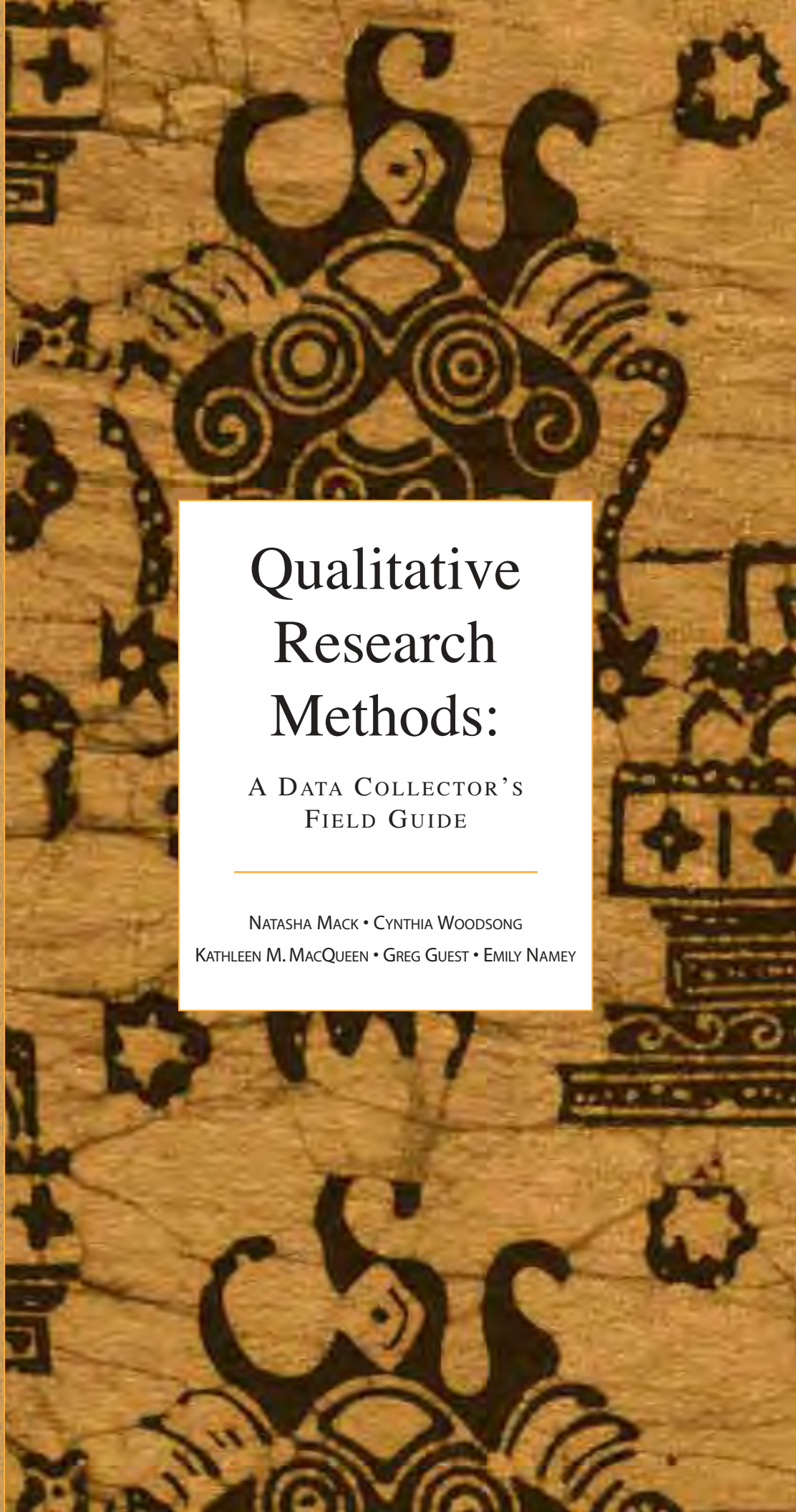
Family Health International



Qualitative Research Methods:

A Data Collector's Field Guide

Natasha Mack • Cynthia Woodsong
Kathleen M. MacQueen • Greg Guest • Emily Namey

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

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FAMILY HEALTH INTERNATIONAL

Family Health International (FHI) is a nonprofit organization working to improve lives worldwide through research, education, and services in family health.

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Acknowledgments

This field guide is the creation of all the authors. However, we especially recognize Cynthia Woodsong as its originator and inspiration. It is she who began crafting training materials during the course of her many public health projects in field sites far and wide, as she sought to prepare teams for the immediate while equipping them with skills to collect data for other research projects in the future. During these training experiences, she perceived a recurring need to provide field teams with foundational, practical information on qualitative methods, presented in a form that was self-contained, tangible, and easy to consult during the action moments of data collection. Dr. Woodsong built upon her repertoire of need-to-know training materials with each succeeding project. In turn, these materials, many of which she developed with funding from the U.S. National Institutes of Health, have provided the bulk of the substance for the present field guide. Too, Dr. Woodsong's vision for capacity building in developing country settings remains our collective vision for this field guide.

We would also like to recognize the conceptual contributions of Betsy Tolley and Lorie Broomhall. Their emphasis on the importance of allowing for individual approaches to preparing research teams for data collection served as a reminder that a practical field guide should not portend to be a training curriculum in and of itself. Rather than a replacement for hands-on interaction between trainers and data collection teams, we intend our guide to be a useful supplement for each team member as they learn and use qualitative methods in the field.

Reviewers Betty Akumatey of the University of Ghana, Legon, and Joy Noel Baumgartner of FHI merit our sincere thanks as well. Their candid evaluations helped us measure our goal of developing a functional tool against the reality of whether it worked in the field. We thank also Beth Robinson for her encouragement, enthusiasm, and technical and personal support from the start of this project to its finish. Thank you to Larry Severy for his all-round backing of the project. Merrill Wolf, editor, is due thanks for the manuscript's organization and flow, as is Karen Dickerson, copyeditor and designer, for her great attention to detail and consistency. Illustrations are credited to Denise Todloski. Kerry McLoughlin graciously stepped in at a moment's notice to provide assistance with the case study examples. And Lucy Harber, our gentle, smiling production manager, was indispensable in ways immeasurable for bringing the project to fruition.

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Introduction

Qualitative research methods are gaining in popularity outside the traditional academic social sciences, particularly in public health and international development research. Whereas quantitative research methods once dominated these fields, researchers have now begun drawing from a more diverse repertoire of methodologies as they tackle international public health problems. Qualitative methods have become important tools within this broader approach to applied research, in large part because they provide valuable insights into the local perspectives of study populations.

