

# Qualitative Research Methods:

A DATA COLLECTOR'S  
FIELD GUIDE

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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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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.

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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.



*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**



# Qualitative Research Methods Overview

**T**his 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
<b>General framework</b>	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
<b>Analytical objectives</b>	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
<b>Question format</b>	Closed-ended	Open-ended
<b>Data format</b>	Numerical (obtained by assigning numerical values to responses)	Textual (obtained from audiotapes, videotapes, and field notes)
<b>Flexibility in study design</b>	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?**

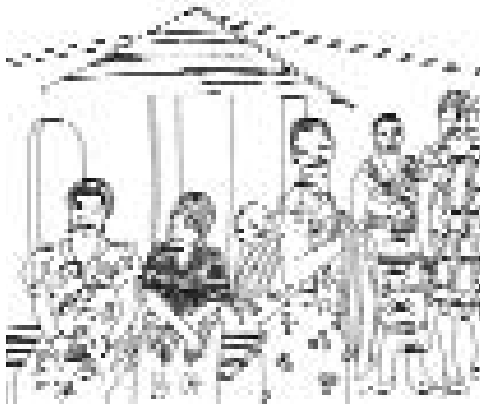
Although the objectives of quantitative and qualitative research are not mutually exclusive, their approaches to deciphering the world involve distinct research techniques and thus separate skill sets. This guide is intended to train researchers in the skill set required for qualitative research. Experience 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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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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**



# Participant Observation

**W**hat 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 gate-

### 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.

keepers, 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.

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.

Researchers often find such individuals at a field site by chance. You might identify as a key informant someone toward whom other people seem to migrate, for example. You could even be approached by someone whose personality or social position makes him or her naturally inclined to interpret and communicate key aspects of the culture to outsiders.

If you eventually want to interview a key informant formally, rather than converse informally in a participant observation context, you need to follow procedures for conducting in-depth interviews, including obtaining informed consent. (See the module on In-Depth Interviews, page 29, for more information.)

### **How do I document what I learn during participant observation?**

Documentation of participant observation data consists of field notes recorded in field notebooks. These data are records of what you experienced, what you learned through interaction with other people, and what you observed. Field notes should include an account of events, how people behaved and reacted, what was said in conversation, where people were positioned in relationship to one another, their comings and goings, physical gestures, your subjective responses to what you observed, and all other details and observations necessary to make the story of the participant observation experience complete. Field notes may be written either discreetly during participant observation or following the activity, depending on where you go and how much you participate. Whatever the case, notes should be expanded as soon as possible before your memory of the details fades. (This module's section on How to Be an Effective Participant Observer, page 22, includes more guidance for taking and expanding field notes. See also the Case Study Samples, page 26.)

You might also sketch a map of your observation site. You could indicate important establishments and locations, mark where certain activities were taking place, and places where follow-up observation is needed.

Audio and video recordings of participant observation are generally not permissible in applied public health or international development research activities because of ethical requirements for obtaining informed consent.

### **What should I do with my field notes?**

As soon as possible after collecting participant observation data, you should expand whatever notes you were able to make into a descriptive narrative. If you plan to do participant observation late in the evening, make sure that you will have time the next morning to expand your notes. (See the section in this module on How to Be an Effective Participant Observer, page 22. See also the Case Study Samples, page 26.) Include as many details as possible. You will not have been able to write down everything that transpired and that you observed, and maybe not anything at all, if you were participating quite actively.

Alternatively, rather than expanding your notes, you might be asked to share your notes with other members of the research team to produce a joint product, such as an ethnographic map of an area.

Once you have expanded your notes, either you or a typist hired for the project will need to type your field notes into a computer file. The notebook and hard copy of the typed data should then



be stored in a secure location (along with maps and any other products of participant observation). (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, for procedures related to computer files and data security.)

### **When should I share my data with the research team?**

Frequent sharing of data from participant observation among researchers helps the study team to become familiar with the context and study population, to identify unanticipated but potential problems and issues related to carrying out the project successfully, and to adjust procedures as necessary.

Team meetings typically take place throughout data collection but are more frequent at the beginning of a project. At such meetings, be prepared to discuss what you have seen, raise questions about the meaning or implications of your observations, and suggest how your observations might be followed up in interviews, focus groups, or in further observation. Also, discuss any logistical or security concerns that emerge. The local principal investigator will also review participant observation data to get a sense of how things are going in the field, identify areas that may be over- or under-observed, and identify any other issues that need to be addressed. Be sure to share with the principal investigator any nuances of your participant observation experience that seem important.

### **How to Be an Effective Participant Observer**

Participant observation data are only as good as researchers' observations, descriptions, and notes. Getting these data requires that participant observers be prepared, know how to gauge their behavior, be objective, take good notes, and use the data throughout data collection activities, including those associated with other methods.

### **How do I prepare for participant observation?**

First, know what the research is about. A thorough understanding of the study will help you stay focused during participant observation. Once you have a clear idea of what the research is about, you can determine specific objectives for the participant observation activity. It may be useful to create a list of things to pay attention to, and either write it in your field notebook or keep it in your pocket for quick reference. Note, however, that it is most important to keep your eyes open for scenarios you had not expected to encounter, which may suggest new directions for the research.

In preparing for the participant observation activity, it is useful to find out as much as you can about the site where you will be participating or observing and about any activities in which you might participate. If necessary, visit the scene and make initial observations before you set up your official data collection time.

Also, take some time to rehearse how you will describe or explain yourself and your purpose, if necessary. Similarly, establish in advance your own personal shorthand conventions – that is, how you will indicate and abbreviate the words and concepts you are likely to use in your note-taking. Know how you will separate your objective observations from your interpretations; how you will indicate men, women, and children, and their ages; and so forth. (More information on taking field notes is presented later in this section.)

## How should I behave during participant observation?

The most important behavioral principle in participant observation is to be discreet. Try not to stand out or to affect the natural flow of activity. One way to do this is to behave in a way similar to the people around you, such as praying in a religious setting or drinking in a bar. It also helps to be aware of local meanings for particular body language (positions and gestures, for example) and tones of voice, as well as what types of physical and eye contact are locally appropriate in different situations.

Field staff engaged in participant observation always need to use good judgment in determining whether to participate in certain types of activities. You should not engage in illegal or sexual activities with study participants, for example. You should exercise caution about the amount of alcohol you consume in a social setting. It may be socially appropriate to buy a beer for someone or to accept their offer to buy you one, but it may not be necessary to actually consume alcohol in any quantity.

## What should I document?

Simply put, document what you observe, taking care to distinguish it from both your expectations and your interpretation of what you observe.

It is important to document what is actually taking place rather than what you were expecting to see and to not let your expectations affect your observations. The purpose of participant observation is partly to confirm what you already know (or think you know) but is mostly to discover unanticipated truths. It is an exercise of discovery.

Also, avoid reporting your interpretation rather than an objective account of what you observe. To interpret is to impose your own judgment on what you see. For example, an interpretive description of a street corner might be that it was “dirty and overly crowded.” An objective description would be that “there was garbage everywhere and there were so many people around that it was difficult to move.” The danger of not separating interpretation from observation is that your interpretations can turn out to be wrong. This can lead to invalid study results, which can ultimately be damaging for the study population. You can work on reporting neutral observations by questioning yourself often about your assertions. Ask yourself, “What is my evidence for this claim?”

### Distinguishing interpretation from observation

A North American researcher is hired to observe the behavior of young men in an African country. He notices a lot of handholding and displays of mutual affection between these men. Because of his American background, he interprets these data to mean that many young men in this country are homosexual. Although this might be a logical interpretation in North America, it is not logical for the African country. Thus, the observations are correct, but his interpretation is not, and any policies or programs based on his interpretation would be invalid.

## How do I take field notes?

Handwritten notes, later converted into computer files, are often the only way to document certain participant observation activities, such as informal or spontaneous interviews, observation, and generally moving about in the field. Notes from participant observation – like those from interviews and focus groups – are called “field notes,” and they are written directly into field notebooks. The tips on page 24 offers some suggestions for formatting and writing field notes.

## How do I expand my notes?

Following each participant observation event, data collectors need to expand their notes into rich descriptions of what they have observed. (See the Case Study Samples, page 26.) This involves transforming your raw notes into a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations, a task most conveniently done using a computer. If no computer is available within a day or so, you should expand your notes by hand. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format, as discussed in the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes*, preferably within 24 hours from the time field notes are made. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as data collection, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook if necessary. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.
- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words*. A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a narrative describing what happened and what you learned about the study population and setting. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.

## TIPS

### Tips for taking field notes

**Begin each notebook entry** with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.

**Leave space** on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section above on “How do I expand my notes?”)

**Take notes strategically.** It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes.

**Use shorthand.** Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.

**Cover a range of observations.** In addition to documenting events and informal conversations, note people’s body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; interactions among participants; ambiance; and other information that could be relevant.

- *Identifying questions for follow-up.* Write down questions about participant responses that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research.
- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.



## Suggested Readings

Bogdewic SP. Participant observation. In Crabtree BF, Miller W (eds.). *Doing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992.

DeWalt KM, DeWalt BR, Wayland CB. Participant observation. In Bernard HR (ed.). *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998.

Handwerker WP. *Quick Ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2001.

Johnson J. *Selecting Ethnographic Informants*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990.

Jorgensen D. *Participant Observation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989.

Spradley J. *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980.

Winstein RM. The mental hospital from the patient's point of view. In Gove WR (ed.). *Deviance and Mental Illness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1982.

