



**16 Articles on the 10 Unique
Attributes of Qualitative Research**

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The contents of this compilation include a selection of 16 articles appearing in [Research Design Review](#) from 2013 to 2022 concerning the unique attributes of qualitative research. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

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10 Distinctive Qualities of Qualitative Research



Adapted from: Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. New York: Guilford Press)

Researchers conduct qualitative research because they acknowledge the human condition and want to learn more, and think differently, about a research issue than what is usual from mostly numerical quantitative survey research data. Not surprisingly, the unique nature of qualitative inquiry is characterized by a distinctive set of attributes, all of which impact the design of qualitative research one way or the other. The 10 unique attributes of qualitative research* are the:

1. **Absence of “truth”** With all the emphasis in qualitative research on reality and the human condition, it might be expected that qualitative inquiry is in the business of garnering “the truth” from participants. Instead of “truth,” the qualitative researcher collects information from which some level of knowledge can be gained. The researcher does not acquire this information and knowledge in a vacuum but rather in a context and, in this way, the research data are a product of various situational factors. For this reason, qualitative researchers do not talk about the “truth” of their findings but rather the “plausibility” of their interpretations. Plausibility is derived from **achieving accuracy in the data collection process**, accuracy in the absence of absolute “truth.”
2. **Importance of context** A relevant factor in the elusiveness of “truth” is the central and significant role context plays in qualitative research. Whether it be the physical environment or mode by which an in-depth interview (IDI), group discussion, or observation is conducted the outcomes in qualitative research hinge greatly on the contexts from which we obtain this data.
3. **Importance of meaning** Although the goal of all research is to draw meaning from the data, qualitative research is unique in the dimensionality

of this effort. Qualitative researchers derive meaning from the data by way of multiple sources, evaluating any number of variables such as: the context, the language, the impact of the participant-researcher relationship, the potential for participant bias, and the potential for researcher bias. Several articles in *Research Design Review* discuss the importance of meaning, including [“Words Versus Meanings.”](#)

4. **Researcher-as-instrument** Along with the emphases on context, meaning, and the potential for researcher subjectivity, qualitative research is distinguished by the fact it places the researcher at the center of the data-gathering phase and, indeed, the researcher is the instrument by which information is collected. The closeness of the researcher to the research participants and subject matter instills an in-depth understanding which can prove beneficial to a thorough analysis and interpretation of the outcomes; however, this intimacy heightens concerns regarding the researcher’s ability to collect (and interpret) data in an objective, unbiased manner. Mitigating these effects is discussed [here](#).
5. **Participant-researcher relationship** Closely associated with the idea that the researcher is the tool by which data are gathered is the important function of the participant-researcher relationship in qualitative research and its impact on research outcomes. This relationship is at the core of IDIs, group discussions, and participant observation, where participants and researchers share the “research space” within which certain conventions for communicating (knowingly or not) may be formed and which, in turn, shapes the reality the researcher is capturing in the data. A discussion of this attribute along with two other unique attributes — importance of context and importance of meaning — can be found [here](#).
6. **Skill set required of the researcher** Qualitative research requires a unique set of skills from the researcher, skills that go beyond the usual qualities of organization, attention to detail, and analytical abilities that are necessary for all researchers. Techniques to build rapport with participants and active listening skills are only two examples. Qualitative researchers also need a special class of analytical skills that can meet the demands of contextual, multilayered analysis (see below) in qualitative inquiry where context, social interaction, and numerous other inter-connected variables contribute to the realities researchers take away from the field. Qualitative research involving multiple methods requires a special set of skills, as discussed in [“Working with Multiple Methods in Qualitative Research: 7 Unique Researcher Skills.”](#)
7. **Flexibility of the research design** A defining characteristic of qualitative research is the [flexibility built into the research design](#). For instance, it is not until a focus group moderator is actually in a group discussion that he or she understands which topical areas to pursue more than others or the

specific follow-up (probing) questions to interject. And, a participant observer has little control over the activities of the observed and, indeed, the goal of the observer is to be as unobtrusive and flexible as possible in order to capture the reality of the observed events.

8. **Types of issues or questions effectively addressed by qualitative research** Qualitative research is [uniquely suited to address research issues or questions](#) that might be difficult, if not impossible, to investigate under more structured, less flexible research designs. Qualitative inquiry effectively tackles: sensitive or personal issues such as domestic violence and sexual dysfunction; intricate topics such as personal life histories; nebulous questions such as “Is the current school leadership as effective as it could be?”; and contextual issues such as in-the-moment decision-making. Similarly, qualitative research is useful at gaining meaningful information from hard-to-reach or underserved populations such as children of all ages, subcultures, and deviant groups.
9. **Contextual, multilayered analysis** Without a doubt, the analysis of qualitative data does not follow a straight line, where point ‘A’ leads to point ‘B’, but rather is a multilayered, involved process that continually builds upon itself until a meaningful, contextually derived, and verifiable interpretation is achieved. The interconnections, possible inconsistencies, and interwoven contextual input reaped in qualitative research demand that researchers embrace the tangles of their data from many sources. A large contributor to the complexity of the analytical process is the inductive method. Qualitative researchers typically analyze their outcomes from the inside out, deriving their interpretations from the themes they construct from the data gathered. *Qualitative Data Analysis* is a compilation of 16 articles discussing various facets of qualitative analysis.
10. **Unique capabilities of online and mobile qualitative research** Online and mobile technology offer unique enhancements to qualitative research design. In large part, this technology has shifted the balance of power from the researcher to the online or mobile participant who is given greater control of the research process by way of more flexibility, convenience, and ways to respond in greater detail and depth to the researcher’s questions.

* Adapted from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller, M. R. & Lavrakas, P. J., 2015. New York: Guilford Press).

Qualitative Data: Achieving Accuracy in the Absence of “Truth”



Adapted from: *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. New York: Guilford Press)

One of the [10 unique attributes of qualitative research](#) is the “absence of truth.” This refers to the idea that the highly contextual and [social constructionist](#) nature of qualitative research renders data that is, not absolute “truth” but, useful knowledge that is the matter of the researcher’s own subjective interpretation. For all these reasons – contextuality, social constructionism, and subjectivity – qualitative researchers continually question their data, [scrutinize outliers \(negative cases\), and implement other steps towards verification](#).

