroom), behind which members of the research team can view and hear the discussions. (Note: Group participants are informed of the presence of observers prior to the discussion.) Viewers often include people affiliated with the research sponsor who have a vested interest in learning firsthand about the attitudes and behavior of members of the target population. In addition to gaining clarity on participants' wants and needs, observers can be helpful in redirecting the discussion on the spot, if necessary, when participants make unanticipated comments that introduce a new way of thinking about the research topic. In these situations, it is important to be able to change course in the research or otherwise pursue new lines of questioning as unanticipated insights emerge from the discussions.

The range of opinions and behavior that can be represented in any one focus group is another important strength of the method because such a range is a factor in finding the “surprising insights” mentioned above. Even the most homogeneous group of participants will relate different experiences and thoughts, thereby giving the researcher an awareness and appreciation of the extent of divergent views on a particular issue. Unlike the IDI method that requires many separate interviews to uncover the spectrum of perspectives related to the subject matter, group discussions offer a time- and often cost-efficient method for revealing differing viewpoints.

Bailey, D. C. (2012). Women and Wasta: The use of focus groups for understanding social capital and Middle Eastern women. Retrieved from The Qualitative Report website: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/bailey.pdf>

Wilkinson, S. (1999). Focus groups: A feminist method. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 23(2), 221–244.

Winslow, W. W., Honein, G., & Elzubeir, M. A. (2002). Seeking Emirati women's voices: The use of focus groups with an Arab population. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 566–575. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129119991>

Image captured from: https://www.clipartkey.com/view/momihb_organization-clipart-focus-group-clipart-debate-competition/

Limitations of the Focus Group Method: An Overview

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 112-113).

Limitations

The **interactive, dynamic nature** of group discussions (see [“Strengths of the Focus Group Method: An Overview”](#)) may also present a potential limitation to the method. The exchange of information and ideas may have the positive effect of eliciting new insights, but it may also have the damaging effect of unwittingly influencing responses from participants who are reluctant to voice dissenting opinions and just want to go along with the prevailing mood. Although a professional moderator can often identify the more introverted or shy participants in a group and use rapport-building techniques to encourage their candidness, these attempts are not always successful and the research outcomes may reflect more agreement on an issue than is actually warranted. Whether the nonexistence of differing attitudes among group participants is due to the reluctance of people to speak their minds or an honest reflection of personal points of view, some researchers can easily fall into the trap of believing that this lack of opposing attitudes is the same as a group consensus. As stated by Sim (1998, p. 348), “the absence of diversity in the data does not reliably indicate an underlying consensus” but is rather a possible product of the group environment, which may mask individual opinions.



Alongside the potential downside of group dynamics is the **critical role of the moderator**. Professional moderators trained in the complexities of group interviewing are essential to the success of the group discussion method. Although competent researchers are important to all qualitative methods, weak or not-fully-trained moderators pose a particular limitation to the focus group method where a myriad of factors can sway the outcomes one way or the other. The moderator not only has to deal with group dynamics, individual personalities, possible disruptive behavior, and potential runaway dialogue, but must also have the ability to (a) spark conversation as needed; (b) exude a firm but gentle authority over the group with a relaxed, personable style; and (c) minimize potential bias from the influence of domineering participants and/or peripheral aspects, such as observers and audiovisual equipment in face-to-face discussions.

An additional limitation (or, at least, a real challenge) to the group discussion method involves **ethical considerations**, particularly the issue of guaranteeing confidentiality to the participants. There are many people involved in a focus group study, all of whom will be privy to the research subject matter as well as the comments made by individual members of the group. The research topic may be a guarded secret (e.g., a pharmaceutical company’s new product concept) or, at the least, not for public knowledge (e.g., proposed policy changes to the county schools’ education

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program for gifted children), yet all the relevant information is necessarily disclosed to everyone involved with the research: group participants, observers, recruiters, as well as facility personnel and audiovisual operators (as needed for face-to-face discussions). Likewise, participants are encouraged to be candid and may be asked to reveal personal or otherwise sensitive information, which they can be expected to provide only if they feel safe in the discussion environment. A signed consent form—stipulating the purpose, process, risks/benefits of the research, as well as the confidentiality of all participant information (or not, e.g., if a video recording of the discussion will be used in the final presentation) and the option to withdraw from the study at any time—from all group participants is important; however, the reality is that there is no way the researcher can totally guarantee confidentiality.

Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analysing qualitative data: Issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(2), 345–352. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9725732>

Focus Groups: Heterogeneity vs. Homogeneity

The following is a modified excerpt from [*Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 107-109).



Fundamental to the design of a focus group study is group composition. Specifically, the researcher must determine the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity that should be represented by the group participants. As shown below, there are many questions the researcher needs to contemplate, such as the extent of similarity or dissimilarity in participants' demographic characteristics, as well as in their experiences and involvement with the subject matter.