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For additional information on this topic, refer to Chapter 4. Collecting Qualitative Data: The Science and the Art in these companion guides:

*Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research*

*Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health*

## Sample Participant Observation Field Notes

Arch # CCP001  
Capital City Hospital

14-6-04  
start 8:00 am  
end 10:15 am

Antenatal clinic for hospital offices 3 sides of waiting area. Govt offices 1 side Mrs. X head nurse are other study nurses Sm waiting area off main, has TV/video. Clinic has 3 HIV videos, very popular, women stay to watch, after 1st, 2nd, Mon & Fri antenatal (busier)

Tues - hi risk

pm teen pregnancy

Wed - test results

STI + treatment on & w

- men shy bit al. w  
(don't want come)

Nurses want men: treat

STI clinic crowded

long wait

## Sample Expanded Field Notes

Archival #: CCP001  
Site: Capital City Hospital  
Data collector: Anna S.  
Typist: Brian L.  
Date: 14-6-04  
Start: 08:00 a.m.  
End: 10:15 a.m.

When we arrived, we went first to the antenatal clinic where several xxxxxx projects are located, including xxxx, xxx, and the xxxxxxxx study. The projects occupy rooms on three sides of the large waiting area, which was largely empty. When we arrived there were seven women in the main waiting area, listening to a nurse give a health talk. A few more women arrived as the talk progressed.

We were met by Mrs. xxxxxx, the head nurse, and introduced to several of the other study nurses.

There is a small waiting area off the main waiting area for the xxx project, which includes a recently acquired TV/VCR. This was playing when we arrived, and there were a number of women gathered around watching throughout our visit. They have two HIV videos which the staff said are very popular and that the women will stay after their study visits to watch.

Monday and Friday are general antenatal clinic days at the hospital and are therefore busier. Tuesday morning is for high-risk clients and the afternoon is a teen pregnancy clinic. On Wednesday clients return for test results. It was unclear to me what happens on Thursday.

Women are tested for STIs, and treatment is provided to both women and their partners; however, men are usually shy about coming to the clinic because it is all women. The nurses prefer to have the partners come to XXX so they can make sure they are treated. The STI clinic has a long wait and is crowded ...

## Participant Observation Steps

### Preparing for Participant Observation

- 1 Determine the purpose of the participant observation activity as related to the overall research objectives.
- 2 Determine the population(s) to be observed.
- 3 Consider the accessibility of the population(s) and the venues in which you would like to observe them.
- 4 Investigate possible sites for participant observation.
- 5 Select the site(s), time(s) of day, and date(s), and anticipate how long you will collect participant observation data on each occasion.
- 6 Decide how field staff will divide up or pair off to cover all sites most effectively.
- 7 Consider how you will present yourself, both in terms of appearance and how you will explain your purpose to others if necessary.
- 8 Plan how and if you will take notes during the participant observation activity.
- 9 Remember to take your field notebook and a pen.

### After Participant Observation

- 10 Schedule time soon after participant observation to expand your notes.
- 11 Type your notes into computer files using the standard format set for the study.

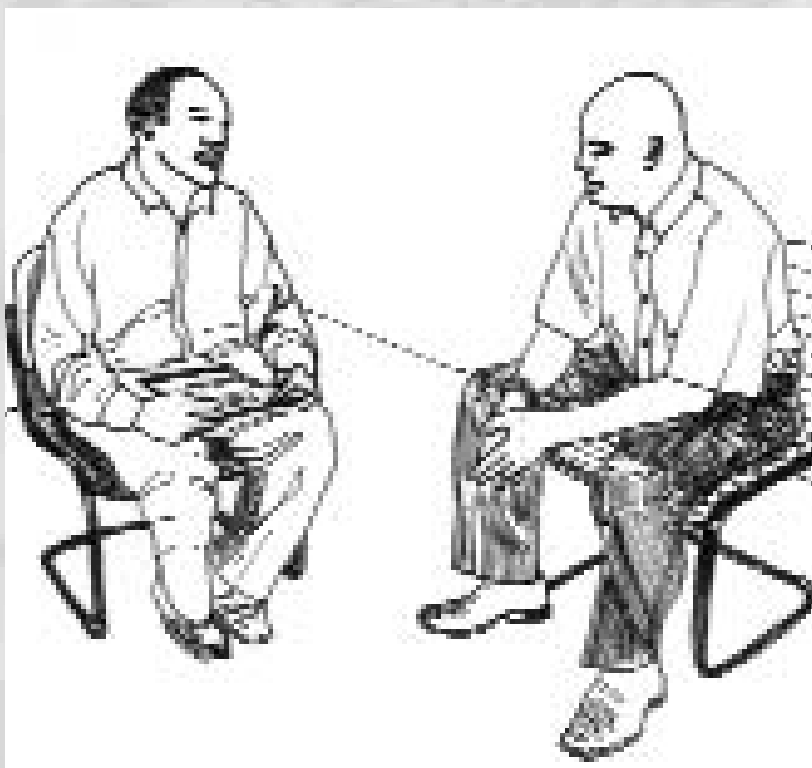




# Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

## Module 3

### **In-Depth Interviews**



# In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are one of the most common qualitative methods. One reason for their popularity is that they are very effective in giving a human face to research problems. In addition, conducting and participating in interviews can be a rewarding experience for participants and interviewers alike. For participants – whether members of the study population or someone related to the population in a professional capacity – in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to express themselves in a way ordinary life rarely affords them. Many people find it flattering and even cathartic to discuss their opinions and life experiences and to have someone listen with interest. For their part, interviewers engaged in in-depth interviews are offered the privilege of having people who are virtually strangers entrust them with a glimpse into their personal lives.

This module covers the basics of using in-depth interviews in applied research projects, including:

- Overview of In-Depth Interviewing
- Ethical Guidelines
- Logistics of Interviewing
- How to Be an Effective Interviewer
- Suggested Readings
- Case Study Samples
- Interview Steps
- Interview Checklist

## Overview of In-Depth Interviewing

### What is an in-depth interview?

The in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic. During in-depth interviews, the person being interviewed is considered the expert and the interviewer is considered the student. The researcher's interviewing techniques are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the research topic. Researchers engage with participants by posing questions in a neutral manner, listening attentively to participants' responses, and asking follow-up questions and probes based on those responses. They do not lead participants according to any preconceived notions, nor do they encourage participants to provide particular answers by expressing approval or disapproval of what they say.

In-depth interviews are usually conducted face-to-face and involve one interviewer and one participant. When safety is an issue for the interviewer, the presence of two interviewers is appropriate. In these situations, however, care must be taken not to intimidate the participant. Phone conversations and interviews with more than one participant also qualify as in-depth interviews,

but, in this module, we focus on individual, face-to-face interviews.

### What can we learn from in-depth interviews?

In-depth interviews are useful for learning about the perspectives of individuals, as opposed to, for example, group norms of a community, for which focus groups are more appropriate. They are an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. They are also an opportunity for us to gain insight into how people interpret and order the world. We can accomplish this by being attentive to the causal explanations participants provide for what they have experienced and believe and by actively probing them about the connections and relationships they see between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs. Interviews are also especially appropriate for addressing sensitive topics that people

**Table 4. Strengths of in-depth interviews versus focus groups**

	<b>Appropriate for</b>	<b>Strength of method</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	Eliciting individual experiences, opinions, feelings Addressing sensitive topics	Elicits in-depth responses, with nuances and contradictions Gets at interpretive perspective, i.e., the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs
<b>Focus groups</b>	Identifying group norms Eliciting opinions about group norms Discovering variety within a population	Elicits information on a range of norms and opinions in a short time Group dynamic stimulates conversation, reactions

might be reluctant to discuss in a group setting. Table 4 below summarizes some of the strengths of in-depth interviews in comparison to focus groups.

### What form do interview data take?

Interview data consist of tape recordings, typed transcripts of tape recordings, and the interviewer's notes. Notes may document observations about the interview content, the participant, and the context.

### How are interview data used?

Typed transcripts are the most utilized form of interview data. During the data analysis phase of the research, after data collection, transcripts are coded according to participant responses to each question and/or to the most salient themes emerging across the set of interviews.

While data is still being collected, researchers use expanded interview notes:

- during interviews, to remind themselves of questions they need to go back to, where they need more complete information, etc.
- during debriefing sessions with other field staff and investigators

- during transcription of interview recordings, to clarify and add contextual details to what participants have said

## Ethical Guidelines

### How do I explain the purpose of the interview?

You should explain the purpose of the interview to study participants within the broader context of the research study. In doing so, it is important that you be truthful and straightforward about the study objectives and the anticipated risks and benefits to the individual participant and the community, and that you identify the organizations involved in the study. It is also important not to create false expectations in order to obtain a participant's cooperation. Be cautious about making even small promises, such as saying a staff member can give a participant a ride home after the interview, unless you know for certain that they can be fulfilled.

### What should I say about confidentiality?

Assuring participants that what they say will be kept in confidence is important for earning their trust and thus for eliciting good data. You should understand the procedures outlined in the study protocol for protecting participants' privacy and be able to explain those steps clearly. If the participant raises concerns about confidentiality that you cannot address, offer to postpone the interview until you can respond to the stated concerns. You might also refer the participant to the study officials whose contact information is

#### Modeling respect for confidentiality

##### Do not say:

"You know, I always promise to keep what people tell me confidential, so I can't tell you what Mary told me when I saw her yesterday. However, I hope you appreciate that I also will not be able to tell her what you tell me."

##### Do say:

"You know, I always promise to keep what people tell me confidential, so I can't tell you who else I have seen or what anyone has said. This also means that I will not be able to tell anyone that you and I had this interview, nor will I talk to anyone about what you tell me today."