The great contribution of qualitative research is the culturally specific and contextually rich data it produces. Such data are proving critical in the design of comprehensive solutions to public health problems in developing countries, as scientists, medical doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and humanitarian organizations have come to recognize that biomedical solutions are only partial remedies. Rather, the success of a health intervention – that is, whether it actually reaches the people it is intended to help – rests also on how well it addresses sociobehavioral factors such as cultural norms, ethnic identities, gender norms, stigma, and socioeconomic status. Success measured on this basis has a bearing, in turn, on the cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and efficacy of interventions, concerns not insignificant in the eyes of project managers and funding agencies.

About this field guide

This field guide is based on an approach to doing team-based, collaborative qualitative research that has repeatedly proven successful in research projects sponsored by Family Health International (FHI) throughout the developing world. With its straightforward delivery of information on the main qualitative methods being used in public health research today, the guide speaks to the need for simple yet effective instruction on how to do systematic and ethically sound qualitative research. The aim of the guide is thus practical. In bypassing extensive discussion on the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research, it distinguishes itself as a how-to guide to be used in the field.

We have designed the guide as a tool for training the data collection staff members of multisite and team-based public health projects, but it easily has application for smaller-scale or multidisciplinary projects as well. It is also applicable to researchers spanning a wide range of expertise, from beginners to the more practiced – i.e., anyone wishing to learn or review the basics of qualitative data collection and management. We should point out, also, that even as our style of presenting the methods makes them accessible to people without an extensive background in qualitative research, we do not neglect important methodological nuances and details that can affect the quality of a project.

The motivation for this guide is our belief that focusing on the mechanics of systematic data collection and management will help to prepare data collectors well for the rigors and inevitable challenges of applied research in developing countries. In turn, well-trained data collectors will be better equipped to execute research protocols smoothly – to the extent that real-life circumstances allow – and ultimately produce a data set of superior quality.

The guide is divided into five modules covering the following topics:

Module 1 – Qualitative Research Methods Overview
Module 2 – Participant Observation
Module 3 – In-Depth Interviews
Module 4 – Focus Groups
Module 5 – Data Documentation and Management

This modular design is meant to make it easy for readers to find information about a particular topic quickly. Each of the three modules on specific qualitative research methods contains an overview of the method being discussed, relevant ethical guidelines, step-by-step instructions, examples from a fictitious case study, checklists, and suggestions for further reading. In the interest of keeping each module self-contained, information applicable to more than one method is repeated in each relevant module. Much of the information is presented in a question-and-answer format, which is intended to anticipate questions that people new to qualitative research might have. In addition, throughout the guide, we provide examples from real or hypothetical research studies to illustrate concepts, methods, and other issues discussed.

The guide's appendices contain materials of interest to trainers and team leaders, including training exercises. An appendix focusing on data management, which is often an overwhelming task in multisite and team-based projects, represents an effort to make this task less intimidating. Intended for data managers, it includes tools and suggestions for data management procedures. Finally, a glossary of terms frequently used in qualitative research appears at the end of the guide.

How to use this field guide

As noted, the primary audience for this guide is field staff. We want field staff, whether experienced or novice, to have at their fingertips all the information they need to be able to go out and collect data. Although it is our intention that individuals who have read this guide will be better prepared to collect qualitative data effectively using the methods described, we do not claim that use of the guide will make you an expert in qualitative research.

We recommend that field staff read the Qualitative Research Methods Overview module, page 1, first, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the kind of information that qualitative research methods can obtain. However, the modules on specific methods may be read in any order. As noted, they are self-contained and can stand alone as complete guides to the method. There is a sample case study on page viii that is used as the basis for the examples within each method module.

Although this guide is not constructed in the format of an educational curriculum per se, it is intended for use as part of training workshops. Trainers can take advantage of its modular design and cover only what is relevant to a specific project. In our experience, five days is sufficient to cover the entire range of topics included in the guide. Nonetheless, we strongly recommend that trainers allot additional time for role-play activities using actual study instruments and the exercises included in the appendix.

For readers interested in a more comprehensive treatment of qualitative methods in public health research, we have cross-referenced corresponding chapters from the companion Family Health International volume, *Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health* (FHI, 2002). A commercially published version of the book, *Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), is also available. These resource books are an important supplement to this field guide, and vice versa. Ideally, they should be consulted in tandem as qualitative research is carried out, so that this guide's focus on practical mechanics can be understood within the larger context of applied qualitative research in international development and public health.

CASE STUDY

This case study will be used throughout the modules to illustrate the various ways qualitative research data may be recorded:

Study objective:

To assess the acceptability and feasibility of integrating HIV counseling and testing for non-pregnant women of reproductive age into existing family planning (FP) services in Capital City, Developing Country.

Background:

In Capital City, an estimated 12 percent of women of reproductive age (15 to 40) have HIV. This is only an estimate because both women and men in this country are generally disinclined toward getting tested for HIV. This reluctance is due to social stigma and discrimination associated with being HIV infected. They are particularly opposed to getting tested at the free clinic that was specifically set up for HIV/AIDS-related services five years ago. Rumors spread quickly in this community, and people who are seen entering or leaving the clinic are assumed to have HIV. For women this can be especially damaging, because their husbands or families may abandon them. Therefore, the services offered at the HIV facility, including antiretrovirals to help prevent mother-to-child transmission, are not being utilized.

In the 1980s, family planning carried heavy social stigma for women, but as a result of public information campaigns, community outreach, and health interventions, stigma and discrimination are no longer significant problems for women who wish to use family planning methods. The rate of contraceptive prevalence is 41 percent.

Social and behavioral changes are clearly needed in this community to reduce stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS, but such change can admittedly be slow to occur. In the meantime, there are free – but little-used – HIV services available that could reduce transmission rates from infected to non-infected adults and children, and increase the quality of life for people who are infected. Encouraging greater utilization of these services must necessarily start with increasing HIV counseling and testing among the general at-risk population. Antenatal clinics would be an appropriate place for interventions targeted at pregnant women. For women of reproductive age who are not pregnant, family planning clinics might offer an opportunity for discreet HIV counseling and testing because they are well utilized and have little associated stigma.

Therefore, in our study we will assess the acceptability and feasibility of integrating HIV counseling and testing for non-pregnant women into existing family planning services.