Questions When Considering Heterogeneity vs. Homogeneity

A few of the questions the focus group researcher might consider when determining the desired heterogeneity or homogeneity among group participants include:

- Should participants be in the same age range and/or stage of life?
- Should participants be the same gender, race, and/or ethnicity?
- Should participants be at a similar income, socio-economic, or educational level?
- Should participants reside in the same community, be members of the same organization(s)?
- Should participants have similar professions or jobs (including, job titles)?
- Should participants have a similar involvement, experience, or knowledge with the research topic, e.g., the same types of problems with their 13 year old boys? the same healthcare service provider? the same purchase behavior? the same level of expertise with a new technology?

Whether or not—or the degree to which—group participants should be homogeneous in some or all characteristics has been at the center of debate for some years. On the one hand, Grønkjær, Curtis, Crespigny, and Delmar (2011) claim that at least some “homogeneity in focus group construction is considered essential for group interaction and dynamics” (p. 23)—for example, participants belonging to the same age group may have similar frames of reference and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with people who have lived through the same experience. In the same vein, Sim (1998) states that, “the more homogeneous the membership of the group, in terms of social

background, level of education, knowledge, and experience, the more confident individual group members are likely to be in voicing their [own] views” (p. 348). Even among strangers, there is a certain amount of comfort and safety in the group environment when the participants share key demographic characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and/or relevant experience.

A problem arises, however, if this comfortable, safe environment breeds a single-mindedness (or “groupthink”) that, without the tactics of a skillful moderator, can stifle divergent thinking and result in erroneous, one-sided data. Heterogeneity of group participants (e.g., including users and nonusers of a particular childcare service within the same focus group) potentially heads off these problems by stimulating different points of view and a depth of understanding that comes from listening to participants “defend” their way of thinking (e.g., product or service preferences). As Grønkjær et al. (2011) state, “a group may be too homogeneous; thus, influencing the range and variety of the data that emerges” (p. 26). The tension that heterogeneity may create in a group discussion can serve to uncover deeper insights into what is being studied, providing the moderator is able to channel this tension in constructive directions. In addition to a heightened level of diversity, heterogeneous groups may also be a very pragmatic choice for the researcher who is working with limited time and financial resources, or whose target population for the research is confined to a very narrow group (e.g., nurses working at a community hospital).

Ultimately, the answer to the question of whether group participants should be homogeneous or heterogeneous is “it depends.” As a general rule, group participants should have similar experiences with, or knowledge of, the research topic (e.g., using the Web to diagnose a health problem, weekly consumption of fat-free milk), but the need for “sameness” among participants on other parameters can fluctuate depending on the circumstance. Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, and Davidson (2007), for example, report that homogeneity of age is particularly important in non-Western countries where younger people may believe it is disrespectful to offer comments that differ from those stated by their elders. Homogeneous groups are also important when investigating sensitive topics, such as drug use among teenagers, where a more mixed group of participants with people who are perceived as “different” (in terms of demographics and knowledge/experience with drugs) may choke the discussion and lead to a struggle for control among participants (e.g., one or more participants trying to dominate the discussion).

Homogeneity of gender, on the other hand, may or may not be important to the success (usefulness) of a focus group study. For example, an organization conducting employee focus group research to explore employees’ attitudes toward recent shifts in management would need to conduct separate groups with men and women in order to discover how the underlying emotional response to new management differs between male and female employees. In contrast, a focus group study among city residents concerning public transportation might benefit from including both men and women in the same discussion, among whom the varied use and perceptions of the transportation services would serve to stimulate thinking and enrich the research findings. The heightened level of dynamics in groups that are heterogeneous in gender and other aspects may also provoke conversations on taboo subjects (e.g., racism) that might not be forthcoming in other methods such as in-depth interviews.

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Grønkjær, M., Curtis, T., de Crespigny, C., & Delmar, C. (2011). Analysing group interaction in focus group research: Impact on content and the role of the moderator. *Qualitative Studies*, 2(1), 16–30.

Halcomb, E. J., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M., Phillips, J., & Davidson, P. M. (2007). Literature review: Considerations in undertaking focus group research with culturally and linguistically diverse groups. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 16(6), 1000–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2006.01760.x>

Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analysing qualitative data: Issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(2), 345–352. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9725732>

Images captured/created from: <https://www.thoughtco.com/heterogeneous-definition-and-example-606355>

From Sociology to Health Care, Psychology, Education, Communication, & Marketing Research: The Many Uses of Ethnography

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 177-179) which is a qualitative methods text covering in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, ethnography, qualitative content analysis, case study, and narrative research.



Ethnography is used across the health and social sciences where the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings associated with particular customs or behaviors by living the experience to the degree possible.

Anthropologists have traditionally conducted lengthy and entrenched ethnographic studies among native tribes in distant lands; however, beginning in the early 1970s, anthropologists such as Spradley (1972) put their ethnographic

skills to work closer to home, researching social groups on American soil, such as men on skid row (and, specifically, the “culture” of alcoholism). The observation method (along with ancillary methods) has since been utilized by anthropologists to study a host of Western social groups and phenomena, expanding even into the virtual online world with, for example, Internet-based research to examine the expatriate experience in Buenos Aires (Freidenberg, 2011).