#### Obtaining informed consent before an in-depth interview

1. For less literate populations, read the consent form aloud to the participant. Be sure you are using the appropriate language version of the form. Speak slowly. Ask the participant often whether he or she understands what you are saying, and explain any terms or sentences in your own words as necessary. For more literate populations, give the participant time to read the form. Then review each section with him or her and check for comprehension.
2. Once you are satisfied that the participant fully understands the research and his or her rights as a participant, ask for his or her consent to be interviewed. In some studies, a comprehension and evaluation tool may be used to ensure that participants understand the information explained to them. If the research presents greater than minimal risk, then the study team needs to consider additional options for ensuring that the participants understand the risks as well as their rights, especially if they are illiterate. This may include the use of witnesses or advocates, as is commonly done in biomedical research that presents greater than minimal risk.
3. If the study protocol requires you to obtain written consent, ask the participant to sign the consent form. After the participant signs the form, sign it yourself.
4. If the study protocol requires you to obtain oral consent, you should sign the consent form to document that you, the interviewer, have obtained oral consent from this participant.
5. Offer the participant a copy of the informed consent form. This document should always list the contact information for study officials to whom questions about the research may be directed.

provided on the informed consent form.

You should also show how you will protect confidentiality by stating that you will not reveal anything you learn to other participants or members of the community. It is very important to adhere to this commitment. During the interview or in casual conversation beforehand or afterward, be careful not to make incidental comments about other people you have interviewed, as this behavior may suggest that you cannot be trusted. As with participant observation, people may test you by seeing if you will tell them what others have said; your refusal to disclose any information about others will reassure them about your commitment to protecting confidentiality.

### **How should informed consent be handled for an interview?**

Before asking any interview questions, you must obtain informed consent in accordance with procedures specified for the study. For in-depth interviews, informed consent is often oral and tape-recorded, but some studies may require participants to sign a written informed consent document. If the documents exist in multiple languages, be sure you use the version in the appropriate language for the participant.

In addition to informing participants about the voluntary nature of the study, a key purpose of informed consent is to ensure that they understand the risks and benefits entailed in participation. As noted in the Qualitative Research Methods Overview module, page 10, informed consent documents should also provide participants with information on how the interview data will be used, who will have access to the data, and whom they may contact for questions.

## **Logistics of Interviewing**

### **What are my responsibilities as an interviewer?**

The interviewer is responsible for fulfilling the following roles, tasks, and obligations before, during, and after the interview:

#### *Prepare for the interview*

- Recruit participants according to the recruitment strategy outlined in the work plan (if interviewers are involved in recruitment).
- Set up recording equipment and the physical space where interviews will take place.
- Become knowledgeable about the research topic, including anticipating and being prepared to answer any questions participants may have about it.
- Be reliable. To get participants to take the interview seriously, you need to demonstrate your own commitment. Arrive on time, equipped with the recording equipment, interview guide, and notebooks. Be both mentally and psychologically prepared to conduct the interview. Keep all promises you make to participants.

#### **Anticipate questions**

Brainstorm about questions participants could ask and think about how you would answer them. You might be asked to explain how a given contraceptive method works, how HIV is transmitted, or the known efficacy of an investigational product. If you do not know the answer to a question, you should tell the participant that you will research the matter and get back to him or her with a response. Then be sure to follow up on this promise, in order to maintain your credibility.

### *Interview participants thoroughly*

- Obtain informed consent from each participant before the interview.
- Address all questions or topics listed in the interview guide.
- Ask follow-up questions (some of which may be scripted in the interview guide) in order to elicit participants' complete knowledge and experience related to the research topic.
- Probe participants for elaboration of their responses, with the aim of learning all they can share about the research topic.

#### **Document participant behaviors**

Note if the participant seems distracted, becomes emotional over a particular question or topic, or seems reluctant to discuss a subject area. Also make a note if you suspect the participant is not being truthful and why you think this.

### *Document the interview*

- Record the interview using an audio (and sometimes video) recorder.
- Take backup notes.
- Observe and document participants' behaviors and contextual aspects of the interview as part of your field notes.
- Expand your notes as soon as possible after each interview, preferably within 24 hours, while your memory is still fresh.

## **How do I recruit people to interview?**

Recruiting participants is often a challenge, for a variety of reasons, including the often delicate nature of working with vulnerable populations; possible stigmatization of participants resulting from affiliation with the study; the high mobility of some populations; participants' concerns about confidentiality; and misinformation, lack of information, fear, or rumors about the study.

The work plan for each site should outline policies and strategies for recruiting participants. However, it is common for realities in the field to necessitate creative revision of these strategies. When developing a recruitment strategy, it can be helpful to consult with local people who are active in or have connections to the study population. They may be able to offer ideas about how to gain access to the population, how best to approach people, and possible obstacles to recruitment.

## **Why and how would two people co-conduct an interview?**

Typically, only one investigator conducts the interview, but sometimes it is appropriate to have two interviewers. For example, when interviews are not being recorded for some reason, an extra interviewer is needed to take notes while the other person conducts the interview. Safety concerns may also call for two interviewers, as may adhering to local norms regarding proper interactions between men and women.

When two field staff are present, they should decide on their roles before the interview. One person should take the role of conducting the interview (interviewer), while the other concentrates on taking notes (note-taker). (The interviewer can also take brief notes.) The note-taker should not interrupt or intervene in the interview unless invited to do so by the interviewer or asked a question by the participant.

Once finished with the questions, the interviewer should ask the note-taker if any points require clarification before the interview comes to a close. Both staff members should then debrief with each other (that is, discuss what happened and what was learned) either immediately after the interview or within a day. The note-taker should take detailed notes during the debriefing. These notes may then be reviewed and supplemented by the interviewer.

### **Where should I conduct the interview?**

Ideally, interviews should be conducted in a private location with no outsiders present and where people feel that their confidentiality is completely protected. Finding such a location may be difficult in some settings, but every effort should be made to protect participants' privacy to the greatest extent possible. One way to do this might be to rent a space in which to conduct interviews. Interviewers who will move among communities will need to find suitable locations on an ad hoc basis. Inviting participants to suggest a location where they would feel comfortable may also be a viable option.

When selecting a location for interviews, be sure to consider local implications of male-female interactions. For example, it would probably be inappropriate for a male field worker to conduct an interview alone with a female participant in her room at a women's boarding house.

### **How should I present myself to interview participants?**

The relationship between the interviewer and the participant begins at first contact, with the participant's first impression of the interviewer based on a variety of factors such as the greeting, manner of speaking, clothing, and body language. All of these should be appropriate for the specific culture and setting and convey respect for the participant. Cell phones should be turned off and placed out of view so as not to imply that the participant's testimony is of secondary importance.

### **What do I say in the interview?**

When conducting an in-depth interview, researchers ask mostly open-ended questions – that is, questions that encourage a detailed response rather than “yes,” “no,” or one-word answers – to elicit unstructured talk from participants about their experiences and opinions. Later, researchers analyze what participants say for insights into the person's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions.

The questions you should ask during the interview will be suggested or specified in an interview or question guide created in advance by the research team. The interview can be conducted with varying degrees of structure, however, depending on what the project calls for. For example, some interview guides specify the exact questions researchers should ask, along with follow-up questions and probes. Other guides simply contain a list of topics to be covered over the course of the interview, leaving the wording and order of questions up to the individual researchers.

It is common to conduct in-depth interviews with several different categories of people as part of a single study. This often involves a separate question guide for each category. For example, in a study about maternal health practices, in-depth interviews might be conducted with health care providers, pregnant women, and women who have given birth within the last year. Some questions in the three guides may overlap, but each guide will be tailored to elicit information specific to the category of participants being interviewed.



### **How long should the interview last?**

On average, in-depth interviews last from one to two hours. As you begin the interview, consider how much time you will likely have with the participant. Set realistic goals for covering all of the questions in the interview guide accordingly. It is a good idea to record the start and end times of each interview in your notebook. Interviews should be tape-recorded, if possible.

Ideally, the interview will flow like a conversation and end naturally, but this is not always the case. Be aware of signs of impatience, annoyance, and boredom from the participant. These are cues that the interviewer needs to be more attentive and engaging, or that it is time to wrap up the interview. It may also be appropriate to take a break, which may actually result in the participant providing additional information. Even though the tape recorder may be turned off during the break, you can take brief notes that you expand later.

### **What if the interview is interrupted?**

It sometimes happens that a participant interrupts the interview to attend to another matter. For example, a health care provider might be called to take an important telephone call, or a mother may need to tend to her child. Be patient and understanding if a participant needs to stop the interview temporarily to attend to personal responsibilities.

When an interruption occurs, stop the tape recorder and note the time in your field notes. While you wait for the participant to return, review your notes, consider what other questions you would like to ask, and note observations. When the participant returns, resume recording and again write down the time. You may want to prompt the participant to resume the discussion by recapitulating the last point and then asking a question about it.

If repeated interruptions make it difficult to keep the discussion going, you might ask if there would be a more convenient time or place where you could talk more privately. Offer to reschedule the interview if necessary.

### **What if a participant does not complete the interview?**

Sometimes participants elect not to complete an interview. If this happens and you would still like to use the interview data collected up to that point, ask them if they are willing to let you do so. Assure them that confidentiality will still be maintained. If they agree, manage the data as you would for any other interview. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.) If they do not agree, destroy the tape, interview guide, and any notes you have made related to the interviews and participants in question.