Qualitative researchers also conduct their research in such a way as to maximize the accuracy of the data. Accuracy should not be confused with “truth.” Accuracy in the data refers to gaining information that comes as close as possible to what the research participant is thinking or experiencing *at any moment in time*. This information may be the product of any number of contextual (situational) and co-constructed factors – i.e., the absence of “truth” – yet an accurate account of a participant’s attitude or experience on a given issue or topic at a particular moment.

It is accuracy that qualitative researchers strive for when they craft their research designs to mitigate bias and inconsistency. For example, focus group moderators are trained to give equal attention to their group participants – allowing everyone an opportunity to communicate their thoughts – rather than bias the data – i.e., leading to inaccurate information – by favoring more attention on some

participants than on others. A trained moderator is also skilled at listening for inconsistencies or contradictions throughout a discussion in order to follow up on each participant's comments, asking for clarification, and ultimately coming away with an accurate "picture" of that participant in relationship to the topic *as communicated in that particular space and time*.

This pursuit of accuracy is no less evident in the in-depth interview (IDI) method. By attending to the [potential for interviewer bias](#) – from question wording, imposing personal beliefs or values into the conversation, physical appearance in face-to-face IDIs – as well as the seemingly contradictory statements made by interviewees, the qualitative researcher is focused on securing an accurate portrayal of how that participant thinks and behaves in association with the research objective. It is not uncommon, for instance, for an IDI participant to state one thing at the beginning of an interview but to make one or more outwardly conflicting statements later in the interview. Why is that? Which statement is accurate? Do the statements really contradict each other? What more does the interviewer need to learn about the interviewee? These are the questions the interviewer must address throughout the IDI in the quest for accurate data.

Achieving accuracy in the data collection process is, like all aspects of qualitative research, a nuanced and often difficult mission. It is, however, a mission worth pursuing because, unlike absolute "truth," it is an obtainable and necessary ingredient to deriving outcomes that enable consumers of the research to actually do something meaningful with the findings.

The Three Dominant Qualities of Qualitative Research



Adapted from: Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, New York: Guilford Press)

Among the [10 distinctive attributes associated with qualitative research](#), there are three that essentially encompass what it means to use qualitative methods – the importance of **context**, the importance of **meaning**, and the **participant-researcher relationship**. In fact, one could argue that these constitute the three dominant qualities of qualitative research in that they help to define or otherwise contribute to the essence of the remaining seven attributes. The “absence of absolute ‘truth’,” for instance, is an important aspect of qualitative research that is closely associated with the research (in-depth interview, focus group, observation) environment where the dominant attributes of context, meaning, and participant-researcher interactions take place. As stated in a [November 2016 Research Design Review article](#), the “absence of absolute ‘truth’”

refers to the idea that the highly contextual and social constructionist nature of qualitative research renders data that is, not absolute “truth” but, useful knowledge that is the matter of the researcher’s own subjective interpretation.

Similarly, there is a close connection between the “researcher as instrument” attribute and the three dominant qualities of context, meaning, and the participant-researcher relationship. A [July 2016 RDR article](#) described the association this way:

As the key instrument in gathering qualitative data, the researcher bears a great deal of responsibility for the outcomes. If for no other reason, this responsibility

hinges on the fact that this one attribute plays a central role in the effects associated with three other unique attributes – context, meaning, and the participant-researcher relationship.

Other distinctive characteristics of qualitative research – having to do with skill set, flexibility, the types of questions/issues that are addressed (such as sensitive topics, the inclusion of hard-to-reach population segments), the involved nature of the data, and the online and mobile capabilities – also derive relevance from the three dominant attributes. Having the necessary skill set, for instance, is important to discerning contextual influences and potential bias that may distort meaning; the particular topic of an interview and type of participant create contextual nuances that impact meaning; online and mobile qualitative research modes present distinct challenges related to context, meaning, and the participant-researcher relationship; and, of course, context and meaning supply the fuel that add to the “messiness” of qualitative data.

Of the three dominant attributes, the relationship between the participant and the researcher (the interviewer, the moderator, the observer) has the broadest implications. By sharing the “research space” (however it is defined), participants and researchers enter into a social convention that effectively shapes the reality – the context and the meaning – of the data being collected. This is particularly true in the in-depth interview method when “power dynamics” (Kvale, 2006) within the interview environment creates the possibility of “a one-way dialogue” whereby “the interviewer rules the interview” (p. 484), or there is a power struggle in which both participant and researcher attempt to control what is said or not said.

With few exceptions (e.g., [qualitative content analysis](#)), a social component, as determined by the participant-researcher relationship, is embedded in qualitative research methods regardless of mode (face-to-face, online, phone), resulting in dynamics that establish the context and meaning of the data along with the ultimate usefulness of the outcomes. The three dominant attributes – associated with context, meaning, and the participant-researcher relationship – are deeply entangled with each other and together cast an effect on the entire array of distinctive qualities in qualitative research.

Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance through interviews and dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(3), 480–500.

Member Checking & the Importance of Context



Adapted from: *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, New York: Guilford Press)

A [social constructionist orientation to qualitative research](#) leans heavily on many of the unique attributes of qualitative research. Along with the absence of “truth,” the importance of meaning, the participant-researcher relationship, and flexibility of design, context plays an important role as the social constructionist researcher goes about collecting, analyzing and interpreting, as well as reporting qualitative data. As depicted in the [Total Quality Framework](#), the phases of the research process are connected and support each other to the extent that the integrity of the contextually-rich data is maintained throughout.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) are often cited for their discussion of “member checks” or “member checking,” one of five approaches they advocate toward adding credibility to qualitative research. The authors describe the member check as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) because it requires the researcher to go back to participants (e.g., by way of a written summary or transcript, in-depth interview, group discussion) and gain participants’ input on the researcher’s data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions. This, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), allows the researcher to “assess intentionality” on the part of the participant while also allowing participants the “opportunity to correct errors” and/or give additional information, among other things.