Methods:

(1) *Structured participant observation* in 4 family planning clinics and the HIV/AIDS clinic.

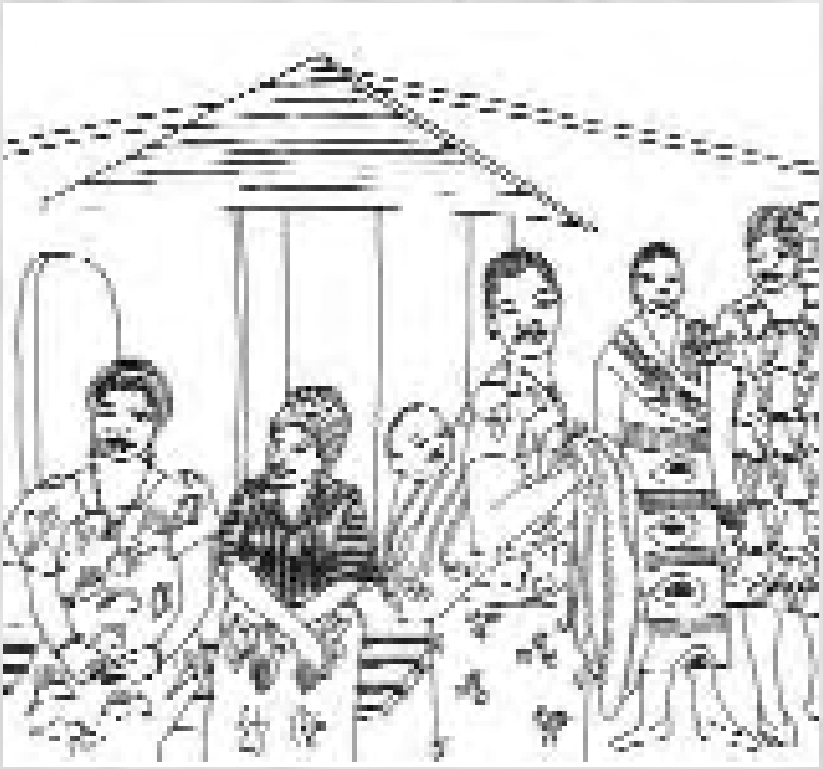
(2) *In-depth interviews* with up to 10 family planning service providers, up to 5 providers and staff members from the HIV/AIDS clinic, up to 10 community leaders, and up to 10 women of reproductive age who use family planning but have not had HIV testing.

(3) *Focus groups* with 8 to 10 non-pregnant women of reproductive age who use family planning and 8 to 10 non-pregnant women of reproductive age who do not use family planning.

Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

Module 1

Qualitative Research Methods Overview



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Qualitative Research Methods Overview

This module introduces the fundamental elements of a qualitative approach to research, to help you understand and become proficient in the qualitative methods discussed in subsequent modules. We recommend that you consult the suggested readings at the end of the module for more in-depth treatment of the foundations of qualitative research.

This module covers the following topics:

- Introduction to Qualitative Research
- Comparing Qualitative and Quantitative Research
- Sampling in Qualitative Research
- Recruitment in Qualitative Research
- Ethical Guidelines in Qualitative Research
- Suggested Readings

Introduction to Qualitative Research

What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research. In general terms, scientific research consists of an investigation that:

- seeks answers to a question
- systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question
- collects evidence
- produces findings that were not determined in advance
- produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study

Qualitative research shares these characteristics. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations.

What can we learn from qualitative research?

The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the "human" side of an issue – that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research

issue may not be readily apparent. When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data.

Although findings from qualitative data can often be extended to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations. In this sense, qualitative research differs slightly from scientific research in general.

What are some qualitative research methods?

The three most common qualitative methods, explained in detail in their respective modules, are participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Each method is particularly suited for obtaining a specific type of data.

- *Participant observation* is appropriate for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviors in their usual contexts.
- *In-depth interviews* are optimal for collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored.
- *Focus groups* are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented.

What forms do qualitative data take?

The types of data these three methods generate are field notes, audio (and sometimes video) recordings, and transcripts.

Comparing Quantitative and Qualitative Research

What are the basic differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods?

Quantitative and qualitative research methods differ primarily in:

- their analytical objectives
- the types of questions they pose
- the types of data collection instruments they use
- the forms of data they produce
- the degree of flexibility built into study design

Table 1, page 3, briefly outlines these major differences. For a more in-depth theoretical treatment of the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, we refer the reader to the suggested readings listed at the end of this chapter, especially Bernard 1995.

Table 1. Comparison of quantitative and qualitative research approaches

	Quantitative	Qualitative
General framework	Seek to confirm hypotheses about phenomena	Seek to explore phenomena
	Instruments use more rigid style of eliciting and categorizing responses to questions	Instruments use more flexible, iterative style of eliciting and categorizing responses to questions
	Use highly structured methods such as questionnaires, surveys, and structured observation	Use semi-structured methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation
Analytical objectives	To quantify variation	To describe variation
	To predict causal relationships	To describe and explain relationships
	To describe characteristics of a population	To describe individual experiences
		To describe group norms
Question format	Closed-ended	Open-ended
Data format	Numerical (obtained by assigning numerical values to responses)	Textual (obtained from audiotapes, videotapes, and field notes)
Flexibility in study design	Study design is stable from beginning to end	Some aspects of the study are flexible (for example, the addition, exclusion, or wording of particular interview questions)
	Participant responses do not influence or determine how and which questions researchers ask next	Participant responses affect how and which questions researchers ask next
	Study design is subject to statistical assumptions and conditions	Study design is iterative, that is, data collection and research questions are adjusted according to what is learned

What is the most important difference between quantitative and qualitative methods?

The key difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is their flexibility. Generally, quantitative methods are fairly inflexible. With quantitative methods such as surveys and questionnaires, for example, researchers ask all participants identical questions in the same order. The response categories from which participants may choose are "closed-ended" or fixed. The advantage of this inflexibility is that it allows for meaningful comparison of responses across participants and study sites. However, it requires a thorough understanding of the important questions to ask, the best way to ask them, and the range of possible responses.

Qualitative methods are typically more flexible – that is, they allow greater spontaneity and adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the study participant. For example, qualitative methods ask mostly "open-ended" questions that are not necessarily worded in exactly the same way with each participant. With open-ended questions, participants are free to respond in their own words, and these responses tend to be more complex than simply "yes" or "no."