### **What if a participant knows little about the research topic?**

Some participants may turn out to have little knowledge about the research topic. If you discover this to be the case during the interview, do not be afraid to bring it to a close. Otherwise, there is the risk that participants will fabricate responses in order to please you or to avoid appearing ignorant. If there is a reimbursement associated with the interview, you should still provide the full amount.

## How should I handle reimbursements?

Policies on reimbursements vary from study to study. In accordance with local practices and with approval from relevant ethics committees, some studies provide financial compensation to participants. When this is the case, researchers should not refer to this compensation as “payment” or



“incentive” for participation. Instead, use the term “reimbursement,” which acknowledges that the participant has taken time away from other obligations and may have incurred expenses – for transportation or child care, for example – to meet with you.

Note that all participants should be provided with the full reimbursement sum, regardless of whether they complete the interview. This includes:

- participants who arrive for the interview and decide not to participate after all
- participants who choose not to answer some questions
- participants who decide to withdraw from the study before or after they have completed the interview
- participants who turn out to have no knowledge about the interview topic

Procedures for documenting reimbursement dispersal are study-specific and usually outlined in the informed consent form. Commonly, in studies that require only verbal (and not written) informed consent, the interviewer signs a statement certifying that each participant was given the cash reimbursement. In studies that require written informed consent, participants may be asked to sign a receipt.

Note that accounting personnel are not always aware of the confidentiality issues related to research studies. The local principal investigator should be prepared to inform accounting personnel if the established reimbursement procedures risk compromising confidentiality, so that alternative procedures may be created. These procedures should be worked out by the on-site principal investigator before interviews begin and must comply with the ethics committee’s approved protocol.

## How do I document the interview?

Documenting the interview consists of making tape recordings, writing field notes, and later expanding those notes. (See the tips on page 44.) When you cannot tape-record an interview, take notes that are as extensive as possible. Plan to expand those notes immediately after the interview. Before setting up any interviews, find out who is responsible for providing recording equipment and other materials, where they will be stored, and how to get access to them. Make sure to practice using the recording equipment before the interview.

## What if the recording equipment fails?

If the recording equipment fails, the notes you will have taken during the interview and later expanded will serve as backup documentation. Check for equipment failure immediately follow-

ing the interview, and expand notes within 24 hours if a failure has occurred.

### **What should I do with my interview recordings and field notes?**

The module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, provides detailed guidelines for handling your recordings and field notes. In brief, the procedure is to label all materials according to the same convention, place them together in one large envelope, expand field notes, and type them into computer files. Then transcribe the tapes directly into a computer file or first by hand and then into a computer file. A sample transcript is included on page 47. Interviewers should check the typed transcripts for accuracy if transcription has been performed by other staff members.

### **When should I share my data with the research team?**

At the local level, interviewers should debrief each other, as well as the local site coordinator or principal investigator, directly after the interview, at scheduled staff meetings, or according to some other arrangement. At the sponsor level, all electronic files are typically sent to a designated sponsor-affiliated staff member once the interviewer has reviewed them for accuracy.

## **How to Be an Effective Interviewer**

A productive interview is one in which participants relate a richly detailed, sincere account of how the research issues occur in their daily lives. Obtaining superior data requires that the interviewer be well prepared and have highly developed rapport-building skills, social and conversational skills specific to the capacity of interviewer, and facility with techniques for effective questioning.

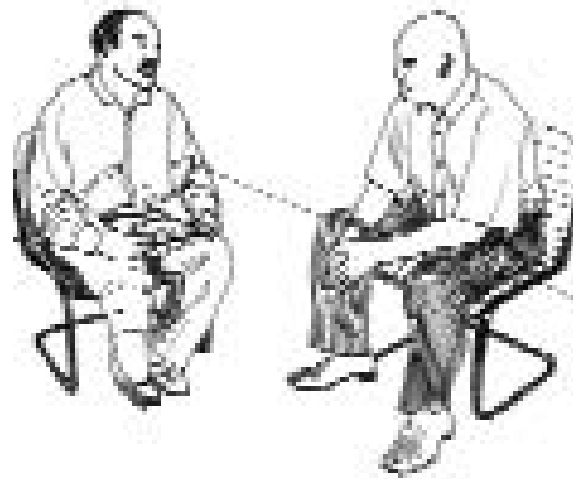
The following steps will help you become comfortable with the interview process:

- *Be familiar with research documents.* An effective interviewer knows the research material well and is practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for an in-depth interview, become thoroughly familiar with the informed consent documents. Although you will read the form to or along with participants, you should also be able to explain its contents in your own words. Be prepared to address any questions participants may have about the content of the consent form, the terminology used, whom to contact for further information, the purpose of the research, and so on.

Next, become thoroughly familiar with the interview guide. During the interview, you should not have to search through the guide for the next question. It is important to understand not only the purpose of each question, but also the purpose of the research as a whole.

Depending on how structured the interview is, you may be called on to rephrase questions that are unclear to participants, or to spontaneously think of follow-up questions and probes. You should be able to recognize when a participant has provided a response that fulfills the intent of the question, when a response contains information that addresses a separate question or a scripted follow-up question, and which probes to use to elicit needed information that was absent in a participant's initial response. If the protocol permits you to ask questions out of order, being familiar with the guide also enables you to use it flexibly, taking advantage of natural shifts in the conversation. It is a good idea to review the interview guide before every interview.

- *Practice interviewing.* It is also helpful to practice interviewing techniques. This is best done through role-playing exercises with other researchers and study staff, using the actual interview question guides. (Some suggested exercises are provided in the Exercises for Training Data Collectors appendix, page 93.) You might also conduct pilot interviews with people in the community who are not participating in the study. In that case, however, you must obtain informed consent, just as you would from someone who was participating in the study. Informal practice sessions – such as with friends, family, or support staff or other researchers – do not require informed consent.



- *Practice using the equipment.* Finally, practice using the recording equipment and checking it before the interview. Equipment failure is all too common, but you can sometimes avoid it by being familiar with how the recorder operates. Before beginning an interview, check the batteries, test the microphone, and make sure that the tape is turning. Know how to use features like pause and high-low recording. We do not recommend using the voice activation feature because it may not record the entire dialogue.

## What are important skills for interviewing?

The interviewer's skills have an important influence on the comprehensiveness and complexity

**Table 5. Key skills for in-depth interviewing**

Skill	Includes	Rationale	Tips
Rapport-building	The ability to quickly create interviewer/participant dynamics that are positive, relaxed, and mutually respectful	<p>Participants will talk freely, openly, and honestly about the research topic only if they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-feel comfortable in the interviewer's presence</li> <li>-trust the interviewer</li> <li>-feel secure about confidentiality</li> <li>-believe the interviewer is interested in their story</li> <li>-do not feel judged</li> </ul>	<p>Learn culturally-specific styles and techniques for building rapport. Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-be friendly</li> <li>-smile</li> <li>-use a pleasant tone of voice</li> <li>-use relaxed body language</li> <li>-incorporate humor</li> <li>-be humble</li> <li>-do not patronize</li> <li>-do not scold, coerce, or cajole participants</li> <li>-be patient</li> </ul>

Table 5. Key skills for in-depth interviewing (contd.)

Skill	Includes	Rationale	Tips
Emphasizing the participant's perspective	<p>Treating the participant as the expert</p> <p>Keeping the participant from interviewing you</p> <p>Balancing deference to the participant with control over the interview</p> <p>Being an engaged listener</p> <p>Demonstrating a neutral attitude</p>	<p>The interviewer's perspective on the research issue should be invisible. This avoids the risk that participants will modify their responses to please the interviewer instead of describing their own perspectives.</p>	<p>Remember that the purpose of the interview is to elicit the participant's perspective; consider yourself a student.</p> <p>If a participant asks for factual information during the interview, write down the questions and respond after the interview is over.</p> <p>If a participant asks what you think, deflect the question. Let the participant know that you consider his or her point of view more important.</p> <p>Don't overcompensate for perceived status differences by giving the participant too much control over the interview.</p> <p>Pay attention to what participants say and follow up with relevant questions and probes.</p> <p>Be aware that what you say, how you say it, and your body language can convey your own biases and emotional reactions. Use them instead to convey neutrality and acceptance.</p>
Adapting to different personalities and emotional states	<p>Being able to quickly adjust your style to suit each individual participant</p>	<p>Every participant has a unique character and demeanor. By adopting an appropriate demeanor for each individual, the interviewer can help the participant be comfortable enough to speak freely about the research topic.</p>	<p>Different interviewing styles may be needed for different participants – for example, be able to retain control of a conversation with a dominant personality and to animate a shy participant.</p> <p>Know how to tone down heightened emotions, such as when a participant starts crying or becomes belligerent.</p> <p>Adapting to each individual may require softening the way you broach sensitive issues, adjusting your tone of voice to be more sober or upbeat, or exhibiting increased warmth or social distance.</p>

of the information that participants provide. The interviewer must be able to lend a sympathetic ear without taking on a counseling role; encourage participants to elaborate on their answers without expressing approval, disapproval, judgment, or bias; keep track of the questions yet let the conversation develop naturally; and manage the interview while still respecting the principle of participant-as-expert. The core skills required to establish positive interviewer/participant dynamics are rapport-building, emphasizing the participant's perspective, and accommodating different personalities and emotional states; these skills are described in Table 5 below.



## What does managing the interview involve?

Managing the interview effectively involves clearly explaining to participants the purpose and format of the interview. Bear in mind that this may be the first time that many individuals have ever participated in one. You should also set ground rules.