Member checking has become a component in many qualitative research designs over the decades; however, it has also been the subject of much controversy. These criticisms range from pragmatic and practical aspects of member checking — e.g., Morse (2015) talks about the “awkward position” that member checking places on

the researcher when a participant does not agree with the analysis, leaving the researcher in a quandary as to *how or if* to alter the analysis and interpretation — to concerns for the potential emotional harm or burden inflicted on participants (Candela, 2019; Morse, 2015; Motulsky, 2020), to issues of quality and data integrity — for example,

“Investigators who want to be responsive to the particular concerns of their participants may be forced to restrain their results to a more descriptive level in order to address participants’ individual concerns. Therefore, member checks may actually invalidate the work of the researcher and keep the level of analysis inappropriately close to the data.” (Morse et al., 2002, p. 16)

An integral consideration associated with data quality and member checking goes back to the importance of context. When interview and focus group participants share their lived experiences with the researcher(s), it is within the context of the interview and discussion environments that are defined by a myriad of factors, including the participant-researcher relationship (e.g., rapport), the research topic and interview/discussion guide, the mode, the time of day, the “mood,” and any number of other details that contribute to the particular responses — *and the contextual nuances of these responses* — that a researcher collects from a participant at any moment in time. As a result, the idea of going back to participants at a different point in time, within a different environment — that is, in a different context — and expecting them to think and respond as they did in the original interview/discussion is unreasonable.

An effective member checking technique that gains participants’ intentionality while *also maintaining context* is a question-answer validity approach during the research event. Question-answer validity is

“A form of member checking by which the in-depth interviewer or focus group moderator paraphrases interviewees’/participants’ comments to confirm or clarify the intended meaning. This technique also enables the interviewer to ascertain whether a participant has interpreted the interviewer’s question as it was intended.” (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 361)

This in-the-moment, question-answer technique strengthens the validity of the data within the data-gathering environment, while also achieving three key goals of member checking: “It provides the opportunity to assess intentionality”; “It gives the [participant] an immediate opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations”; and “It provides the [participant] the opportunity to volunteer additional information” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

The importance of context and its role in quality outcomes permeates qualitative research design. Member checking by way of the question-answer validity technique is one of the many approaches that helps to preserve the contextual integrity of qualitative data, leading to thematic analyses that deliver useful interpretations and recommendations.

Candela, A. G. (2019). Exploring the function of member checking. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(3).

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

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>

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.

Motulsky, S.L. (2020). “Is member checking the gold standard of quality in qualitative research?” [Conference session]. APA Conference, virtual.

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

Mitigating Researcher-as-instrument Effects



Adapted from: Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, New York: Guilford Press)

There are 10 unique attributes associated with qualitative research. These were discussed briefly in an [article posted in this blog back in 2013](#). One of the most fundamental and far-reaching of these attributes is that the qualitative researcher is the “instrument” by which data are collected. The data-gathering process in qualitative research is facilitated by interviewer or moderator guides, [observation grids](#), and the like; however, these are only accessories to the principal data collection tool, i.e., the researcher or others on the research team.

As the key instrument in gathering qualitative data, the researcher bears a great deal of responsibility for the outcomes. If for no other reason, this responsibility hinges on the fact that this one attribute plays a central role in the effects associated with three other unique attributes – context, meaning, and the participant-researcher relationship. On the one hand, the researcher-as-instrument reality in qualitative research has the positive effect of enabling the researcher to utilize context and the participant-researcher relationship to discover substantive meaning; yet it is this closeness and intimacy that potentially threatens the integrity of the data gathered. And it is this compromised data that distorts the meaning, interpretations, and ultimate usefulness researchers derive from their research studies.

This is why it is important to think carefully about qualitative research design and take steps to mitigate researcher-as-instrument effects. Researchers do this, for example, when choosing the mode for any particular study, thinking through the strengths and limitations of each mode given the target population and research objective. Qualitative researchers also mitigate researcher-as-instrument effects by how they develop their interview and moderator guides, e.g., their use of the [funnel](#)

[approach](#). And, of course, researchers' skills are clearly essential to circumventing possible bias during data gathering; skills that focus on building participant-researcher rapport, active listening, identifying contradictions, and [avoiding inconsistency](#) in some situations.

As the all-important tool or instrument in collecting qualitative data, the researcher embodies the definition of what it means to conduct qualitative research. It is this role that portends the rich, meaningful information we expect from qualitative research, but also signals unwanted effects that demand careful attention to research design.

The Skilled Focus Group Moderator & the Ability to Multitask

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 143-147).



The importance of consistency (or, the danger of inconsistency) in qualitative data collection has been discussed elsewhere in *Research Design Review* (see [“The Recipe for Quality Outcomes in Qualitative Research Includes a Healthy Dose of Consistency”](#) and [“Mitigating Researcher-as-instrument Effects”](#)). From the perspective of the

[Total Quality Framework](#), moderator inconsistency can be a real concern in the focus group method because of the extreme multitasking required of the moderator. More so than in the in-depth interview method, the focus group moderator has to manage multiple points of view and ensure the full engagement of all group participants within a well-defined slot of time (typically, 75–120 minutes depending on the mode). Because of these challenges and the inherent unpredictability of the group dynamic process, the moderator may find it difficult (if not impossible) to cover all areas of the [discussion guide](#) across different focus groups and/or practice consistent behavior in the articulation of research questions in each group. This inconsistency across groups does not necessarily lead to *inaccuracy* in the research data (i.e., biased outcomes) but **may result in variations in the data that do not actually exist.**

For example, a series of focus group discussions among people who are active in environmental causes might include some groups that were easily managed by the moderator, who was able to cover the entirety of the discussion guide, thereby providing a well-rounded and informative perspective of the issues. Other groups within the series, however, might have been especially contentious, dominated by a few highly vocal environmental activists who were disruptive to the point that the moderator had difficulty maintaining control of these groups and was ultimately forced to skip some of the important areas of the discussion guide. As a result of this inconsistency in group dynamics and management, the final outcome of the research might accurately reflect participants’ positions on the research topics of interest, but the final data *may also indicate a wide variation of personal opinion on the issues when, in reality, this variation does not exist.* (This example speaks further to the importance of managing participants when moderating group

discussions while, at the same time, giving participants sufficient latitude to speak their minds.)