Researchers in the health sciences have used [onsite nonparticipant observation](#) coupled with in-depth interviews to study the level of advice and knowledge pharmacists impart in their interactions with their customers (Cramer, Shaw, Wye, & Weiss, 2010), the obstacles nurse board members face in impacting community health care policy (Hughes, 2010), and the treatment of older people with dementia in the hospital setting (Jurgens, Clissett, Gladman, & Harwood, 2012).

Ethnography has been used in the field of psychology in work that ranges from onsite nonparticipant observation of decision making in closed facilities of the mentally ill (Lyall & Bartlett, 2010) to planting [covert observers](#) in psychiatric hospitals (i.e., [complete participant observation](#)) to study the environment in which psychiatric diagnoses are made (Rosenhan, 1973).

Sociologists such as Haenfler (2004) and Williams (2006) have used the methods of complete participant observation and online ethnography, respectively, to study the youth [“straight edge” subculture](#) in order to understand the values and belief system of this group as well as the personal experiences and meanings in identity associated with belonging to this subculture, including the pledge to abstain from recreational drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.

Researchers in education have used ethnography to investigate the in-classroom experience, specifically teachers’ approaches to educating school-age children on topics such as environmental issues (Cotton et al., 2010), as well as values and morality (Thornberg, 2008).

Qualitative Research: Ethnography

With the advent of digital communications, journalism researchers have conducted ethnographies to study how newsrooms are dealing with the transition from print to online publication (Robinson, 2011) as well as the use of new technology (Mabweazara, 2010).

Ethnography has also become popular among corporate and marketing researchers. “Corporate anthropologist” [Brigitte Jordan](#), for example, conducted an ethnographic study for Intel Corporation in their assembly plants in Costa Rica and Malaysia to study the interaction, communication, work-flow issues, and productivity among employees (Jordan & Lambert, 2009). Mariampolski (2006) has adapted ethnography for marketers to observe consumers and business customers going about their daily routines in their natural environments. These ethnographic studies have included the investigation of diabetes patients’ use of glucose measurement devices; at-home use of paper towels and potential new uses of paper towels; decision making at the retail level for a variety of consumer goods manufacturers (e.g., shelf-stable Mexican foods) by way of “shop-along” observation (i.e., the researcher shops with the consumer participant as a [passive participant](#)); consumer behavior associated with seasonal and year-round barbecue grilling; and how various types of businesses compile reports for their customers utilizing specific office equipment.

Another obvious use of ethnography is in the study of open spaces. This includes research into such areas as the public spaces at a university library and how these spaces impact students’ learning experiences (May, 2011), as well as the design and social implications of the coffee shop as a community gathering space (Waxman, 2006).

Although ethnography may not be associated with research on delicate or sensitive topical areas, there are instances when ethnographers have successfully completed nonparticipant observational studies on sensitive issues. One example is the work Mariampolski conducted for faucet manufacturer Moen, Inc., to observe showering behavior among consumers (see [ElBoghdady](#), 2002). In that study, the researcher recruited “social nudists” to be videotaped (using a specially devised video recording system) while going through their usual showering routine. As another example, Forbat, White, Marshall-Lucette, and Kelly (2012) report on a study involving onsite nonparticipant observations of clinician–patient consultations with men in various stages of prostate cancer treatment. The purpose was to learn what is spoken (and what is implied but not spoken of directly) in these consultations by the clinicians with patients (and their partners who also attended these consultations); and, specifically, the content and manner in which the topic of sexual functioning was discussed.

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Qualitative Research: Ethnography

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Gathering Quality Ethnographic Data: 3 Key Considerations

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 204-206).

Data Gathering is one of two broad areas of the [Total Quality Framework Credibility component](#) that affects all qualitative research, including ethnographic research. There are three primary aspects concerning the gathering of data in ethnography that require serious consideration by the researcher in the development of the study design. To optimize the measurement of ethnographic data, and hence the quality of the outcomes, researchers need to pay attention to:



- How well the observers have **identified and recorded all the information** (e.g., verbal and nonverbal behavior, attitudes, context, sensory cues) pertinent to the research objectives and constructs of interest. A well-developed [observation guide and observation grid](#) can assist greatly in this effort. Not unlike the development of an in-depth interview or discussion guide, the ethnographer seeks to identify those observable events—including the specific individuals (or types of individuals), the verbal and nonverbal behaviors, attitudes, sensory and other environmental cues—that will further the researcher’s understanding of the issues. During the design development phase, the researcher might isolate the observations of interest by:
 - Looking at earlier ethnographic research on the subject matter and/or with similar study populations.
 - Interviewing the clients or those who have requested the research to learn everything they know about the topic and their past work in the area.
 - Consulting the literature or other experts concerning the behaviors and other occurrences associated with particular constructs.
 - “Shagging around” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) the observation site(s) to casually assess the environment and begin to learn about the participants.
- **Observer effects**, specifically—
 - **Observer bias**, that is, behavioral and other characteristics (e.g., personal attitudes, values, traits) of the observer that may alter the observed event or bias their observations. For example, an observer as a [complete participant](#) would bias the observational data if there was an attempt to “educate” participants on a subject matter for which the observer had personal expertise or knowledge.
 - **Observer inconsistency**, that is, an inconsistent manner in which the observer conducts the observations that creates unwarranted and unrepresentative variation in the data. For example, an [on-site nonparticipant observer](#) conducting in-home

observations of the use of media and technology would be introducing inaccuracies in the data by observing and recording the use of television and gaming in some households but not in others where television and gaming activities took place.

- **Participant effects**, specifically, the extent to which observed participants alter a naturally occurring event, leading to biased outcomes. This is often called the [Hawthorne effect](#), whereby the people being observed, either consciously or unconsciously, change what is being measured in the observation because they are aware of the observer. For example, an ethnographer conducting an overt, [on-site passive observation](#) of teaching practices in a school district would come away with misleading data if one or more school teachers deviated from their usual teaching styles during the observations in order to more closely conform with district policies.

LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982). Ethnographic data collection in evaluation research. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 4(3), 387–400.

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Ethnography: Number of Observations

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 199-201), a qualitative methods text covering in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, ethnography, qualitative content analysis, case study, and narrative research.

An important decision that ethnographic researchers need to make is the number of observations to conduct, or, more accurately, the number of:

- Sites to observe.
- People within sites to observe.
- Observational events (e.g., how often to revisit a particular site).



Addressing this question can be complex—a process of both art and science—or fairly straightforward. In the simplest case, the **number of sites to observe** and observation events will be dictated by the (1) breadth and depth of the research objectives, (2) breadth and depth of the target population, and/or (3) practical realities of the research (e.g., the accessibility of the target participants, financial resources, and time available to complete the study). If, for example, the research objective is to examine the implementation of new procedures at a county free clinic, the number of sites to observe is just one (the clinic) and the frequency of observations will be determined by

such factors as the fluctuation in the patient load (i.e., the slow- and high-volume hours in the clinic) and level of procedural details the observer wants to capture.

A more complex situation arises when the focus of the research is on a broad target population such as consumers. For instance, ethnographic research to study how consumers shop for vitamins would most likely require many observations of the same or different individuals within a variety of retail environments (e.g., supermarkets, drug stores, and superstores such as Target or Walmart). As a consumer researcher, Mariampolski (2006) recommends that the ethnographer observe no less than 15 sites; however, it is the expansiveness of the research objectives and target population, as well as practical matters, that may ultimately serve as the prime bases in the decision of how many sites to observe and how often.

In addition to the number of sites to observe, the ethnographer also wants to carefully consider **how many individuals as well as the “type” of individuals** who will be observed. As an example, is the observer interested in studying everyone on staff at the county free clinic (e.g., the receptionist, the nursing assistants, the nurses, and the physicians), or are the new procedures under investigation only pertinent to one aspect of the clinic, such as patient registration and check-in?

For all ethnographic research, the overriding “goal is to get at the meanings behind the acts” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 197) as they relate to the constructs under investigation. Not unlike the decision of

[how many in-depth interviews are sufficient](#) for a research study, an ethnographic researcher must consider the **number of observations** (site and individual) at both the design and fieldwork phase. Ultimately, the researcher wants “enough” observations to be confident that the range of variation in what is being studied has been captured by the observations; however, the number that is anticipated when developing the research design may need to be adjusted when in the field. If there is more variation than expected, the researcher will need to extend the number of observations; otherwise, the lack of additional observations may threaten the [Credibility](#) of the study by missing something important in the behaviors of interest. A study concerning visitor attendance to the state park, for example, may need to expand the number of observations originally planned to include unexpected variations in behavior that occur during different weather conditions. In turn, if there proves to be less variation than expected—for instance, if park visitors behave very similarly regardless of weather, demographics, or other factors—the prudent researcher will want to make an explicit decision about terminating the field period sooner than had been planned. The caveat is that, although the researcher’s confidence in the variations of behaviors being observed is important, the decision to either extend or cut short the observations may also boil down to the practical or logistical realities of the study itself (e.g., safety concerns for a researcher observing in a high-crime area of the city, travel plans that cannot reasonably be changed, other types of ancillary research such as in-depth interviews that are also being conducted for the study and whose timing cannot be changed, and meeting others’ expectations to complete the research as planned).