Taking the time to explain how an interview works can go a long way toward ensuring a smooth and fruitful interview. It will be up to you to decide the best way to do this according to the cultural context and study population. You might start by explaining that, although an interview is a type of conversation, it is different from typical conversations. You could then explain that you have a list of questions to which the participant should respond, that the participant should speak freely in response to each question, and that you will be directing the conversation in such a way as to ensure that all questions in the interview guide are addressed.

Clarifying roles can also be useful. Explain that while you are ultimately responsible for making sure that all questions in the interview guide are addressed during the interview, the participant will play the role of expert and you, the interviewer, will be the student. Explain that you are there to gain from the participant's own knowledge about the research topic, not to dispense advice. Assure the participant that there are no right or wrong answers; it is his or her personal opinion and perspective that are of interest to the study.

It is important to emphasize the voluntary nature of the interview. Remind participants that they are not obligated to respond to any question. If the interview guide includes questions that may be of a personal or sensitive nature, explain this to participants in advance. You should emphasize that you would like for participants to respond to all questions as fully and honestly as possible, but only to the extent that they feel comfortable doing so.

Another important aspect of managing the interview is working within time constraints. Before beginning the interview, ask participants about any time limitations they have. When you know the time available, you can pace the interview in order to cover all the questions in the guide. One way to keep track of the questions you have asked or that have been addressed is to check them off in the guide. This is especially practical when you ask questions in a different order than they appear in the guide or when a participant's response applies to a question you have not yet asked.

If the instrument design allows, it can be advantageous to let the interview conversation proceed more

### It's not just what you say . . .

**Tone** refers to the volume and sound quality of a person's voice. It can reveal biases such as excitement, approval and disapproval, scorn, surprise, and disbelief. Remember that cultural context affects how tone of voice will be interpreted – what is moderate in one context may seem inappropriately loud in another. For example, depending on where you are, increasing the volume of your voice might indicate that you have become irritated or angered by a particular response, or it could be perceived as a fluctuation of the voice typical of everyday conversation. The age, gender, social status, educational background, and economic class of both you and the participant might also factor into which tone you should adopt. Generally, you should aim to use a friendly tone that will not betray your personal opinions or emotional state.

**Body language** is the culturally specific interpretation of what it means to move or position the body in a particular way. Facial expressions are perhaps the most obvious example, but gestures, posture, and constant movement can also be powerful indicators of a person's mood, opinion, and evaluative stance. Interviewers should be conscious of their body language at all times and be careful not to imply, for example, boredom, aggression, or exasperation. Instead, body language that indicates patience, pleasant mood, open attitude, and sincere interest will serve to encourage participants to express themselves without reserve.



**Table 6. Unbiased versus leading questions**

Unbiased question	Leading question
"I've heard some people in this community say that most smart people use a condom, and others say that they know smart people who don't use condoms. What do you think?"	"Most smart people in this community always use condoms, don't they?"
"Why did you want to use the female condom?" Potential follow-up question: "What were you trying to protect yourself from?"	"Was one reason that you wanted to use the female condom because you were trying to prevent sexually transmitted infections?"
"What do you think stops people in the school community from talking about sex and condoms?"	"Do you think people in the school community don't talk about sex and condoms because they might be stigmatized and seen as promiscuous?"

or less naturally, as long as you can redirect the focus if necessary. Adapting the flow of the interview may involve recognizing when a participant has already addressed a particular question in a previous response, rephrasing a question, or asking questions in a different sequence from how they are organized in the interview guide (unless the research design requires a specific order). Again, this emphasizes the need for familiarity with the guides.

Because it is important to focus on eliciting the participant's perspective, you should not correct factual errors during the interview. Afterward, however, the interviewer is free and in some instances ethically obligated to provide the participant with relevant factual information. For example, if a participant expresses the belief that mosquitoes transmit HIV, you should relay scientifically correct information about how HIV is transmitted. However, you should speak only on subjects about which you are well informed. Include these misconceptions and clarifications in your field notes for the interview.

### What are some techniques for effective questioning?

Proficiency in techniques for asking effective questions is especially important for leading interviews in which participants speak liberally. This involves keeping track of which questions have and have not been asked and answered; knowing how to phrase questions

#### Examples of effective probes

##### Direct questions:

- "What do you mean when you say ...?"
- "Why do you think ...?"
- "How did this happen?"
- "How did you feel about ...?"
- "What happened then?"
- "Can you tell me more?"
- "Can you please elaborate?"
- "I'm not sure I understand X... Would you explain that to me?"
- "How did you handle X?"
- "How did X affect you?"
- "Can you give me an example of X?"

##### Indirect probes:

- Neutral verbal expressions such as "uh huh," "interesting," and "I see"
- Verbal expressions of empathy, such as, "I can see why you say that was difficult for you"
- Mirroring technique, or repeating what the participant said, such as, "So you were 19 when you had your first child ..."
- Culturally appropriate body language or gestures, such as nodding in acknowledgment

that encourage participants to provide elaborate, detailed (rather than brief) responses; and asking questions that elicit the participant's own views and experiences as opposed to reflecting the convictions of the interviewer. Relevant techniques include asking one question at a time, verifying unclear responses, asking open-ended questions, avoiding leading questions, and using follow-ups and probes.

### **What does it mean to ask one question at a time?**

Be careful not to pose several questions at once without giving the participant an opportunity to respond to individual questions. This is especially apt to happen when questions are grouped together in the interview guide. When it does, participants are unlikely to address each of the questions in full. A better technique for getting answers to all the questions is to ask them one at a time, which gives you the opportunity to provide clarification or to rephrase each question.

### **How do I verify unclear responses?**

If you are unsure that you accurately heard what the participant said, verify the response before going to the next question. You might say, for example, "I'm sorry, could you repeat what you just said? I didn't quite hear you." Be careful not to imply that the response was somehow incorrect. Alternatively, you might use the mirroring technique, where you reflect the participant's answer back to him or her in question form. For instance, you might say, "So you told her that you think being in that study is a sign of having tuberculosis?"

### **How do I ask open-ended questions?**

Closed-ended questions are questions that may be answered with a single word or phrase or with a "yes" or "no" response. An example is, "Do you use condoms regularly?" It is difficult to glean much insight from these brief responses, because they usually do not indicate "why" or "how." A better technique for getting in-depth answers is to phrase questions as open-ended – that is, requiring more than a "yes" or "no" response. Open-ended questions set no limits on the range or length of responses, instead giving participants the opportunity to explain their position, feelings, or experiences. An example is, "Would you please describe your typical condom use?"

### **What are leading questions and how do I avoid them?**

Leading questions are questions that are worded in such a way as to influence participants' responses – in other words, questions that lead participants along a particular line of thinking. Asking leading questions risks conveying your own value judgments and biases and imposing a perspective on participants. When asked a leading question, participants are likely to provide a response that accords with it simply because they are reluctant to contradict the interviewer. To avoid this, ask neutral questions free of preconceptions. Table 6 above provides examples of leading and unbiased questions.

### **What are follow-up questions and how do I use them?**

Follow-up questions (or sub-questions) are intended to ensure that participants provide the complete set of information each main question was designed to elicit. They prompt the participant to speak on some aspect not mentioned in response to the original question. Sub-questions are often provided in the interview guide under each main question or topic, as cues for the inter-

## TIPS

### Tips for taking interview notes

**Begin each notebook entry** with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.

**Leave space** on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section on “How do I expand my notes?” on this page.)

**Take notes strategically.** It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes.

**Use shorthand.** Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.

**Write on the interview question guide.** Save time by writing notes directly in the question guide under the relevant question. If it is not possible to record direct quotations, write down key words and phrases.

**Distinguish clearly between participant comments and your own observations.** You could use your own initials or “MO” to indicate “my observation.” For example: “MO – embarrassed by empty beer bottles in room.” This documents the researcher’s observation that the participant seemed embarrassed about the empty beer bottles in the room.

**Cover a range of observations.** In addition to documenting what people say, note as well as you can their body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; and other information that could be relevant.

viewer. If a participant answers a sub-question in the initial response, it is not necessary to then pose that sub-question. Engaged listening will help you decide which follow-up questions to ask.

### What are probes and how do I use them?

Probes are neutral questions, phrases, sounds, and even gestures interviewers use to encourage participants to elaborate on their answers and explain why or how. Suggestions for probes are sometimes outlined in the interview guide, but they are also left to the discretion of the interviewer. The particular probe used depends on the response given by the individual participant. Probing therefore requires the interviewer to listen carefully to participants and to engage actively with what they say.

You should use probes when the participant’s response to your question is brief or unclear, when the participant seems to be waiting for a reaction from you before continuing to speak, or when the person appears to have more information on the subject. As much as possible, probe for more detail about what the participant thinks, feels, and experiences in relationship to the research topic. Do not assume that you understand the intent of a brief response. Instead, use probes to further or confirm your understanding and to encourage more explanation. Be careful, however, not to use probes to excess. Balance knowing when to probe with knowing when to go to the next question. If responses are repetitive or lacking in substance, or if the participant becomes annoyed or upset about lingering on a particular topic, it is best to advance to the next question.

Probing is probably the most important technique in qualitative interviewing, but also the hardest

to master. It requires practice, thorough knowledge of the interview guide and research objectives, and a solid understanding of what kind of information each question is intended to elicit. It also requires patience and sensitivity, effective time management, and good interpersonal skills.

### **What are indirect probes and how do I use them?**

Indirect probes are verbal and physical expressions that indicate that the interviewer is listening attentively. It is important to note that the appropriateness and effectiveness of indirect probes vary from culture to culture. The box on page 42 offers examples of effective probes, including both direct questions and indirect probes.