In addition, with qualitative methods, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is often less formal than in quantitative research. Participants have the opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative methods. In turn, researchers have the opportunity to respond immediately to what participants say by tailoring subsequent questions to information the participant has provided.

It is important to note, however, that there is a range of flexibility among methods used in both quantitative and qualitative research and that flexibility is not an indication of how scientifically rigorous a method is. Rather, the degree of flexibility reflects the kind of understanding of the problem that is being pursued using the method.

What are the advantages of qualitative methods for exploratory research?

One advantage of qualitative methods in exploratory research is that use of open-ended questions and probing gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses, as quantitative methods do. Open-ended questions have the ability to evoke responses that are:

- meaningful and culturally salient to the participant
- unanticipated by the researcher
- rich and explanatory in nature

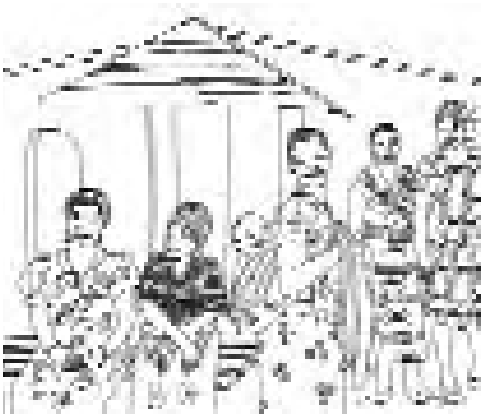
Another advantage of qualitative methods is that they allow the researcher the flexibility to probe initial participant responses – that is, to ask why or how. The researcher must listen carefully to what participants say, engage with them according to their individual personalities and styles, and use "probes" to encourage them to elaborate on their answers. (See the modules on In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups, pages 42-43 and 64-65 respectively, for discussions of probes.)

Is my quantitative experience applicable to qualitative research?

Although the objectives of quantitative and qualitative research are not mutually exclusive, their approaches to deciphering the world involve distinct research techniques and thus separate skill sets. This guide is intended to train researchers in the skill set required for qualitative research. Experience in quantitative methods is not required, but neither is it a disadvantage. Essential for our purposes, rather, is that all qualitative data collectors have a clear understanding of the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, in order to avoid confusing qualitative and quantitative techniques. Whatever a researcher's experience in either approach, a general grasp of the premises and objectives motivating each helps develop and improve competence in the qualitative data collection techniques detailed in this guide.

Sampling in Qualitative Research

Even if it were possible, it is not necessary to collect data from everyone in a community in order to get valid findings. In qualitative research, only a sample (that is, a subset) of a population is selected for any given study. The study's research objectives and the characteristics of the study population (such as size and diversity) determine which and how many people to select. In this section, we briefly describe three of the most common sampling methods used in qualitative research: purposive sampling, quota sampling, and snowball sampling. As data collectors, you will not be responsible for selecting the sampling method. The explanations below are meant to help you understand the reasons for using each method.



What is purposive sampling?

Purposive sampling, one of the most common sampling strategies, groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question (for example, HIV-positive women in Capital City). Sample sizes, which may or may not be fixed prior to data collection, depend on the resources and time available, as well as the study's objectives. Purposive sample sizes are often determined on the basis of theoretical saturation (the point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights to the research questions). Purposive sampling is therefore most successful when data review and analysis are done in conjunction with data collection.

What is quota sampling?

Quota sampling, sometimes considered a type of purposive sampling, is also common. In quota sampling, we decide while designing the study how many people with which characteristics to include as participants. Characteristics might include age, place of residence, gender, class, profession, marital status, use of a particular contraceptive method, HIV status, etc. The criteria we choose allow us to focus on people we think would be most likely to experience, know about, or have insights into the research topic. Then we go into the community and – using recruitment strategies appropriate to the location, culture, and study population – find people who fit these criteria, until we meet the prescribed quotas. (See the section in this module on Recruitment in Qualitative Research, page 6.)

How do purposive and quota sampling differ?

Purposive and quota sampling are similar in that they both seek to identify participants based on selected criteria. However, quota sampling is more specific with respect to sizes and proportions of subsamples, with subgroups chosen to reflect corresponding proportions in the population. If, for example, gender is a variable of interest in how people experience HIV infection, a quota sample would seek an equal balance of HIV-positive men and HIV-positive women in a given city, assuming a 1:1 gender ratio in the population. Studies employ purposive rather than quota sampling when the number of participants is more of a target than a steadfast requirement – that is, an approximate rather than a strict quota.

What is snowball sampling?

A third type of sampling, snowballing – also known as chain referral sampling – is considered a type of purposive sampling. In this method, participants or informants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit "hidden populations," that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies.

Recruitment in Qualitative Research

A recruitment strategy is a project-specific plan for identifying and enrolling people to participate in a research study. The plan should specify criteria for screening potential participants, the number of people to be recruited, the location, and the approach to be used. In this section, we address some of the questions that may come up during the recruitment of participants.

How are recruitment strategies decided?

Ideally, the local principal investigator and qualitative research team members work together, in close consultation with community leaders and gatekeepers (that is, community members in positions of official or unofficial authority), to develop a plan to identify and recruit potential participants for each site. Recruitment strategies are determined by the type and number of data collection activities in the study and by the characteristics of the study population. They are typically flexible and can be modified if new topics, research questions, or subpopulations emerge as important to the study, or if initial strategies do not result in the desired number of recruits. The criteria for selection can also be changed if certain data collection activities or subpopulations of people prove not to be useful in answering the research questions, as discussed in greater detail below.

What if we disagree with recommendations from local leaders'?

It is important for the research team to be respectful of and responsive to the guidance and advice of local experts and community leaders. Remember that they have had more opportunity to establish rapport with the local community and they will also have to maintain that rapport after the study is complete. Remember also that community members may hold community leaders and local organizations accountable for any misunderstandings or other problems resulting from the behavior of the field staff.

What should we say to people when we try to recruit them?

Each research team develops guidelines for the introductory comments staff make to potential participants at each site. These guidelines need to be sensitive to the social and cultural contexts from which participants will be recruited. They should also reflect the researchers' awareness that willingness to participate in an interview or focus group will depend on how well the participants understand what the study is about, what will be expected of them if they participate, and how their privacy will be respected.

In developing recruitment guidelines, it is important to take special care to avoid saying anything that could be interpreted as coercive. The voluntary nature of participation in research studies should always be emphasized.