The researcher moderating a focus group must also know when and how to follow up on participants' comments and to probe responses that may be unclear or inconsistent with remarks made earlier in the discussion. To this end, the moderator has the responsibility of keeping track of the group dynamics and identifying if and how individual attitudes may have shifted as the result of the group interaction (e.g., exploring why mothers, who stated early in the discussion that they buy fast food for their children because it is easy and convenient, talk about purchasing healthy food for their children after hearing other group participants espouse the virtue in giving children a nutritional diet).

All of this is to say that the focus group moderator must be skilled in the art of multitasking, including

- Managing discussion time and topical priorities in a dynamic environment to **ensure that there is consistent coverage of the key areas** within the discussion guide across groups.
- Maintaining focus during each discussion, asking follow-up questions and **pursuing emerging and/or contrary ideas**, even though the moderator may be overwhelmed with stress and fatigue due, in part, to the high level of social interaction.
- Responding to **observers' requests** (e.g., asking the moderator at the midway point in a discussion to interject a new topic or question).
- Dealing with **unanticipated events** (e.g., participants who do not show up for the discussion by the appointed time, or someone in a discussion who gets very angry or upset and starts to cry).
- Managing **logistics** (e.g., the discussion room setup for in-person groups, the look and capabilities of the online asynchronous platform).

Focus Group Dynamics & Quality Outcomes

As discussed elsewhere in this blog, the [ability of the moderator to multitask](#) has important implications to the quality of focus group discussion data. For example, to gather quality data, the moderator must maintain concentration on the research objectives while also following up on new and/or contrary ideas as they emerge from discussion participants. The quality of research outcomes also demands that, in a multi-group study, the moderator consistently cover all the key topic areas of the discussion guide across all groups while also contending with the unpredictability of group dynamics as defined by each group of participants.



Group dynamics can lead a discussion in any number of unexpected directions. Here are just a couple:

- **Group Think**
 - For whatever reason, participants appear to be in agreement on one or more topics. The moderator can
 - Look for inconsistencies by assessing whether one or more participants are contradicting earlier comments and, if so, ask about it.
 - Paraphrase what is being said and ask participants to clarify their basis for agreement.
 - Play devil's advocate
 - *"I have heard the opposite from other users of this product. Help me understand how this group thinks differently."*
- **Stray From the Guide**
 - Participants may bring up topic areas that are *relevant* but earlier than intended per the discussion guide. The moderator can
 - Ask participants' permission to discuss the topic at a later time.
 - Choose to discuss the topic at that moment in time (if not too disruptive to the flow of discussion).
 - Participants may bring up topic areas that are *not relevant* to the research. The moderator might say
 - *"Thank you for bringing this up. This may be something for us to consider for future discussions."*

An important component of these and other forms of group dynamics is participants' behavior. For instance, one or more participants in a focus group may

- **Dominate** the discussion preventing others from contributing. The moderator can
 - Make it clear in the introduction that it is important to hear from everyone.
 - Let the participant speak before interjecting, *“Thank you for that comment. Let’s hear from someone else. Sally, what do you think about the current climate crisis?”* or *“Thank you. Any reactions to David’s comment?”*
- Be **argumentative** or hostile, has “an axe to grind.” The moderator can
 - Be sure participants understand the purpose of the research & how the discussion will be conducted.
 - Let the participant vent. Listen politely and then, *“Susan, I hear you. Thank you for your comments. But we need to move on with today’s discussion. Can you and I talk afterwards about your concerns?”*
 - Take the opportunity to use the participant’s comments to start a new discussion – *“Jack, you make a good point...”*
- Be **shy**, quiet and doesn’t make eye contact. The moderator can
 - Make a special effort during introductions to engage the participant via active listening techniques.
 - “Back off” from the shy participant until sufficient rapport has been established and then attempt to engage the participant – *“John, what do you think about the idea of adding solar panels to your home?”*
 - Be considerate and, if the participant does not want to contribute to the discussion, do not risk angering or upsetting the participant.
- Enter into **side conversations or be distracted**. The moderator can
 - Call for a “time out” whereby the discussion is briefly stopped and the conversation/distraction is resolved.

Building Rapport & Engagement in the Focus Group Method

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 150-152).



The ability to quickly build rapport with focus group participants and then maintain it throughout the discussion session is a necessary skill of all moderators. Regardless of mode (in-person, telephone, or online), focus group moderators must learn how to effectively engage participants to generate accurate and complete information. Rapport

building for the moderator begins even before the start of a group discussion, when they welcome the participants as they arrive at the facility (for an in-person discussion), on the teleconference line (for a telephone focus group), or in the virtual focus group room (for an online discussion), and it continues beyond the introductory remarks during which the moderator acknowledges aspects of the discussion environment that may not be readily apparent (e.g., the presence of observers, the microphone or other device being used to audio record the discussion), states a few ground rules for the session, and allows participants to ask any questions or make comments before the start of the discussion. In the in-person mode, the moderator's rapport building goes beyond what it is said to participants to make them feel at ease to also include the physical environment. For example, business executives might feel comfortable and willing to talk sitting around a standard conference table; however, in order to build rapport and stimulate engagement among a group of teenagers, the moderator needs to select a site where teens will feel that they can relax and freely discuss the issues. This might be a standard focus group facility with a living or recreation room setup (i.e., a room with couches, comfortable chairs, and rugs on the floor for sitting) or an unconventional location such as someone's home or the city park.

Another aspect of the physical environment in in-person discussions that impacts rapport and consequently the quality of the data gathered is the seating arrangement. For instance, Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend that the moderator position a shy participant directly across from their seat in order to "maximize eye contact." Other moderators prefer to keep particularly talkative and potentially domineering participants in seats close to them so that they can use their proximity to better manage these participants as needed. The "ideal" seating

arrangement will vary depending on the physical environment; the number, type, and homogeneity of participants; and topic of discussion (e.g., for a potentially “explosive” topic such as women’s rights, individuals who are particularly active and opinionated on the issues should not sit together where they may form a subgroup or coalition that could end up dominating and skewing the discussion).