### **How do I take field notes?**

Interviewers must take notes during the interview, regardless of whether it is being tape-recorded. These notes serve as a backup when recording fails and to capture nonverbal information. They are also valuable when a participant asks the interviewer to turn off the tape recorder during discussion of particularly confidential information.

Interviewers write their notes on the question guide or in a notebook as they are leading the interview. Because you are actively engaged in the interview, your notes will be less detailed than those of, say, a focus group note-taker. The tips on page 44 offer some suggestions for formatting and writing interview notes. (See also the Case Study Samples, page 46.)

### **How do I expand my notes?**

Following each in-depth interview, data collectors need to expand their notes into rich descriptions of what they have observed. (See the Case Study Samples, page 46.)

This involves transforming your raw notes into a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations, a task most conveniently done using a computer. If no computer is available within a day or so, you should expand your notes by hand. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format, as discussed in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes*, preferably within 24 hours of the interview. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as data collection, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook to expand the notes you wrote in the interview guide. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.
- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words*. A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a descriptive narrative describing what happened and what

## Sample Interview Guide with Field Notes

## Family Planning Service Provider Interview Guide

Archival #: CCIISP01  
 Site: Morning Star Clinic  
 Interviewer: Beatrice B.  
 Date: 7-6-04  
 Start: 10:00 am  
 End: 11:10 am

(Question 1)

What family planning methods do you provide in the

coil, IUD, permanent

• Norplant

• inject

• condom

(Question 2)

Describe the process of how you provide family planning

① how a client comes

② choose

Examine, check-up, apt

(Question 3)

Describe any challenges you face in promoting con

could work w/ training

Rumors likely

(none neg)

(Question 4)

How popular are condoms as a family planning method

stigma (they)

Prob w/ confidentiality

## Sample Expanded Field Notes

Archival #: CCIISP01  
 Site: Morning Star Clinic  
 Interviewer: Beatrice B.  
 Date: 7-6-04  
 Start: 10:00 a.m.  
 End: 11:10 a.m.

This interviewee has been a nurse at the Morning Star FP Clinic in Capital City for 2 years.

At this clinic they offer all methods including long-term, permanent, pills, injections, Norplant, condoms, coil. Clients are free to choose the method they want to use. The typical procedure is that when the client comes to the clinic, the nurse shows them (explains?) all the methods, counsels them on how they are used (also whether particular ones better suited to the individual?), and allows them to select their preferred method. The person is then examined and fitted with or given the method of their choice. Clients are required to make a checkup appointment (for how long afterwards??) to make sure everything is going well for them in relationship to the method. (How many people really come back for the checkup? Is there a charge for the checkup? How often are methods like BC pills supplied to the client, i.e., are they required to come back to the clinic to be examined if they want to continue using the method?)

The interviewee said that increasing women's opportunities for HIV testing and counseling by offering those services at the clinic could work if providers were given the proper training, but her tone of voice was doubtful. She really did not seem convinced. She cited rumors in the community as a potential barrier. Other people know who comes to the clinic and how often. It was not clear to me whether men played a role in the rumor problem or not – she only mentioned women talking about other women criticizing them for going to get so many condoms. People at the clinic (employees? or other clients?) talk about who they have seen there, evident because clients find that people they have not told know. Thus, confidentiality appears to be a problem already. (Right now it starts rumors that frequent clients are having a lot of sex, but with HIV services the repercussions could be more significant.)

## Sample Interview Transcript

### Family Planning Service Provider Interview (page 1)

Archival #: CCIISP01

Site: Morning Star FP Clinic

Interviewer: Beatrice B.

Transcriber: Beatrice B.

Translator: Samuel D.

Typist: Samuel D.

Date: 7-6-04

Start: 10:00 a.m. End: 11:10 a.m.

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent

I: Do you consent freely to participate in this tape-recorded interview?

R: Yes, I consent freely.

(Question 1)

I: As a family planning provider, what do you do or which methods do you provide in this clinic?

R: We provide all methods, some of them being the pills, injection, Norplant, coil, condoms and the permanent family planning methods.

(Question 2)

I: How do you go about that?

R: Usually when a client comes, we counsel them on all the methods, how they work, how they are used, and then the client chooses which method she feels she can use.

I: Ehee ...

R: Then you go ahead and examine and evaluate if she is eligible for the method, we then give it and then we give a return date, and if she has any problem, she can come and we check it out.

I: Ehee ...

R: And we are there to assure them of confidentiality, giving instructions and the methods how they are used, the likely side effects, and how they can deal with them. So that they are free to make their own choices on family planning.

(Question 3)

I: If VCT was to be brought into this clinic, is there anything that makes it very difficult to say promote the condom or convince someone to use the condom? Is there something?

R: If you are seen everyday coming for the condoms, people may wonder, "Are you sexy that you cannot even refrain even for a month (laughter) why are you finishing my condoms?" (Laughter)

I: Who will complain about condoms being finished?

R: Now the attitude, if you feel the sisters will see you being given 200 condoms.

I: So there are some clients who fear to come for condoms because they feel they will be seen?

R: I think the client service provider relationship is not really very confidential with all the providers, with some providers. Because some women, if they feel somebody will know about the services they come for, they will not come for it. So maybe she will come for a condom then she hears somebody say, "I heard that you came here for condoms, I was told." You see this client will say I was only with X, so why did Y also know? Which means they talked about it. So clients will fear – also fear people knowing they came for the HIV testing.

I: Okay.

R: Because confidentiality is not guaranteed.

I: What can be the solution to that?

I: Privacy, confidentiality, they are some of rights of the client, so if the service provider doesn't know that those are the rights of the clients, he/she can just play around with them, but if you know them, you know how to go about it.

## Interview Steps

### Preparing for the Interview

#### *Getting familiar with the instruments:*

- 1 Study the interview guide.
- 2 Study the informed consent document.
- 3 Practice with a partner.

#### *Day of the interview:*

- 4 Using a checklist, verify that you have all the equipment. (See the Interview Checklist, page 49.) If the instruments and consent forms exist in more than one language, be sure you have the appropriate ones for that participant.
- 5 Label all data documentation materials with an identical archival number, including tapes, notebooks, and question guides. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, for how to create archival numbers.)
- 6 Arrive early at the interview site to set up equipment.
- 7 Test your recording equipment.

### Conducting the Interview

- 8 Greet the participant in a friendly manner to begin establishing positive rapport.
- 9 Briefly describe the steps of the interview process (informed consent, question and answer, their questions, reimbursement).
- 10 Obtain informed consent.
- 11 Turn on the tape recorder and verify that it is working.
- 12 Verify informed consent orally with the tape recorder on.
- 13 Conduct the interview according to the interview guide.
- 14 End the question-asking phase of the interview.
- 15 Give the participant the opportunity to ask questions.
- 16 Reconfirm the participant's consent while the tape recorder is still on.
- 17 Turn off the tape recorder and thank the participant.
- 18 Clarify any factual errors expressed by participants during the interview.
- 19 Reimburse the participant in accordance with study procedures.

### After the Interview

- 20 Check the tape to see if the interview was recorded. If it was not, expand your notes immediately.
- 21 Punch out the re-record tab.
- 22 Make sure all materials are labeled with the archival number.
- 23 Debrief with other field staff.
- 24 Assemble all materials into one envelope. Double-check that you have completed all forms and that all materials are appropriately labeled. Note and explain any missing materials on the archival information sheet. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.)
- 25 Expand your notes within 24 hours if possible.



## Interview Checklist

### Make arrangements for

- q Private setting for interview site
- q Transportation of staff to interview site
- q Transportation of participant to interview site
- q Refreshments for participants (if applicable)

### What to take to the interview

#### *Equipment*

- q 1 tape recorder (plus 1 extra, if available)
- q 2 blank 90-minute cassette tapes per interview
- q Spare batteries
- q Field notebook and pens

#### *Interview packet*

- q 1 large, heavy-duty envelope
- q Archival information sheet with archival number
- q 1 copy of interview guide (in the appropriate language for participant)
- q 2 informed consent forms (1 for interviewer, 1 for participant, in the appropriate language)
- q Participant reimbursement (if applicable)
- q Reimbursement form (if applicable)

### What to place in the envelope after the interview

- q Completed archival information sheet
- q Signed informed consent form (signed only by interviewer if oral, by participant and interviewer if written)
- q Labeled interview guide with notes
- q Field notes
- q Labeled cassette tapes, re-record tabs punched out
- q Signed reimbursement form (if applicable)



# Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

## Module 4

### **Focus Groups**



FOCUS GROUPS

FAMILY HEALTH INTERNATIONAL

# Focus Groups

**F**ocus groups are a qualitative data collection method effective in helping researchers learn the social norms of a community or subgroup, as well as the range of perspectives that exist within that community or subgroup. Focus groups are often used to determine what service or product a particular population wants or would like to have, such as in marketing studies. Because focus groups seek to illuminate group opinion, the method is especially well suited for sociobehavioral research that will be used to develop and measure services that meet the needs of a given population.

This module presents the fundamentals of using focus groups in applied qualitative research. It includes:

- Overview of Focus Groups
- Ethical Guidelines
- Logistics of Focus Groups
- How to Be an Effective Moderator
- How to Be an Effective Note-taker
- Suggested Readings
- Case Study Samples
- Steps in Moderating a Focus Group
- Steps in Note-taking for a Focus Group
- Focus Group Checklist

## Overview of Focus Groups

### What is a focus group?

A focus group is a qualitative data collection method in which one or two researchers and several participants meet as a group to discuss a given research topic. These sessions are usually tape-recorded, and sometimes videotaped. One researcher (the moderator) leads the discussion by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions – that is, questions that require an in-depth response rather than a single phrase or simple “yes” or “no” answer. A second researcher (the note-taker) takes detailed notes on the discussion. A principal advantage of focus groups is that they yield a large amount of information over a relatively short period of time. They are also effective for accessing a broad range of views on a specific topic, as opposed to achieving group consensus. Focus groups are not the best method for acquiring information on highly personal or socially sensitive topics; one-on-one interviews are better-suited for such topics. Table 7, page 52, summarizes some of the strengths of focus groups in comparison to in-depth interviews.