Can we recruit people who are legally under the care of a parent or guardian?

Yes, you may recruit minors, but in most cases you must obtain informed consent (discussed in detail in this module's section on Ethical Guidelines in Qualitative Research, page 9) from the parent or guardian, as well as from the potential participant. Exceptions to the parental consent requirement include pregnant adolescents and homeless minors, but you should always consult the guidelines of the relevant ethics review boards before proceeding with recruitment. Moreover, recruitment of minors must be specifically approved by all relevant ethics review boards. Because they are considered a vulnerable population, recruiting minors for research studies is a highly sensitive issue, and extra measures are required to ensure their protection.

Do we always need to obtain informed consent? If so, oral or written?

The ethics committee that reviews and approves the study protocol determines whether informed consent needs to be obtained for each data collection activity. Typically, formal informed consent is necessary for all qualitative research methods except participant observation, regardless of the sampling method used to identify potential participants and the strategies used to recruit them. Whether this informed consent is oral or written depends on a number of project-specific factors and ultimately upon approval by the ethics committee. During recruitment, obtaining informed consent for qualitative research involves clearly explaining the project to potential study participants. (See the section in this module on Ethical Guidelines in Qualitative Research, page 9, for more on informed consent.)

What if the recruitment strategy is not working?

After data collection is under way, the local principal investigator and field staff may find that the recruitment strategy is not working as well as anticipated. Because qualitative research is an iterative process, it is permissible to change the recruitment strategy, as long as the proper approvals are obtained.

For example, it may be necessary to develop a new recruitment strategy because following the original plan has resulted in inadequate enrollment or because researchers determine that they need participants who meet a different set of criteria. After meeting to discuss alternatives, the research team should write down reasons why the strategy was not working or needs to be changed and outline how they would like to change it.

Proposed changes in the recruitment strategy must be submitted to the sponsoring organization, and some will require submission of a protocol amendment for approval by the ethics committees that initially approved the research. If new criteria for participation are proposed, for instance, they must be approved by relevant ethics committees before the new phase of recruitment can begin. Similarly, increasing the number of recruits would also require ethics committee approval.

Because of the limited time frame for data collection, it is important that the field staff work closely with the site principal investigator and community gatekeepers to identify and recruit the new set of research participants.

Ethical Guidelines in Qualitative Research

This section briefly summarizes ethical issues relevant to qualitative research. It is intended to provide a context for discussion in subsequent modules of procedures for safeguarding research participants' interests. Qualitative researchers, like anyone conducting research with people, should undergo formal research ethics training. The material presented here is not a substitute for training on research ethics. A list of ethics training resources is included on page 12.

Research ethics deals primarily with the interaction between researchers and the people they study. *Professional ethics* deals with additional issues such as collaborative relationships among researchers, mentoring relationships, intellectual property, fabrication of data, and plagiarism, among others. While we do not explicitly discuss professional ethics here, they are obviously as important for qualitative research as for any other endeavor. Most professional organizations, such as the American Anthropological Association, the Society for Applied Anthropology, the American Sociological Association, and the American Public Health Association, have developed broad statements of professional ethics that are easily accessible via the Internet.

Why is research ethics important in qualitative research?

The history and development of international research ethics guidance is strongly reflective of abuses and mistakes made in the course of biomedical research. This has led some qualitative researchers to conclude that their research is unlikely to benefit from such guidance or even that they are not at risk of perpetrating abuses or making mistakes of real consequence for the people they study. Conversely, biomedical and public health researchers who use qualitative approaches without having the benefit of formal training in the social sciences may attempt to rigidly enforce bioethics practices without considering whether they are appropriate for qualitative research.

Between these two extremes lies a balanced approach founded on established principles for ethical research that are appropriately interpreted for and applied to the qualitative research context. Agreed-upon standards for research ethics help ensure that as researchers we explicitly consider the needs and concerns of the people we study, that appropriate oversight for the conduct of research takes place, and that a basis for trust is established between researchers and study participants.

Whenever we conduct research on people, the well-being of research participants must be our top priority. The research question is always of secondary importance. This means that if a choice must be made between doing harm to a participant and doing harm to the research, it is the research that is sacrificed. Fortunately, choices of that magnitude rarely need to be made in qualitative research! But the principle must not be dismissed as irrelevant, or we can find ourselves making decisions that eventually bring us to the point where our work threatens to disrupt

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[1] National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. *The Belmont Report. Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*. Washington, DC: National Institutes of Health, 1979. Available: *http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html*.

[2] Weijer C, Goldsand G, Emanuel EJ. Protecting communities in research: current guidelines and limits of extrapolation. *Nature Genetics* 1999;23(3):275-80.

the lives of the people we are researching.

What are the fundamental research ethics principles?

Three core principles, originally articulated in The Belmont Report,[1] form the universally accepted basis for research ethics.

Respect for persons requires a commitment to ensuring the autonomy of research participants, and, where autonomy may be diminished, to protect people from exploitation of their vulnerability. The dignity of all research participants must be respected. Adherence to this principle ensures that people will not be used simply as a means to achieve research objectives.

Beneficence requires a commitment to minimizing the risks associated with research, including psychological and social risks, and maximizing the benefits that accrue to research participants. Researchers must articulate specific ways this will be achieved.

Justice requires a commitment to ensuring a fair distribution of the risks and benefits resulting from research. Those who take on the burdens of research participation should share in the benefits of the knowledge gained. Or, to put it another way, the people who are expected to benefit from the knowledge should be the ones who are asked to participate.

In addition to these established principles, some bioethicists have suggested that a fourth principle, *respect for communities*, should be added. Respect for communities "confers on the researcher an obligation to respect the values and interests of the community in research and, wherever possible, to protect the community from harm."[2] We believe that this principle is, in fact, fundamental for research when community-wide knowledge, values, and relationships are critical to research success and may in turn be affected by the research process or its outcomes.

What is informed consent?

Informed consent is a mechanism for ensuring that people understand what it means to participate in a particular research study so they can decide in a conscious, deliberate way whether they want to participate. Informed consent is one of the most important tools for ensuring *respect for persons* during research.

Many people think of informed consent primarily as a *form*, that is, a piece of paper that describes in detail what the research is about, including the risks and benefits. This form generally goes through ethics committee approval procedures, includes legalistic language, and is signed by the participant, the researcher, and possibly a witness. Such informed consent forms are appropriate for biomedical and other research – including qualitative – when the risks faced by participants may be substantial. They may also be necessary for minimal risk research when the foundation for trust between researchers and participants is weak.