A few of the more critical considerations in building rapport to maximize the [credibility](#) of group discussion data include the following:

- Group participants should be **contacted** on behalf of the researcher(s) at least twice after they have agreed to participate in a focus group—once immediately after recruitment to confirm the date and location, and again via telephone the day before the discussion.
- Not unlike the [in-depth interview method](#), a necessary ingredient to building rapport with group participants is the moderator’s ability to show **genuine interest** in the discussion as a whole and with each participant’s contribution to the discussion. Demonstrating this interest involves frequent and relevant follow-up probing questions as well as helping participants engage with each other.
- The moderator should be attuned to any **verbal and nonverbal cues** that signal participants’ level of engagement and, hence, the extent of rapport among the participants. Indeed, “one of the most difficult skills to teach in focus group training is how to ignite an interactive environment where participants engage with the moderator as well as with each other” (see [“Seeking Interaction in the Focus Group Method”](#)).
- Rapport building is especially difficult in the asynchronous **online mode** because the moderator does not have direct visual or verbal contact with the participants and therefore has less control over the rapport-building process. The online moderator can, however, identify participants who are not logging into the discussion very often or are leaving only short, non-descriptive responses to the moderator’s questions. In these cases, the moderator can send each of these participants a private email to inquire why he or she has not been more active in the discussion and offer to assist with any difficulties the participant may be having with logging in or otherwise

accessing the discussion. The moderator may also choose to call this participant on the telephone in an attempt to establish a more personal connection that may encourage the participant to become more active in the session.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Towards a Credible In-depth Interview: Building Rapport

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 88-89).

Not unlike the discussion in [“Building Rapport & Engagement in the Focus Group Method,”](#)

a necessary skill of the in-depth interviewer is the ability to build rapport with the interviewee.

Rapport building begins early in the study design and continues through completion of the in-depth interview (IDI). The following are just a few guidelines that IDI interviewers should consider using in order to establish a trusting relationship with their interviewees and maximize the [credibility](#) of their outcomes:



- Regardless of the mode by which the IDIs will be conducted, the interviewer should contact each recruited interviewee on the telephone at least once prior to the scheduled interview to begin establishing rapport. This **preliminary conversation** helps the interviewer and the interviewee make a personal connection, manage their respective expectations, and facilitate an open dialogue at the interview stage. In addition to building rapport, an early personal exchange with the interviewee also instills legitimacy in the research, which further aids in the interview process and makes the interviewee comfortable in providing detailed, thoughtful, and credible data.
- The interviewer’s preliminary communication with the interviewee should make clear (a) the purpose of the study and the interviewer’s association with the research; (b) the anticipated length of the study (i.e., a date when the research is expected to be completed); (c) the breadth of the interview (i.e., the range of topics that will be covered); (d) the depth of the interview (i.e., the level of detail that may be requested, either directly or indirectly); (e) the time commitment required of the interviewee (e.g., length of a telephone IDI, the frequency participants are expected to check email messages in [an email IDI study](#)); and (f) the material incentive (e.g., cash, a gift card).
- The interviewer should make a conscious effort to interject a sign of **sincere interest** in the interviewee’s remarks, but do so in a nonevaluative fashion, without displaying either approval or disapproval with the sentiment being

expressed by the interviewee (e.g., “Your comments interest me, please go on”).

- Particularly in the telephone and online modes, the interviewer must be able to **identify and respond to cues** in the conversation—for example, the interviewee’s audible hesitations or the background noise in a telephone IDI, or nonresponse from an email participant. The email interviewer also needs to be sensitive to the idea that they may have misjudged the participant’s intent. For instance, Bowker and Tuffin (2004) report on the potential difficulty in judging whether an email IDI participant has more to say on a topic or whether certain questions would be deemed redundant. In either case, these potential miscalculations on the part of the interviewer can interfere with the interviewer–participant relationship, with interview participants providing short retorts, such as, “Yes, that was the end [of my comments]!” (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004, p. 237).
- With telephone IDIs, the interviewer–interviewee relationship can be enhanced by **adding a webcam and/or an online component**. The ability to see the interviewee and/or present stimuli to them (e.g., new program service features, promotional concepts, audio and video clips) during the interview takes advantage of the benefits of face-to-face contact.

Bowker, N., & Tuffin, K. (2004). Using the online medium for discursive research about people with disabilities. *Social Science Computer Review*, 22(2), 228–241.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439303262561>

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

Image captured from: <https://chiefexecutive.net/why-power-saps-empathy-and-what-you-can-do-to-keep-yours/>

Rapport & Reflection: The Pivotal Role of Note Taking in In-depth Interview Research



Note taking is fundamental to the in-depth interviewing process and an essential interviewer skill. And yet note taking – e.g., why note taking is important, how to take notes, and how to use notes from a completed interview – does not get much attention. Note taking is important – actually, *critical* – to the in-depth interview method because it is about much more than

jotting down a participant's comments and responses to the interviewer's questions.

In fact, an effective note taker is a more effective interviewer. This is because

- Taking notes during an interview helps to focus the interviewer's attention on the participant's point of view and lived experience relevant to the research question.
- Taking notes helps the interviewer internalize what is being said by the participant which in turn helps the interviewer identify seemingly contradictory statements and follow up on new, insightful topic areas that may not appear on the interview guide.
- The interviewer's heightened focused attention and internalization helps to build rapport and enhances the participant-researcher relationship.
- The interviewer can add sidebar notations while taking notes that add context to what is being discussed or remind the interviewer to follow up on a particular comment.
- Taking notes allows the interviewer to identify and flag important quotes made by the participant in the moment when the contextual import of participant's statements can be fully appreciated and noted.