Although there may not be an exact way to decide how many observations to conduct, a [Total Quality Framework](#) approach guides the researcher towards explicitly addressing a number of questions while in the field to assess this issue:

- How well have the observations provided insight on the constructs of interest?
- Is it clear to the observer what has been observed? What is the extent of the ambiguity?
- At what level can the observer explain or anticipate variations in the observations?
- Does the observer’s reflexive journal reveal any biases or concerns with objectivity?
- Have the observations provided the necessary input to facilitate next steps (i.e., the ancillary methods such as in-depth interviews)?

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

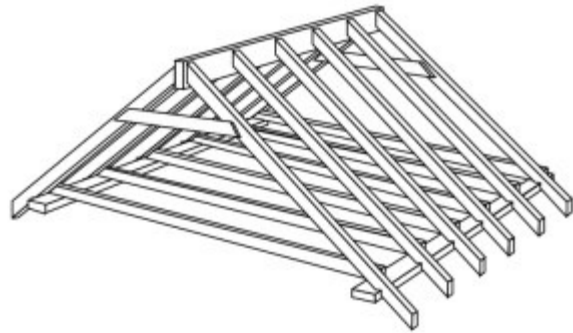
Mariampolski, H. (2006). *Ethnography for marketers: A guide to consumer immersion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Supporting Observational Research

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 217-219) which is a qualitative methods text covering in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, ethnography, qualitative content analysis, case study, and narrative research.

An important element in the [Total Quality Framework Analyzability component](#) is

Verification, i.e., taking steps to establish some level of support for the data gathered in order to move the researcher closer to achieving high quality outcomes. The verification tools at the ethnographer's disposal go beyond [those identified for the in-depth interview \(IDI\) and group discussion methods](#) in that they include the technique of expanded observation. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that it is “more likely that credible findings and interpretations” will come from ethnographic data with



“prolonged engagement” in the field and “persistent observation” (p. 301). The former refers to spending adequate time at an observation site to experience the breadth of stimuli and activities relevant to the research, and the purpose of the latter (i.e., persistent observation) is “to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue” (p. 304)—that is, to provide a depth of understanding of the “salient factors.” Both prolonged engagement and persistent observation speak to the idea of expanding observation in terms of time as well as diligence in exploring variables as they emerge in the observation. Although expanding observations in this way may be unrealistic due to the realities of deadlines and research funding, it is an important verification approach unique to ethnography. When practicable, it is recommended that researchers maximize the time allotted for observation and train observers to look for the unexpected or examine more closely seemingly minor occurrences or variables that may ultimately support (or contradict) the observer’s dominant understanding.

The ultimate usefulness of expanded observation is not unlike deviant or negative case analysis (see earlier link). In both instances, the goal is to identify and investigate observational events (or particular variables in these events) that defy explanation or otherwise contradict the general patterns or themes that appear to be emerging from the data. For example, a researcher conducting in-home [nonparticipant observations](#) of young mothers may find that infants are typically put back in the crib when they begin to cry, which seems to be a routine behavior among the mothers observed. The observer may come to the assumption that mothers equate crying with fatigue and place their infants in the crib so they can rest. But observations of mothers who do not respond to their crying infants yet put them to bed at similar times of the day may give the observer a different point of view and lead her to explore other factors, such as, the mother’s fatigue and need to be away from the baby. It is this ability to always question assumptions and look for factors that disprove these assumptions that enhance the quality and ultimate usefulness of ethnographic research.

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As in all qualitative research, triangulation is an important procedure for investigating support of observational data. The purpose of triangulation, similar to deviant case analysis, is to integrate other ways of looking at the data into the analysis. One example is researcher triangulation, which might include collaborating with other members of the research team in the data collection and processing phases, or asking someone on the research team to review transcripts or the observer's reflexive journal to give her/his own assessment. As with deviant case analysis, any differences that may surface between the researcher's and the colleague's interpretations should be treated as an opportunity to learn more about the underlying meanings from the observations.

Another triangulation-like consideration is offered by Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey (2006), who discuss the variation of meanings in ethnographic research derived from different media. The idea is that the meaning of an observed event is transformed by the different modes of capturing the data. So, for instance, the researcher needs to consider what meaning in the data is lost or gained by listening to the spoken word in an audio recording compared to reading the written word in text. This "media triangulation" becomes particularly complex in an online context, where hyperlinking makes it nearly impossible to decipher the participant's experience. For example, as Dicks et al. state, "How does a piece of video film change when linked to a piece of written text? And what kind of reading or interpretation is produced by that linkage when the reader can pursue an almost infinite number of traversals and linkages of his/her own?" (p. 94).

Dicks, B., Soyinka, B., & Coffey, A. (2006). Multimodal ethnography. *Qualitative Research*, 6(1), 77–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058876>

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Image captured from: <https://seblog.strongtie.com/2018/06/roof-framing-building-strong-roofs/>

In-depth Interview Data: Achieving Quality From Cooperation

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 75-77)

An important aspect related to [Scope within the Credibility component](#) of the [Total Quality Framework \(TQF\) for qualitative research design](#) is the extent to which the researcher is successful in gaining cooperation from the participants. In an in-depth interview (IDI) study, the researcher is



concerned with the impact that the proportion of selected interviewees not interviewed or only partially interviewed has on the integrity of the data. This is the domain of research that is often termed “nonresponse.” If this proportion is large and/or if the group that is selected but not interviewed differs in meaningful ways from those who are interviewed, bias can infiltrate the final data of an IDI study and compromise the credibility of the research.