But forms are really only one part of an informed consent *process*. In some cases, forms may not be the best way to ensure informed consent. There are also situations where obtaining informed

consent from individual participants may not be feasible or necessary. For example, a researcher using participant observation to learn about how transactions occur in a public market would find it very hard to get everyone observed in that setting to sign a consent form and would probably create unwarranted suspicion about her motives in the process of seeking such consent. Yet if people see a stranger hanging around, watching, asking questions, and perhaps taking discreet notes, they may be even more suspicious about why she is there. In these situations, qualitative researchers must use other mechanisms to achieve the goal of informed consent.

How do we achieve informed consent for qualitative research?

In general, informed consent procedures are based on national and international research ethics guidelines; a review of such guidance is an important part of ethics training. Research organizations and ethics committees often have their own specific guidelines as well.

The first task in achieving informed consent is to inform people about the research in a way they can understand. This can be a multistep process. For example, you may begin by approaching community leaders and explaining the research to them. The leaders may then facilitate a community forum where interested people can learn about the research and ask questions. You might distribute information sheets, advertisements, or brochures, or try to get local newspapers or radio stations to do a report on the research. A community advisory board might be set up. Or the researchers might spend a week or two just talking with people one-on-one. If the researchers will be spending a lot of time in the community setting, or if the research is potentially controversial or sensitive, such efforts can go a long way toward gaining trust as well as understanding. In some situations, it may be necessary to obtain formal permission from community leaders or gatekeepers before research can begin.

In general, data collection activities that require more than casual interaction with a person require individual informed consent from that person, regardless of whether community-level permissions exist. Examples of such activities include in-depth interviews and focus groups. The person should be told:

- the purpose of the research
- what is expected of a research participant, including the amount of time likely to be required for participation
- expected risks and benefits, including psychological and social
- the fact that participation is voluntary and that one can withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions
- how confidentiality will be protected
- the name and contact information of the local lead investigator to be contacted for questions or problems related to the research
- the name and contact information of an appropriate person to contact with questions about one's rights as a research participant (usually the chair of the local ethics committee overseeing the research)

All this information must be provided in a language and at an educational level that the participant can understand. Potential participants must be competent to make a decision about being in

Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

Module 2

Participant Observation

FAMILY HEALTH INTERNATIONAL

Participant Observation

What people say they believe and say that they do are often contradicted by their behavior. A large body of scientific literature documenting this disparity exists, and we can all likely summon examples from our own lives. Given the frequency of this very human inconsistency, observation can be a powerful check against what people report about themselves during interviews and focus groups.

This module presents the basics of conducting participant observation in applied research projects:

- Overview of Participant Observation
- Ethical Guidelines
- Logistics of Participant Observation
- How to Be an Effective Participant Observer
- Suggested Readings
- Case Study Samples
- Participant Observation Steps

Overview of Participant Observation

What is participant observation?

Participant observation is a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research, whose objective is to help researchers learn the perspectives held by study populations. As qualitative researchers, we presume that there will be multiple perspectives within any given community. We are interested both in knowing what those diverse perspectives are and in understanding the interplay among them.

Qualitative researchers accomplish this through observation alone or by both observing and participating, to varying degrees, in the study community's daily activities. Participant observation always takes place in community settings, in locations believed to have some relevance to the research questions. The method is distinctive because the researcher approaches participants in their own environment rather than having the participants come to the researcher. Generally speaking, the researcher engaged in participant observation tries to learn what life is like for an "insider" while remaining, inevitably, an "outsider."

While in these community settings, researchers make careful, objective notes about what they see, recording all accounts and observations as field notes in a field notebook. Informal conversation and interaction with members of the study population are also important components of the method and should be recorded in the field notes, in as much detail as possible. Information and messages communicated through mass media such as radio or television may also be pertinent and thus desirable to document.

What can we learn from participant observation?

Data obtained through participant observation serve as a check against participants' subjective reporting of what they believe and do. Participant observation is also useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which study participants live; the relationships among and between people, contexts, ideas, norms, and events; and people's behaviors and activities – what they do, how frequently, and with whom.

In addition, the method enables researchers to develop a familiarity with the cultural milieu that will prove invaluable throughout the project. It gives them a nuanced understanding of context that can come only from personal experience. There is no substitute for witnessing or participating in phenomena of human interaction – interaction with other people, with places, with things, and with states of being such as age and health status. Observing and participating are integral to understanding the breadth and complexities of the human experience – an overarching research endeavor for any public health or development project.

Participant observation in action

In the early 1990s, sharing needles during injection drug use was a known risk factor for HIV acquisition in the United States. After educational campaigns informed injection drug users about the importance of using clean needles, surveys indicated that needle-sharing had declined. High rates of HIV transmission persisted among this population, however.

An anthropologist's observation of heroin users in one state confirmed that users were not sharing needles. In observing the preparation process leading up to injection, however, the anthropologist noticed numerous opportunities for cross-contamination of the instruments shared in cooking and distributing the heroin (such as cooking pots, cotton, and needles) and of the liquid heroin itself. Discovery of this phenomenon through participant observation constituted an important contribution to understanding injection drug use behavior as related to HIV acquisition. The phenomenon itself is now known as "indirect sharing."

Through participant observation, researchers can also uncover factors important for a thorough understanding of the research problem but that were unknown when the study was designed. This is the great advantage of the method because, although we may get truthful answers to the research questions we ask, we may not always ask the right questions. Thus, what we learn from participant observation can help us not only to understand data collected through other methods (such as interviews, focus groups, and quantitative research methods), but also to design questions for those methods that will give us the best understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

What are the disadvantages of participant observation?

The main disadvantage of participant observation is that it is time-consuming. In traditional ethnographic research, researchers spend at least one year in the field site collecting data through participant observation and other methods. This is not practical for most applied research studies, which necessarily require a shorter period of data collection. This weakness is partially mitigated in most current international development projects by the tendency for the inquiry to be more focused than in traditional ethnographic study and for the data collection team to include researchers who are native rather than foreign to the region. Researchers who already possess a solid base of cultural awareness are better able to concentrate on the research question itself.

A second disadvantage of participant observation is the difficulty of documenting the data – it is hard to write down everything that is important while you are in the act of participating and observing. As the researcher, you must therefore rely on your memory and on your own personal

More objective:
The waiting room of the antenatal clinic was empty except for one girl who looked to be approximately 5 to 8 years old. She was sitting in the corner behind a chair. She peeked out from behind it and looked at us when we entered the room talking. Her nose was running and her eyes were red and swollen.