An effective note taker is also better equipped to conduct meaningful analyses of the data, leading to useful outcomes. This is because

- The notes serve as an immediate resource for reflection: 1) during the interview – when the interviewer can flip back and forth to consider the participant's earlier comments and ask for clarification as the need arises to fully comprehend and better analyze the participant's point of view – and 2) at the completion of the interview – when the interviewer can quietly review

the interview notes and add any informative annotations that will aid analysis.

- The interviewer can use the notes from each interview to record the participant's attitudes and behavior related to each primary and secondary research question. Ideally, this should be done within an hour of the interview completion and by way of a spreadsheet of some kind, where the columns consist of key research questions and the rows contain input from each participant. This format allows the researcher to quickly capture interview data when it is fresh on the mind as well as easily review and analyze the data within and across participants.

Importantly, the note taking discussed here pertains to notes *written by hand* (pen [or [smartpen](#)] on paper) in contrast to tapping notes directly into an electronic device. Research has shown that the use of laptops (for example) is great at creating large volumes of notes (with lots of verbatims) but it also encourages a “mindless” transcription rather than a meaningful engagement with the material. Indeed, [as reported in this research](#), individuals who wrote their notes by hand demonstrated “a stronger conceptual understanding and were more successful in applying and integrating the material” compared to those who took notes with their laptops.

Handwritten note taking compels the interviewer to fully engage with the participant and fosters highly reflective behavior in the researcher. You might say that, in this way, note taking helps to maintain the all-important participant-researcher relationship throughout data collection and analysis; a relationship that can be too easily lost when utilizing more mechanical processes such as the reliance on audio recordings and data transcripts.

Image captured from: <https://www.skipprichard.com/power-handwritten-note/>

The Importance of Analytical Sensibilities to Observation in Ethnography

Analytical Sensibilities

Ethnography is a multi-method approach in qualitative research with observation at its core. Prolonged onsite observations in the participants' natural material world are what make ethnography a unique and important research approach. Needless

to say, the observer plays a central role in the success of an ethnographic study and there are few more important skills for the observer than those associated with the concept of analytical sensibility. It is the observer's skills in sensibilities that can compensate for weaknesses in other aspects of the study design, such as the unavoidable pairing of an older male observer with a group of school-age girls. The observer's analytical sensibilities include the capacity to be aware of and to reflect on his or her surroundings, the actions of the participants, and how the observer may be influencing the outcomes from the observation. This sensibility is analytical in nature because the focus is on the observer's ability to apply analytical skills while in the field that deepen the researcher's understanding of the culture and events from the participants' point of view.

The facet of sensibility that is imperative among all ethnographic observers is, what [Stacey and Eckert](#) called, "dual perspective" or the ability to derive meaning from participants' activities (as well as the study environment) by internalizing the viewpoint of the research participants while maintaining an "outsider's" objectivity. In this way, the observer is mentally placing him or herself among the participants while at the same time looking out to the connections that give meaning to the group. A dual perspective demands that observers have the ability to actually put themselves into the "shoes" of unfamiliar cultures and social groups, sensing and recording events from the participants' vantage point while also reflecting on its meaning as well as the observer's own values and possible biases. This ability distinguishes the untrained observer from the ethnographer.

The observer's job is made particularly difficult because a dual way of thinking is only one of the analytical sensibilities required from an ethnographic observer. An observer's sensibility skills also include the ability to:

- Notice and record participants' body movements (e.g., posture, gestures, eye contact), language and word choices, seating or standing positions, relative interaction with others, as well as the physical setting (including a map of the physical space and the participants positions within it).
- Gain participants trust by managing assumptions and expectations (e.g., patients in a drug detox facility might alter their behavior under the assumption that the observer is an undercover agent, or students-in-training may believe that the observer is there to offer expert advice rather than just observe).
- Focus attention on what is happening *now* in the study environment rather than trying to anticipate what will happen next. That is, being in the moment.
- Reflect back on observations during the field period, construct hypotheses or begin to identify patterns, and investigate nascent theories with participants by way of IDIs and/or activities.
- Maintain naivety when immersed in the role of a complete participant (e.g., an observer who is an experienced seaman needs to make a conscious effort to consider what he or she knows about the subject matter when studying the daily lives of fishermen, and continually reflect on the degree to which this know-how may be biasing the observer's ability to conduct the observation from the participants' point of view).

To simply observe a social group, an individual, an act, or an event (on- or off-line) is not research. Observation requires the analytical sensibilities of a trained ethnographer who can bring back from the field credible, analyzable, and ultimately useful data that takes the researcher to the next step.

Working with Multiple Methods in Qualitative Research: 7 Unique Researcher Skills

There are certain types of qualitative research studies that employ more than one qualitative research method to explore a particular topic or phenomenon, i.e., the researcher uses multiple methods. These studies generally fall into the category of case study or narrative research, which are both designated by the label of “case-centered research.” The attributes that differentiate these forms of research from



other qualitative approaches were discussed in an earlier *Research Design Review* post ([“Multi-method & Case-centered Research: When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of its Parts”](#)). These differentiating attributes are largely associated with the use of multiple methods to gain a complete understanding of complex subject matter. As stated in the post:

Multi-method research enables the qualitative researcher to study relatively complex entities or phenomena in a way that is holistic and retains meaning. The purpose is to tackle the research objective from all the methodological sides. Rather than pigeonholing the research into a series of IDIs, focus groups, or observations, the multi-method approach frees the researcher into total immersion with the subject matter.

A multi-method approach to conduct case-centered research requires sufficient time and resources – in terms of financial and human support – as well as unique skills on the part of the researcher. A researcher adept at single-method research – e.g., an IDI study to examine employee attitudes toward new company policies, a focus group study concerning the drinking habits among teenagers – is not necessarily equipped with the appropriate skills for conducting multi-method studies. Here are seven important skills required of the researcher who plans to use multiple methods to conduct case-centered – case study or narrative – research:

- Experience & expertise in different qualitative research methods – IDIs, group discussions, observation, content analysis.
- Exceptional organizational skills, e.g., the ability to coordinate/stage the various elements of the research design.
- Exceptional time management skills, e.g., the ability to allocate a reasonable time frame for each step.
- Wherewithal to obtain the necessary permissions to gain access to observation venues, activities, documents.
- Ability to relinquish control, allowing the case or the narrative to steer the direction of the investigation.
- Ability to accept many different points of view.
- Ability to notice the sequence of events as well as the physical & substantive context of information across all methods.