To avoid this, qualitative researchers need to give serious a priori thought to how they will gain high and representative levels of cooperation from the persons they have selected to interview, and how individuals who do not cooperate may differ in past experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge compared to interviewees. The researcher must keep in mind that bias may enter into the outcomes, and the credibility of the study’s findings and interpretations thereby weakened, if the characteristics of those in the sample who do not cooperate with an IDI study are correlated with the key topics the study is investigating. Likewise, qualitative researchers using the IDI method should also constantly monitor the representativeness of the group of selected participants that does cooperate and watch whether the characteristics of that group deviate from the characteristics of the target population. This may be difficult in the case of [the email IDI](#) (or other asynchronous text-based mode) where the interviewer must stay alert to the consistency of participants’ responses and recognize when the identity of the interviewee may have changed (i.e., someone other than the recruited research participant is the one now responding). For instance, in an email IDI study among unemployed men, the interviewer may become suspicious when a participant who frequently misspells words and has stated that a chronic health problem prevents him from looking for a job writes in a later email, with no spelling errors, that he spends most of the day outdoors exercising or socializing with friends.

In trying to reduce or eliminate nonresponse as a potentially biasing influence on the final outcomes of an IDI study, the researcher should attempt to identify ameliorative approaches that would bring representativeness back into balance. There are several factors that researchers should consider when thinking about how to gain cooperation from a representative set of IDI interviewees, or when attempting to “fix” a lack of representation that is emerging during the field period. These include:

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- How the **purpose** of the study will be explained to an interviewee, without biasing what is learned during the interview (e.g., explaining the purpose of a study concerning television viewership as a study to learn about at-home activities).
- The **nonmaterial motivations** that will be used to achieve cooperation from the selected interviewees (e.g., emphasizing that the study's ultimate goal is to improve some aspect of people's lives).
- Whether any **material incentives** (e.g., cash, a gift card, prized tickets to a sporting event, donation to a favorite charity) will be provided, including their nature and value, and whether they are given in advance of the IDI (i.e., a noncontingent incentive) and/or after the IDI is completed (i.e., a contingent incentive).
- The positive or negative effect that knowing the **identity of the study's sponsor** may have on a participant's willingness to participate (e.g., corporate financial decision makers may be reluctant to participate in an IDI study if the sponsoring bank has recently received bad press due to questionable banking practices, or they harbor an assumption that the research is actually an attempt to sell products and services).
- The nature of any **advance notice**—both its substance (e.g., amount of detail) and form (e.g., a personalized letter in the U.S. mail or via FedEx on the research sponsor's letterhead vs. a generic email message)—that will be provided to interviewees before the interviewer directly makes contact.
- What the recruiter/interviewer will do to tailor (i.e., target, modify, adjust) the recruitment effort to the specific interview participant, as opposed to using a “one-size-fits-all” approach (e.g., taking time to reiterate the purpose of the study and personalizing the benefits of participation to someone who initially refuses). The success of tailoring is clearly linked to **the quality of the rapport the recruiter/interviewer is able to build with the potential interviewee**.

Image captured from: <https://drawtut.com/en/drawings-of-hands-in-different-styles-download/>

Generalizability in Case Study Research

Portions of the following article are modified excerpts from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 307-326)

Case study research has been the focus of several articles in *Research Design Review*. These articles range from discussions on case-centered research (i.e., case study and narrative research) generally — [“Multi-method & Case-centered Research: When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of its Parts,”](#) [“Lighting a Path to Guide Case-Centered Research Design: A Six-Step Approach,”](#) and [“Ethical Considerations in Case-Centered Qualitative Research”](#) — to articles where the subject matter is specific to case study research — [“Case Study Research: An Internal-External Classification.”](#)



One of the controversies associated with case study research designs centers on “generalization” and the extent to which the data can explain phenomena or situations outside and beyond the specific scope of a particular study. On the one hand, there are researchers such as Yin (2014) who espouse “analytical generalization” whereby the researcher compares (or “generalizes”) case study data to existing theory¹. From Yin’s perspective, case study research is driven by the need to develop or test theory, giving single- as well as multiple-case study research explanatory powers — “Some of the best and most famous case studies have been explanatory case studies” (Yin, 2014, p. 7).