More subjective:
The waiting room of the antenatal clinic was deserted except for a young girl who had been abandoned there by her mother. She had been wedged into the corner behind a chair so she wouldn't wander off. She glared at us because we were making so much noise. She had probably been crying for a long time.

discipline to write down and expand your observations as soon and as completely as possible. It is easy to tell yourself that you will do this task later, but, because memory fades quickly, postponing the expansion of notes can lead to loss or inaccurate recording of data. The quality of the data therefore depends on the diligence of the researcher, rather than on technology such as tape recorders.

A third disadvantage of participant observation is that it is an inherently subjective exercise, whereas research requires objectivity. It is therefore important to understand the difference between reporting or describing what you observe (more objective) versus interpreting what you see (less objective). Filtering out personal biases may take some practice. One way to practice is to write down objective observations of a given event on one side of a page, and then offer more subjective interpretations of the same event on the other side of the page, as illustrated in the box at left. Alternately, in team-based research, field staff can review one another's field notes and help identify objective versus subjective observations. Table 2 below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation in qualitative research.

Table 2. Strengths and weaknesses of participant observation

Strengths	Weaknesses
Allows for insight into contexts, relationships, behavior	Time-consuming
Can provide information previously unknown to researchers that is crucial for project design, data collection, and interpretation of other data	Documentation relies on memory, personal discipline, and diligence of researcher
	Requires conscious effort at objectivity because method is inherently subjective

What form do participant observation data take?

In large part, participant observation data consist of the detailed field notes that the researcher records in a field notebook. Although typically textual, such data may also include maps and other diagrams, such as kinship or organizational charts. Occasionally, participant observation may involve quantification of something and, as a result, produce numerical data. For example, the researcher could count the number of people who enter a particular space and engage in a particular activity during a specified segment of time. Textual notes are entered into computer files, and data of all forms are analyzed and consulted on a regular basis throughout the study, as discussed elsewhere in this module. (See the Case Study Sample Field Notes, page 26.)

How are participant observation data used?

In applied research, as in traditional ethnography, participant observation is almost always used with other qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups. It is an integral part of the iterative research process – that is, the back-and-forth revising and refining – in several ways:

At the beginning stages of a research project, participant observation is used to facilitate and develop positive relationships among researchers and key informants, stakeholders, and gatekeepers, whose assistance and approval are needed for the study to become a reality. These relationships are essential to the logistics of setting up the study, including gaining permission from appropriate officials, and identifying and gaining access to potential study participants.

Using participant observation to develop interview questions

In a research study on HIV transmission, a researcher may observe that some men who approach women in a particular social setting are transient truck drivers, whereas others are local residents. Previously, researchers may not have known that women had sexual relationships with men who lived outside the community. This information could be used to develop more meaningful questions for interview guides. For example, researchers might now ask whether it is more or less difficult for women to negotiate condom use with truck drivers than with men who live in the community on a more permanent basis.

Researchers also use data collected through participant observation to improve the design of other methods, such as interviews and focus groups. For instance, they help to ensure the cultural relevance and appropriateness of interview and focus group questions.

Participant observation data are invaluable in determining whom to recruit for the study and how best to recruit them.

When acting as interviewers or focus group facilitators, researchers are guided by the cultural understanding gained through participant observation, allowing them to discern subtleties within participant responses. Knowing what these culturally specific cues mean allows the researcher to ask more appropriate follow-up questions and probes.

Participant observation data also provide a context for understanding data collected through other methods. In other words, they help researchers make sense of those other data. Participant observation may be done prior to other data collection, as well as simultaneously with other methods and during data analysis. For example, researchers might follow up on mention of a neighborhood with a high immigrant population by going there to do structured observation. Or, they might consult previously collected data that detail interactions between men and women in a public space, in order to shed light on a cryptic male focus group discussion about how men meet extramarital sex partners. Frequent consultation of participant observation data throughout a study can inform instrument design, save time, and prevent mistakes.

Ethical Guidelines

How much should I disclose about who I am and what I am doing?

When conducting participant observation, you should be discreet enough about who you are and what you are doing that you do not disrupt normal activity, yet open enough that the people you observe and interact with do not feel that your presence compromises their privacy. In

many situations, there is no reason to announce your arrival at the scene; in many others, however, it is essential that you openly state your identity and purpose. You should always alert relevant gatekeepers (community members in positions of official or unofficial authority) as to your presence and purpose. You should never be secretive or deliberately misleading about the research project or your role in it. If someone asks directly what you are doing, always provide a truthful response, using your judgment to gauge how exactly to handle a given situation. Be open, polite, and cognizant of your position as a guest or outsider.

There are no formal rules about disclosing your involvement in a research project while in casual conversation with community members, but it is usually advisable to do so. If you are at a bar, for example, you might spend a significant amount of time chatting with other people there. If someone begins talking to you about a topic related to the research, you might still continue to talk casually for a while. If it gets to the point where you want to ask specific questions and direct the conversation, however, then you should reveal your mission. Also, do not neglect to inform the person or persons of their right to refuse further discussion and of your commitment to confidentiality if they decide to continue talking with you.

How do I maintain confidentiality during participant observation?

As with all qualitative methods, researchers involved in participant observation must make a personal commitment to protect the identities of the people they observe or with whom they interact, even if informally. Maintaining confidentiality means ensuring that particular individuals can never be linked to the data they provide. This means that you must not record identifying information such as names and addresses of people you meet during participant observation. If it becomes necessary to get such information – for example, if the person wants you to telephone him or invites you to his home or workplace – it should not be included in the field notes that are entered into the computer. Similarly, it may be reasonable in some instances to record the names and locations of establishments – if, for example, follow-up observation will be required. These names and locations may be documented in field notes and shared with other research staff, but they should be coded and eliminated upon entry of the field notes into the computer, with the code list kept in a separate, secure computer file with limited access.

Sometimes, you may develop informal personal relationships with key informants. If that happens, be sure that no personal information they give you is ever included in the actual participant observation data. If you are unsure whether information they provide is appropriate for your official field notes, ask their permission.