Image captured from: <http://www.dailyartmuse.com/2010/08/11/dryden-wells-ceramic-multiples-imply-movement/>

Built-in Quality in Qualitative Research: Flexibility of Design



Adapted from: Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, New York: Guilford Press)

Many of the unique attributes associated with qualitative research have been discussed elsewhere in *Research Design Review*, e.g., [“Achieving Accuracy in the Absence of ‘Truth’”](#) and [“Mitigating Researcher-as-instrument Effects.”](#) One of these [10 unique attributes of qualitative research](#) is the flexibility of the research design. Accepting that flexibility is a central and important component that *strengthens the qualitative research process* will greatly benefit the researcher embarking on a qualitative approach.

There are a variety of ways that qualitative researchers demonstrate flexibility in their designs, data generation, and analysis and thereby strengthen their research. Here are a few:

- **Modifying and adapting** the questions that are asked or the direction to take during fieldwork. For example,
 - A moderator may modify the focus group discussion guide after hearing unexpected-yet-relevant discussion points in the first of many scheduled focus groups.
 - In a case study, the researcher may decide to substitute cases or change methods, e.g., switching to in-depth interviews (IDIs) when experiencing unanticipated delays in scheduling focus group discussions.
 - An ethnographer may decide to switch [observer roles](#) as they consider new observation and participation strategies.
- Use of the **semi-structured and unstructured interview approach** in IDIs and [narrative research](#). This allows for

- Flexibility in how, what, and when relevant content in the guide is discussed in the interview.
 - Back-and-forth dialogue and encourages each participant's "voice" to be heard.
- **Asynchronous online modes** give participants the flexibility to respond at a time and place of their choosing, making the asynchronous online approach participants' preferred mode and raising the rate of participant cooperation. For example,
 - Gibson (2010) found that 55 out of 70 research participants opted for an email IDI rather than an in-person IDI, and Beck (2005) extended an email IDI study for 18 months which allowed the researcher to incorporate some complexity and "richness" into the interview.
 - Tate et al. (2009) conducted asynchronous online focus group discussions with pediatric cancer patients, parents, and survivors and found that participants "highly valued the flexibility and convenience of logging in at their own time and place to join the discussion" (p. 1).
- **Location** of in-person IDIs can be flexible, allowing the participant to choose a convenient and comfortable location, which has a positive effect on the level of participant cooperation and interviewer-participant rapport.
 - For example, flexibility of location is critical to achieving quality outcomes when conducting an IDI study with building contractors who are constantly moving between projects or busy on construction sites. Depending on contractors' preferences, the researcher may agree to conducting the interview at a construction site or a nearby coffee shop.
- Qualitative research **analysis is a back-and-forth process** whereby the researcher is always questioning assumptions and interpretations of the data as they develop.
 - Verification is an important step in the qualitative data analysis process.

Gibson, L. (2010). *Using email interviews* (No. 09). Retrieved from <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/1303/1/09-toolkit-email-interviews.pdf>

Tate, K., Zwaanswijk, M., Otten, R., van Dulmen, S., Hoogerbrugge, P. M., Kamps, W. A., & Bensing, J. M. (2009). Online focus groups as a tool to collect data in hard-to-include populations: Examples from paediatric oncology. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 9(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-9-15>

The Issues & Questions Uniquely Suited For Qualitative Research



There are many instances when a qualitative research design is the only option. This is because qualitative research is uniquely suited to address research issues or questions that might be difficult, if not impossible, to investigate under more structured, less flexible quantitative research designs. Qualitative inquiry effectively tackles sensitive or personal issues such as domestic violence (e.g., Beaulaurier et al., 2005), racism (e.g., Harper et al., 2011), physical disabilities (e.g., Kroll et al., 2007), pregnancy among teenagers (e.g., Luttrell, 2003), drug addiction (e.g., Jodlowski et al., 2007), and infertility (e.g., Culley et al., 2007); multifaceted, intricate topics such as personal life histories (Elliott, 2005) and corporate leadership (e.g., Schilling, 2006); nebulous questions such as those pertaining to “quality of life” (e.g., Ferrell et al., 1997; Wainwright et al., 2018) and **“Feelings & Sensations: Where Survey Designs Fair Badly.”**; and contextual issues such as in-the-moment decision making, for example, in-store observations of shopping patterns (e.g., West, 2012).

By the same token, qualitative research is often the only option to gaining in-depth, meaningful information from hard-to-reach, underserved, or hidden populations, such as children (e.g., Christensen, et al., 2011), same-sex partners (e.g., Frost, 2013); subcultures such as motorcycle bikers (e.g., Schouten & McAlexander, 1995); psychiatric facilities (e.g., Lyall & Bartlett, 2010); deviant groups such as heavy drug users and convicted murderers (e.g., Small et al., 2006); individuals afflicted with an uncommon physical condition such as [acromegaly](#) (e.g., Sibeoni et al., 2019); and minority parents of school-age children (e.g., Auerbach, 2002). Although qualitative inquiry is just as appropriate in the investigation of the