Diane Vaughan’s research is a case study referenced by Yin (2014) as an example of a single-case research design that resulted in outcomes that provided broader implications (i.e., “generalized”) to similar contexts outside the case. In both *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (1996) and “The Trickle-Down Effect: Policy Decisions, Risky Work, and the *Challenger* Tragedy” (1997), Vaughan describes the findings and conclusions from her study of the circumstances that led to the *Challenger* disaster in 1986. By way of scrutinizing archival documents and conducting interviews, Vaughan “reconstructed the history of decision making” and ultimately discovered “an incremental descent into poor judgment” (1996, p. xiii). More broadly, Vaughan used this study to illustrate “how deviance in organizations is transformed into acceptable behavior,” asserting, for example, that “administrators in offices removed from the hands-on risky work are easily beguiled by the myth of infallibility” (1997, p. 97).

In contrast to Yin (2014), there are researchers such as Stake (1995), who believes that the purpose of case study research is “particularization, not generalization” (p. 8), and Thomas (2010), who rejects the concept of theoretical generalizability in case study research, believing instead that “the

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goal of social scientific endeavor, particularly in the study of cases, should be exemplary knowledge . . . that can come from [the] case . . . rather than [from] its generalizability” (p. 576). Thomas goes further in asserting that simply attempting to generalize case study data will have the detrimental effect of dampening the researcher’s “curiosity and interpretation” of the outcomes.

So, the prospective case study researcher is left with somewhat of a dilemma:

- Is my goal to generalize my case study to some greater theory?
- Is my goal to envelop myself in this particular case in order to find in-depth meaning and derive valid interpretations of the data for this case, and not to apply my results to a preconceived theory?
- Or do I want to strike some kind of balance and focus my analysis on “both the emergent theory that is the research objective and the rich empirical evidence that supports the theory” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 29)?

¹ Smith (2018) provides a broader discussion of analytical generalization along with three other types of generalizability in qualitative research, i.e., naturalistic, transferable, and intersectional.

Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), 25–32. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2007.24160888>

Smith, B. (2018). Generalizability in qualitative research: misunderstandings, opportunities and recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10(1), 137–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1393221>

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Thomas, G. (2010). Doing case study: Abduction not induction, phronesis not theory. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(7), 575–582. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410372601>

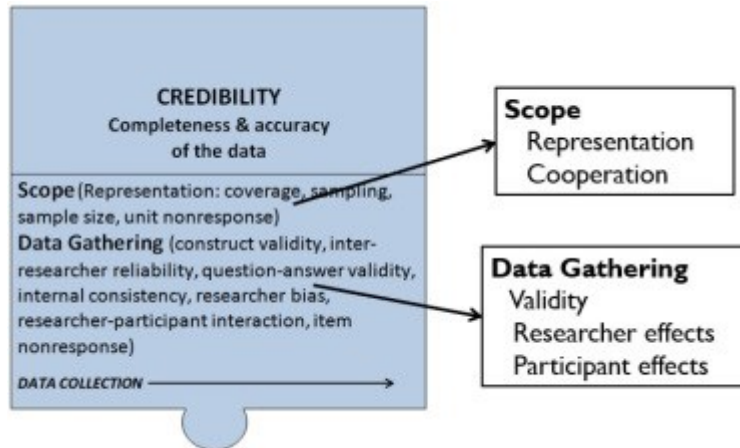
Vaughan, D. (1996). *The Challenger launch decision: Risky technology, culture, and deviance at NASA*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Vaughan, D. (1997). The trickle-down effect: Policy decisions, risky work, and the Challenger tragedy. *California Management Review*, 39(2), 80–102.

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Qualitative Tech Solutions: Coverage & Validity Considerations

Back in 2018, *Research Design Review* posted an article titled [“Five Tech Solutions to Qualitative Data Collection: What Strengthens or Weakens Data Quality?”](#) The focus of this article is on a presentation given in May 2018 concerning technological alternatives to qualitative research data collection. Importantly, the aim of the presentation was, not to simply identify different approaches



to data collection beyond the in-person and telephone modes but rather, to examine the strengths and limitations of these technological solutions from a data quality – specifically, [Credibility](#) – standpoint.

Broadly speaking, technological approaches to qualitative research data gathering offer clear advantages over in-person methods, particularly in the areas of:

- **Representation**, e.g., geographic coverage, potential access to hard-to-reach population segments;
- **Cooperation**, e.g., convenience and flexibility of time and place for participants, appropriateness for certain demographic segments (18-49 year olds*);
- Validity associated with **data accuracy**, e.g., research capturing in-the-moment experiences do not rely on memory recall;
- Validity associated with the **depth of data**, e.g., capturing multiple contextual dimensions through text, video, and images;
- Validity associated with data accuracy and depth allowing for the **triangulation** of data;
- **Researcher effects**, e.g., mitigated by the opportunity for greater reflection and consistency across research events;
- **Participant effects**, e.g., mitigated by the multiple ways to express thoughts, willingness to discuss sensitive issues, and (possibly) a lower tendency for social desirability responding; and
- Efficient use of **resources** (i.e., time, money, and staff).