**Table 7. Strengths of focus groups versus in-depth interviews**

	<b>Appropriate for</b>	<b>Strength of method</b>
<b>Focus groups</b>	Identifying group norms Eliciting opinions about group norms Discovering variety within a population	Elicits information on a range of norms and opinions in a short time Group dynamic stimulates conversation, reactions
<b>Interviews</b>	Eliciting individual experiences, opinions, feelings Addressing sensitive topics	Elicits in-depth responses, with nuances and contradictions Gets at interpretive perspective, i.e., the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs

### **What can we learn from focus groups?**

Focus groups are especially effective for capturing information about social norms and the variety of opinions or views within a population. The richness of focus group data emerges from the group dynamic and from the diversity of the group. Participants influence each other through their presence and their reactions to what other people say. Because not everyone will have the same views and experiences – because of differences in age, gender, education, access to resources, and other factors – many different viewpoints will likely be expressed by participants.

Focus group data can also capture idiosyncratic experiences and views of individuals, but it is preferable to collect that data during one-on-one interviews, rather than in a group environment.

Within a study, focus groups are typically one method among many that are used to create a complete picture of how a given issue affects a community of people. Focus groups contribute to this broad understanding by providing well-grounded data on social and cultural norms, the pervasiveness of these norms within the community, and people's opinions about their own values.

### **What form do focus group data take?**

Focus group data consist of tape recordings, transcripts of those recordings, the moderator's and note-taker's notes from the discussion, and notes from the debriefing session held after the focus group. Notes are initially handwritten in field notebooks, on the focus group guide, or on special forms. After data collection, all handwritten notes are expanded into more complete narratives, then entered into a computer.

### **How are focus group data used?**

Typed transcripts are the most utilized form of focus group data. During the data analysis phase of the research, after data collection, transcripts are coded according to participants' responses to each question and/or to the most salient themes emerging across the set of focus groups.

The moderator's and note-taker's expanded focus group notes (from the discussion and the debriefing session) are used:

- by moderators during the focus group discussions, to remind themselves of questions they need to go back to, where they need more complete information, etc.
- during debriefing sessions with other field staff and investigators
- during transcription of focus group recordings, to clarify and add contextual details to what participants have said

## Ethical Guidelines

### How do I explain the purpose of the focus group?

Sometimes participants or potential participants ask focus group recruiters or facilitators to answer questions about the research or the topic of discussion before the focus group session begins. In this event, it is important not to talk about the topic in any detail, to avoid influencing what people say during the discussion.

You should, however, explain the purpose of the focus group as it fits within the broader context of the research study. In doing so, it is important that you be truthful and straightforward about the objectives of the study and the anticipated risks and benefits to the individual participant and the community. You should also identify the organizations involved in the study. Do not create false expectations in order to obtain a participant's cooperation. Be cautious about making even small promises, such as saying a staff member can give a participant a ride home after the focus group, unless you know for certain that they can be fulfilled.

Participants may ask you questions that you prefer to answer at the end of the focus group – for example, if your response would risk influencing the discussion. Write them on a board or large piece of paper to ensure that you come back to them at the end.

### What should I say about confidentiality?

Maintaining confidentiality requires special precautions and emphasis in focus groups. For this reason, it is often preferable to avoid using participants' names during the focus group. In such instances, you should implement a system of name substitution before the session begins. For example, you could assign participants numbers, letters, or pseudonyms for the moderator and note-taker to use on the seating charts and to identify speakers in their notes.

Although the moderator and note-taker should assure participants that everything they share in the focus group will be treated as confidential by project staff, they cannot promise that other members of the focus group will do the same. It is therefore important to emphasize both at the beginning and end of each session that participants should respect each other's privacy and anonymity. Once outside the focus group setting, they should not reveal the identities of other participants nor indicate who made specific comments during the discussion.

If any participants express concern about their privacy during the focus group, assure them that you have taken special precautions to protect participants' identities and the data. You should understand the procedures outlined in the study protocol for protecting participants' privacy and

#### **Obtaining informed consent with focus group participants**

1. For less literate populations, read the consent form aloud to the participant. The form must be written and read in a language the participant understands. Speak slowly. Ask the participant often whether he or she understands what you are saying, and explain any terms or sentences in your own words as necessary. For more literate populations, give the participant time to read the form. Then review each section with him or her and check for comprehension.
2. Once you are satisfied that the participant fully understands the research and his or her rights as a participant, ask for his or her consent to be in the focus group.
3. If the study protocol requires you to obtain written consent, ask the participants to sign the consent form. After the participants sign the forms, sign them yourself.
4. If the study protocol requires you to obtain oral consent, you should sign the consent form to document that you have obtained oral consent from these participants. Protocols may require that oral informed consent be tape-recorded in full or in part, before and sometimes again after the focus group.
5. Offer the participant a copy of the informed consent form, written in a language the participant understands. This document should always list the contact information for study officials to whom questions about the research may be directed.

be able to explain those steps clearly. You should also provide participants with the contact information of study officials whom they can call for more specific information. (If consent forms are being used, these contacts will appear on the forms.)

If, after these assurances, any participants are still uncomfortable and wish to withdraw from the focus group, the moderator should respectfully acknowledge and support their right to do so and thank them for their time and effort. The note-taker should then take the person or persons to the side, preferably to another room, provide them with the full reimbursement (if there is one), and again thank them for their time. The moderator should then redirect the focus group back to the discussion, taking care to avoid personal commentary.

#### **How should informed consent be handled for a focus group?**

Before beginning the focus group, you must obtain informed consent in accordance with the procedures of the specific study protocol. Typically, you will obtain informed consent individually with each participant before the person joins the group. As noted in the *Qualitative Research Methods Overview* module, page 10, the overarching purpose of informed consent procedures is to ensure that participants understand that they are not for any reason obligated to participate in the focus group, nor are they required to answer any questions they do not wish to answer. Informed consent for focus groups is often oral and may be tape-recorded in full or in part, but some studies may

require written informed consent. It is also essential to provide participants with information on how the focus group data will be used and who will have access to it.

## **Logistics of Focus Groups**

### **Who conducts the focus group?**

Focus groups work best when conducted by two researchers, often called facilitators. These facilitators have both individual and shared responsibilities. One person acts as the moderator of the discussion and the other is the note-taker. Both facilitators should be prepared to perform either role, in case it becomes necessary to switch roles during the focus group.



## What does the moderator do?

Typical duties of the moderator are described in detail in this module's section on How to Be an Effective Moderator, page 59, and the specific scope of the moderator's role will be clarified for every project. In general, however, moderators are responsible for leading the focus group discussion, posing all questions specified in the focus group question guide, keeping the discussion on track, and encouraging all participants to contribute.

## What does the note-taker do?

Typical duties of the note-taker are described in detail in this module's section on How to Be an Effective Note-taker, page 69, and the specific scope of the note-taker's role will be clarified for every project. In general, however, note-takers are responsible for taking detailed notes of the discussion, even though focus group sessions are typically tape-recorded. These notes serve as supplementary documentation of the discussion, documentation of the note-taker's observations, and as a backup in the event that the recording system fails. Note-takers may also be responsible for tasks related to recording (operating the tape recorder, labeling the cassette tapes, and taking appropriate security measures to protect the tapes once the session is over). Finally, note-takers typically facilitate the logistics of participant arrivals and departures, such as early withdrawal and escort to the restroom.



## What other duties do focus group facilitators have?

Depending on the protocol, focus groups facilitators may also be responsible for fulfilling the roles, tasks, and obligations in the list that follows. If these tasks are not their responsibility, facilitators should know who is performing them and be assured that everything has taken place according to plan. Tasks include:

- *Recruiting participants* according to the recruitment strategy outlined in the work plan.
- *Reminding recruits of the focus group time and place.* If the particularities of local public transport could affect participants' punctuality or their accessibility to the focus group location, facilitators may need to arrange to transport participants from an agreed location. In that case they would need to consider how to maintain confidentiality – for example, by using an unmarked car or finding out whether participants are sensitive about being transported as a group.
- *Answering any advance questions* recruits may have, without providing information in excess. To do this, you should be knowledgeable about the research topic. If you do not know the answer to a question, tell the participant that you will research the matter and respond later. Maintain your credibility by following up on such promises.
- *Being reliable.* Participants will be more likely to take the focus group discussion seriously if you demonstrate your own commitment to the discussion. Arrive on time, with the recording equipment, focus group guide, and notebooks, and be prepared to either moderate or document the focus group, according to your role. Satisfy any commitments you make to participants, such as fact-finding and confidentiality, to the greatest possible extent.

### **How many people are necessary for a focus group?**

The qualitative work plan for each site will specify the approximate number of participants to be recruited for each focus group, as well as the number of focus groups required for the project. A typical number of participants is eight to ten people, with a maximum of 12.

In most cases, more than the target number of people will be recruited because it is common for people who are scheduled to participate not to show up. If more than 12 people come to the session, one of the facilitators should explain to the last arrivals that the group is already full, provide them with the full reimbursement (if there is one), offer refreshments (if applicable), and thank them for coming. If a participant is especially disappointed at not being able to participate in the focus group, the facilitator can try to schedule him or her for another group or for an individual interview, if feasible.