Protecting participants' confidentiality also requires that researchers do not disclose personal characteristics that could allow others to guess the identities of people who played a role in the research. This dictates that you take great care not only in entering participant observation data into field notes but also when talking with other people in the community, whether for research purposes or otherwise. People may test you to see whether you disclose information by asking questions about things you may have seen or heard. Your refusal to divulge confidences will reassure them that you will protect their confidentiality as well. Participant confidentiality must also be respected during eventual presentation of the data in public dissemination events, as well as in printed publications.

How should informed consent be handled for participant observation?

It is not necessary to obtain formal informed consent for participant observation. However, when talking to people informally about the research and your role in it, it is important to emphasize that they are not required to talk to you and that there will be no repercussions if they do not. If your involvement with an individual appears to be progressing beyond participant observation to a formal interview, it is necessary to obtain informed consent before beginning an in-depth interview.

Logistics of Participant Observation

What are my responsibilities as a participant observer?

Researchers conducting participant observation need to be prepared and willing to adapt to a variety of uncontrolled situations and settings. How much you actively participate in activities versus observe them depends on the objectives and design of the specific project, on the circumstances in which you find yourself, and on your ability to blend in with the study population.

Your specific responsibilities include:

- observing people as they engage in activities that would probably occur in much the same way if you were not present
- engaging to some extent in the activities taking place, either in order to better understand the local perspective or so as not to call attention to yourself
- interacting with people socially outside of a controlled research environment, such as at a bar, public meeting place, bus depot, religious gathering, or market – if casual conversation gives way to more substantive discussion of the research topic, you would need to disclose your identity, affiliation, and purpose
- identifying and developing relationships with key informants, stakeholders, and gatekeepers

Is participant observation done individually or as a team?

Participant observation may be done individually, in pairs, and in teams – whichever arrangement is most appropriate for covering the locations and topics at issue. Factors often considered in determining the appropriate arrangement include the age, gender, physical appearance, ethnicity, personality, and linguistic abilities of different data collectors. The objective should be to gather data in the least obtrusive and most efficient manner possible, in light of the specific population and context.

One way to do participant observation is for members of a team to disperse to different locations individually, or in pairs or groups, to spend time doing focused observation to address particular questions. They can then reconvene to compare notes. From these notes, they can construct a more complete picture of the issues being studied. They might then create a map indicating places where some activity of interest was observed or where certain types of people go at different times of the day or week.

Where should I do participant observation?

Where you should go to do participant observation depends on the research goals. Generally, you should try to go where people in the study population often go in their daily lives, and if appropriate,

engage in the activity of interest. A key informant could tell you where those places are. For example, you might go where people in the study population seek medical care, socialize, eat, or shop. You could visit places where high-risk sexual activities are negotiated, such as discotheques or bars. Another option is to attend organized events such as religious services, municipal activities, and public information sessions. In team-based research, data collectors could decide to distribute themselves among observation sites that best match their ages and genders.

When should I do participant observation?

Participant observation is often done at the beginning of the data collection phase, but the method is also sometimes revisited later to address questions suggested by data collected using other methods. The best time to schedule participant observation sessions depends on what, whom, and where you need to observe. You may need to set up specific times based on when the particular activity takes place, such as on the day a weekly women's health clinic is scheduled at a local health facility. There might be specific times of day when an activity usually occurs, as at bars or public parks. It may also be important to observe the same population in several different locations and at different times.

Less structured, unscheduled participant observation may occur any time you are moving about the community and interacting with people. For example, you might talk to people at a bus stop while you, too, are waiting for a bus, or observe interactions between people at a market while you are doing your own shopping. You may wish to carry your notebook and a pen so that you can take advantage of spontaneous opportunities without relying completely on memory.

How long does participant observation take?

The specific duration of participant observation depends on the setting, activity, and population of interest. For example, the researcher might spend an hour, an afternoon, or a series of afternoons in a particular setting.

What is the difference between observing and participating?

This module's section on How to Be an Effective Participant Observer, page 22, includes detailed discussion of both how to observe and how to participate in a community activity. The basic difference between these two roles should be self-evident. In the first, you remain an "outsider" and simply observe and document the event or behavior being studied. In the second, you take part in the activity while also documenting your observations.

It is best to have some questions in mind before beginning participant observation. These topics and questions are typically provided for you or may be generated from team discussion about the research objectives. Generally, it is best to focus directly on observing behaviors and other factors that are most relevant to the research problem. For example, you might be advised to focus on the behaviors of male substance abusers, interactions between women and men, or the length of time individuals spend at a certain place. It may be helpful to create a checklist to help you remember what you are meant to observe. Table 3, page 20, suggests some general categories of information that are worth observing regardless of the research topic. These include individuals' general appearance, verbal and physical behaviors, personal space, human traffic at the observation site, and people who stand out.

Table 3. What to observe during participant observation

Category	Includes	Researchers should note
Appearance	Clothing, age, gender, physical appearance	Anything that might indicate membership in groups or in sub-populations of interest to the study, such as profession, social status, socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity
Verbal behavior and interactions	Who speaks to whom and for how long; who initiates interaction; languages or dialects spoken; tone of voice	Gender, age, ethnicity, and profession of speakers; dynamics of interaction
Physical behavior and gestures	What people do, who does what, who interacts with whom, who is not interacting	How people use their bodies and voices to communicate different emotions; what individuals' behaviors indicate about their feelings toward one another, their social rank, or their profession
Personal space	How close people stand to one another	What individuals' preferences concerning personal space suggest about their relationships
Human traffic	People who enter, leave, and spend time at the observation site	Where people enter and exit; how long they stay; who they are (ethnicity, age, gender); whether they are alone or accompanied; number of people
People who stand out	Identification of people who receive a lot of attention from others	The characteristics of these individuals; what differentiates them from others; whether people consult them or they approach other people; whether they seem to be strangers or well known by others present

The specifics of participating in a given community activity, compared to observing it, depend on each project. However, effectively participating typically requires blending in, interacting with people, and identifying individuals who may be good sources of information.

How do key informants figure into participant observation?

Another important aspect of participant observation is identifying key informants – local individuals who can directly provide important information about the community and thus help the researcher more quickly understand the study population and cultural environment. Key informants can facilitate your access to particular resources, populations, organizations, gatekeepers, etc., and can help you make connections between phenomena that might not be obvious to an outsider.

Key informants with personal connections to the study population can be invaluable. They may not be appropriate study participants themselves but may be willing to serve as liaisons to the community. For example, in a study involving male homosexual adolescents, an older member of the gay community could play a significant role in developing recruitment strategies by pointing researchers to key social spaces where these adolescents spend time and by explaining relevant social practices among them.