There are also potential drawbacks to any technological solution, including those associated with:

- Uneven Internet **access and comfort** with technology among certain demographic groups (e.g., sampling favors “tech savvy” individuals), hard-to-reach and marginalized segments of the population;
- Difficulty in **managing engagement**, including the unique researcher skills and allocation of time required;
- Potential **participant burnout** from researcher’s requests for multiple input activities and/or days of engagement. This is a type of participant effect that negatively impacts validity;

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- **Nonresponse** due to mode, e.g., unwillingness or inability to participate to a mostly text-based discussion;
- **Data accuracy**, e.g., participant alters behavior in a study observing in-home meal preparation;
- Missing important **visual &/or verbal cues** which may interfere with rapport building and an in-depth exploration of responses;
- Difficulty managing **analysis** due to lots and lots of data (in volume & formats);
- **Fraud**, misrepresentation – “Identity is fluid and potentially multiple on the Internet” (James and Bushner, 2009, p. 35) and people may not share certain images or video that reveal something “embarrassing” about themselves**; and
- **Security**, confidentiality, anonymity (e.g., data storage, de-identification).

* <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

** <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180409006050/en/Minute-Maid-Debuts-New-Campaign-Celebrates-Good>

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Focus Groups: Moving to the Online Face-to-face Mode

There are many articles in *Research Design Review* about the focus group method. They range from broad discussions concerning the [strengths](#) and [limitations](#) of focus group discussions in qualitative research, to [determining the number of groups to conduct](#) for a particular study, to considerations when deciding on the [heterogeneity or homogeneity of focus group participants](#), to matters of moderating such as the [importance of gaining individual thinking in the group environment](#).



Most of these articles pertain to the in-person mode, where the moderator meets group participants at a local facility to discuss the research topic for 90 minutes to two hours. Alternatively, there are a variety of online solutions for the focus group method. One of the most popular are online asynchronous discussions (sometimes called “bulletin boards”) that take place over two to three or more days. As [discussed in a brief 2018 article](#), there are a number of strengths and limitations to the online asynchronous mode, including the advantages of flexibility, geographic spread of participants, and potential for multi-media input; as well as limitations such as that having to do with the absence of visual cues, managing participant engagement, and conducting the analysis.

As I write this in mid-March 2020, many researchers are scrambling to find ways to re-design their in-person focus group research during the current coronavirus pandemic crisis. In doing so, these researchers are taking a close look at moving from in-person discussions to an online mode that allows for some semblance of in-person groups by way of face-to-face, real-time interaction, i.e., synchronous video conferencing. For some (if not, most) of these researchers, the online face-to-face mode is a new experience and, as such, researchers are uncertain on how to proceed on two key facets of the research design: 1) the online service or platform they should use and 2) best practices when conducting online synchronous group discussions for research purposes.

With respect to the online service or platform, the researcher needs to weigh the scope of the study (e.g., type of participant) as well as the depth and breadth of the discussion guide. While simple interfaces such as those provided by [Zoom](#), [Webex](#), or [GoToMeeting](#) may offer the video interface, the researcher needs to think about what they may or may not be giving up in terms of the quality of the discussion. For instance, dedicated online qualitative research platforms – such as [itracks](#), [20/20 Research](#), [Civicom](#), [Discuss.io](#), and others – offer features and capabilities designed specifically for the demands of qualitative research. This includes the capacity to go beyond simple video conferencing (e.g., recording, screen sharing, and transcripts) by way of: recruiting participants; providing a community dashboard; aiding in question development; enabling in-discussion participant activity capabilities such as marking up images and creating collages; an observer “back room”; and various analytical functions such as image tagging as well as keyword and sentiment analysis.

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In terms of best practices when conducting online synchronous discussions, here are a few resources:

[“Considerations for and Lessons Learned from Online, Synchronous Focus Groups”](#) (Forrestal, D’Angelo, and Vogel, 2015)

[“Best Practices for Synchronous Online Focus Groups”](#) (Lobe, 2017)

[Online Moderator Training](#) with Casey Sweet and Jeff Walkowski

Although there are clearly limitations to the online mode in qualitative research (as mentioned earlier), there are also times and extraordinary situations (such as the current pandemic) when it is the best approach. In these times, it is incumbent on the researcher to think carefully about maintaining the integrity of their research as they move to an online face-to-face mode, to reflect on what was lost and gained in this approach, and to be transparent in the reporting of this research.

Forrestal, S. G., D’Angelo, A. V., & Vogel, L. K. (2015). Considerations for and lessons learned from online, synchronous focus groups. *Survey Practice*, 8(2), 1-8.

Lobe, B. (2017). Best Practices for Synchronous Online Focus Groups. In *A New Era in Focus Group Research* (pp. 227-250). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Images captured from: <https://pixabay.com/vectors/monitor-screen-computer-electronics-1143202/> and <https://www.istockphoto.com/illustrations/cartoon-people?mediatype=illustration&phrase=cartoon%20people&sort=mostpopular>