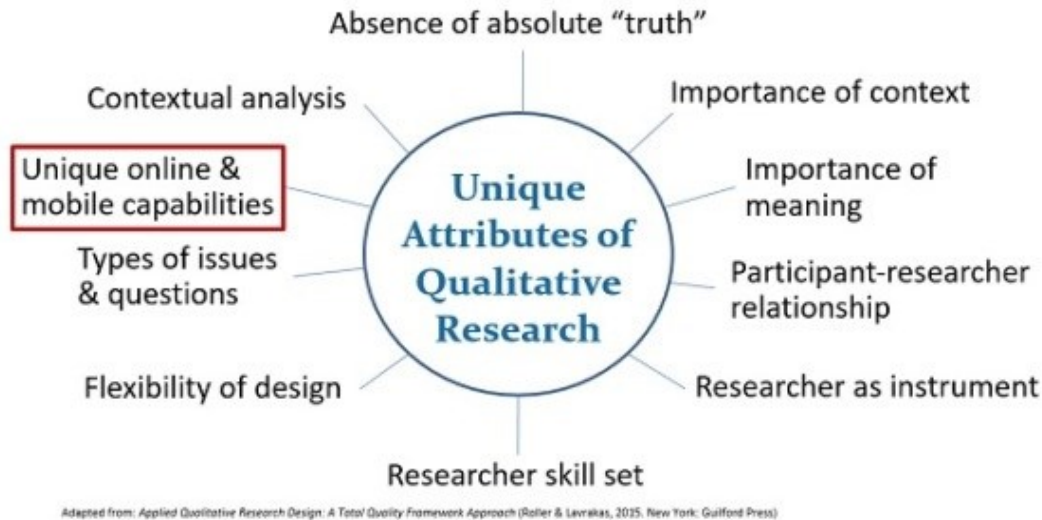
“average” consumer, teenager, senior citizen, educator, corporate employee, community volunteer, cancer patient, and the like, it is the ability to obtain insight from the less obvious, smaller niche segments of the population that gives special distinction to the qualitative approach.

All 10 unique attributes of qualitative research are discussed in **this [RDR](#) article**.

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Unique Online & Mobile Capabilities in Qualitative Research



The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 7-8).

[Online and mobile technology](#) offer unique enhancements to qualitative research designs. In many instances, these technologies have shifted the balance of power from the researcher to the online or mobile participant, who is given greater control of the research process by way of increased flexibility, convenience, and varied ways to respond in greater detail and depth to the researcher's inquiries. For example, a participant in [an email in-depth interview study](#) can thoughtfully reflect on a researcher's question before answering and can delay response until the participant is at a location where they can take the time to write a thoughtful reply. The opportunity to select the time and place for participation empowers online and mobile participants beyond that afforded participants of conventional, more restrictive modes that dictate a specific interview schedule or date and place for a group discussion or observation.

Asynchronous online and mobile technologies have also ushered in a richer, deeper qualitative research experience. Not only do participants have the chance to write more thoughtful responses to interview questions compared to more time-limiting modes (e.g., telephone and face-to-face), but online and mobile participants can also enrich their text responses by attaching files, images (photographs, graphics), links to websites, as well as add a voice response via VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) or the mobile phone device. This possibility for multimedia

communication can be particularly effective, for example, when capturing in-the-moment experiences or observations via the participant's smartphone, which may include a text message describing the event, photographs of the event, a short video of the event, and a voice message to the researcher elaborating on specific aspects of the event.

Online and mobile capabilities represent just one of the [10 unique attributes of qualitative research](#).

Contextual Analysis: A Fundamental Attribute of Qualitative Research



Adapted from: Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, New York: Guilford Press)

One of the [10 unique or distinctive attributes of qualitative research](#) is contextual, multilayered analysis. This is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research and, in fact, plays a central role in the unique attributes associated with data generation, i.e., [the importance of context, the importance of meaning, the participant-researcher relationship](#), and [researcher as instrument](#) —

“...the interconnections, inconsistencies, and sometimes seemingly illogical input reaped in qualitative research demand that researchers embrace the tangles of their data from many sources. There is no single source of analysis in qualitative research because any one research event consists of multiple variables that need consideration in the analysis phase. The analyzable data from an in-depth interview, for example, are more than just what was said in the interview; they also include a variety of other considerations, such as the context in which certain information was revealed and the interviewee–interviewer relationship.” (Roller & Lavrakas, pp. 7-8)

The ability — the *opportunity* — to contextually analyze qualitative data is also associated with basic components of research design, such as sample size and [the risk of relying on saturation](#) which “misguides the researcher towards prioritizing manifest content over the pursuit of contextual understanding derived from latent, less obvious data.” And the defining differentiator between a qualitative and quantitative approach, such as [qualitative content analysis](#) in which it is “the inductive strategy in search of latent content, the use of context, the back-and-forth flexibility throughout the analytical process, and the continual questioning of

preliminary interpretations that set qualitative content analysis apart from the quantitative method.”

There are many ways that context is integrated into the qualitative data analysis process to ensure [quality analytical outcomes and interpretations](#). Various articles in *Research Design Review* have discussed contextually grounded aspects of the process, such as the following (each header links to the corresponding *RDR* article).

[Unit of Analysis](#)

“Although there is no perfect prescription for every study, it is generally understood that researchers should strive for a unit of analysis that retains the context necessary to derive meaning from the data. For this reason, and if all other things are equal, the qualitative researcher should probably err on the side of using a broader, more contextually based unit of analysis rather than a narrowly focused level of analysis (e.g., sentences).”

[Meaning of Words](#)

“How we use our words provides the context that shapes what the receiver hears and the perceptions others associate with our words. Context pertains to apparent as well as unapparent influences that take the meaning of our words beyond their proximity to other words [or] their use in recognized terms or phrases...”

[Categorical Buckets](#)

“No one said that qualitative data analysis is simple or straightforward. A reason for this lies in the fact that an important ingredient to the process is maintaining participants’ context and potential multiple meanings of the data. By identifying and analyzing categorical buckets, the researcher respects this multi-faceted reality and ultimately reaps the reward of useful interpretations of the data.”

[Use of Transcripts](#)

“Although serving a utilitarian purpose, transcripts effectively convert the all-too-human research experience that defines qualitative inquiry to the relatively emotionless drab confines of black-on-white text. Gone is the profound mood swing that descended over the participant when the interviewer asked about his elderly mother. Yes, there is text in the transcript that conveys some aspect of this mood but only to the extent that the participant is able to articulate it.”

Use of Recordings

“Unlike the transcript, the recording reminds the researcher of how and when the atmosphere in the [focus] group environment shifted from being open and friendly to quiet and inhibited; and how the particular seating arrangement, coupled with incompatible personality types, inflamed the atmosphere and seriously colored participants’ words, engagement, and way of thinking.”

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