### **How do I recruit people for the focus group?**

Recruiting participants is often a challenge for a variety of reasons, including the often delicate nature of working with vulnerable populations; possible stigmatization of participants resulting from affiliation with the study; the high mobility of some populations; participants' concerns about confidentiality; and misinformation, lack of information, fear, or rumors about the study.

The work plan for each site should outline policies and strategies for recruiting participants. However, it is common for realities in the field to necessitate creative revision of these strategies. When developing a recruitment strategy, it can be helpful to consult with local people who are active in or have connections to the study population. They may be able to offer ideas about how to gain access to the population, how best to approach people, and possible obstacles to recruitment.

### **How do I identify individual participants in my notes?**

In most cases you should identify individual participants by some convention other than their real names. Once all participants have arrived, assign them each a number, letter, or pseudonym and provide them with the materials to display their "nametag" clearly. Both the moderator and note-taker should draw a seating chart and label it. This will be of benefit as you take notes during the focus group and expand them later. The sample seating chart on page 70 uses numbers to identify participants. The same numbers are used to identify which participant responds to the question (e.g., "R10") in the sample notes on page 71 and the sample transcript on page 78.

### **Where should I conduct the focus group?**

Whenever possible, focus groups should be conducted in a location affording a maximum degree of privacy to participants. This decision should be made by someone who is familiar with the local area and cultural context.

### **How should I present myself to focus group participants?**

Dress is an important part of making a good impression on participants, as are initial remarks, manner of speaking, and body language. All of these should be appropriate for the specific culture and setting and convey respect for the participants. Cell phones should be turned off and placed out of view so as not to imply that the participants' testimony is of secondary importance.

### **How long should the focus group last?**

Focus group sessions usually last from one to two hours and should include time for participants to take a break. If possible, they should be scheduled no closer than 90 minutes apart to allow time for each staff member to take a break, participate in a debriefing session, and prepare for the next focus group. As you begin the focus group, consider how much time you are likely to have and set realistic goals for covering all of the questions in the focus group guide. Keep track of which questions have been addressed, and be ready to redirect the conversation if necessary in order to cover all questions. It is a good idea to record the start and end times of each focus group.

### **What if nonparticipants want to observe the focus group?**

It is preferable that no outside observers (that is, someone who is neither a participant nor a facilitator) be present during the focus group. Their presence might inhibit participants from speaking freely. Therefore, even stakeholders should be strongly discouraged from attending the discussion.

### **What if a participant does not stay for the entire discussion?**

Participation in focus groups is always voluntary. Participants who do not want to remain for the duration of the discussion, for any reason, should be reminded of the confidentiality agreement, thanked for their participation, and reimbursed, if applicable. In such a situation, the note-taker can take the participant aside to handle departure, and the moderator can take notes until the note-taker returns.

### **What if the focus group is interrupted?**

If a focus group discussion is interrupted by someone outside the group, take any steps necessary to protect the confidentiality of participants. At the least, this will involve stopping the discussion temporarily and explaining the private nature of the discussion to the person(s) responsible for the interruption. Again, the note-taker can take the interrupter outside or aside to explain the need for privacy.

### **What if I want to refer a participant for help?**

If, during the discussion, a participant appears to be distressed about information shared, the moderator or note-taker might consider approaching the person after the focus group and offering to refer him or her for help as appropriate or desired.

### **How should I handle reimbursements?**

Policies on reimbursements vary from study to study. In accordance with local practices and with approval from relevant ethics committees, some studies provide financial compensation to participants. When this is the case, researchers should not refer to this compensation as “payment” or “incentive” for participation. Instead, use the term “reimbursement,” which acknowledges that the participant has taken time away from other obligations and may have incurred expenses, such as transportation or child care, to meet with you.

Note that all participants should be provided with the full reimbursement sum, regardless of whether they complete the focus group. This includes:

- participants who arrive for the focus group and decide not to participate after all
- participants who choose not to answer some questions
- participants who turn out to have no knowledge about the focus group topic

Procedures for documenting reimbursement dispersal are study-specific and usually outlined in the informed consent form. Commonly, in studies that require only verbal (and not written) informed consent, the facilitator signs a statement certifying that each participant was given the cash reimbursement. In studies that require written informed consent, participants may be asked to sign a receipt.

Note that accounting personnel are not always aware of the confidentiality issues related to research studies. The local principal investigator should be prepared to inform accounting personnel if the established reimbursement procedures risk compromising confidentiality, so that alternative procedures may be created. These procedures should be worked out by the on-site principal investigator before the focus group begins and must comply with the ethics committee's approved protocol.

### **How do I document the focus group?**

Documenting the focus group consists of making tape recordings and writing notes. The note-taker is responsible for taking detailed notes of the discussion and often for operating the recording equipment. The moderator takes brief notes. Both facilitators should take the opportunity to expand their notes during the debriefing session after the focus group, and/or generate a set of debriefing notes.

### **What if the recording equipment fails?**

Facilitators should practice operating the recording equipment before conducting any focus groups and test it just before each session. If the equipment fails, the note-taker's detailed notes, supplemented by the moderator's brief notes, will serve as backup documentation. It is important to check for equipment failure immediately after the focus group and to expand notes as soon as possible if a failure has occurred.

### **What should I do with my focus group recordings and notes?**

The module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, provides detailed guidelines for handling your recordings and notes. To summarize briefly, the procedure consists of labeling all materials according to the established convention, placing them together in one large envelope, expanding all notes and entering them into computer files, transcribing the tapes, and entering the transcripts into computer files. Facilitators should check the typed transcripts for accuracy if the transcription is done by other staff members.

### **When should I share my data with the research team?**

At the local level, the field staff should debrief each other, as well as the local site coordinator, principal investigator, etc., about the focus groups they have conducted immediately after focus groups, at staff meetings, or according to other arrangements as appropriate.

## How to Be an Effective Moderator

The moderator is responsible for moving the discussion of each focus group along and for keeping it on topic. A good moderator should be skilled at creating a discussion in which he or she participates very little. In this regard, the moderator should stress the value of participants' contributions to the study and emphasize the moderator's own role as a learner rather than a teacher. Moderators also need to be adept at directing the discussion at a pace that allows all questions in the guide to be addressed thoroughly. Having these skills depends on your familiarity with the focus group guide, flexibility, ability to monitor and gauge the tone of the discussion, and ability to make quick judgments about when and how to interject.

## How do I prepare for a focus group?

An effective focus group facilitator knows the research material well and is practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for a focus group, become thoroughly familiar with the informed consent documents. Although you will read the form to participants, you should also be able to explain its contents in your own words. Be prepared to address any questions participants may have about the content of the consent form, the terminology used, whom to contact for further information, the purpose of the research, and so on.

Next, the moderator should become thoroughly familiar with the focus group guide. Being familiar with the guide allows the moderator to be more engaged during the discussion, to adhere to the guide more easily should the conversation begin to deviate from the questions, and to focus on encouraging equal participation from group members rather than on locating the questions in the guide. It is important to understand the purpose behind each question and how it fits within the overall research aims. It may be necessary to rephrase questions that are unclear to participants, or to spontaneously think of follow-up questions and probes. You should be able to recognize when participants have adequately addressed the intent of the question, when a response or responses contain information that applies to a separate question or to a scripted follow-up question, and when or which probes are needed to elicit additional information from individuals or from the group as a whole. Being familiar with the guide also enables you to use it flexibly, taking advantage of natural shifts in the discussion. It is advisable to review the focus group guide before every session. If multiple versions of a guide have been developed, make sure you are using the correct version.

It is also helpful to practice moderating in pilot or mock focus groups. Mock sessions, in which you use the focus group guide and other project staff play the role of participants, allow you to test your knowledge of the questions, your ability to probe and to keep the discussion on track, and your flexibility. (Some suggested exercises are provided in the Exercises for Training Data Collectors appendix, page 93.) You might also conduct practice focus groups with people in the community who are not participating in the study. In that case, however, you must obtain informed consent, just as you would from someone who was participating in the study. Informal practice sessions – such as with friends, family, or support staff or other researchers – do not require informed consent.

Another important step in preparing for a focus group is to label all materials that you will use during the focus group – including notebooks and the focus group guide – according to a previously

established convention for archiving the data. All items should be labeled identically. (See the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105, for an example of archival conventions.)

Finally, it is very helpful to review debriefing forms from previous focus groups before conducting your own. Debriefing information will provide insights into questions that need more probing, topics that were not well covered in previous groups, and other useful information.

### How do I encourage positive group dynamics?

Efforts by the moderator to cultivate a positive atmosphere for the focus group can foster a productive and rewarding discussion that is rich in data. Ideally, participants will express a wide range of perspectives and some points of disagreement, controversy, or debate, rather than consensus. Of course, participants may all agree on a given issue, but you should make certain that this is the case by encouraging participation of all those in attendance.

A crucial skill for moderating a productive focus group is the ability to build rapport with and among participants from the start of the discussion. This involves quickly establishing a positive, relaxed, and mutually respectful group dynamic. If participants do not feel comfortable expressing personal opinions and experiences during the discussion, the focus group will not achieve its objectives.

Specific techniques for building positive rapport are culturally specific; words and behaviors that would put someone of one culture at ease may be offensive in another. Therefore, if you are unfamiliar with the context, it is a good idea to ask colleagues who have qualitative research experience in the local culture for ideas about establishing rapport. Table 8 outlines some suggestions for establishing and maintaining good rapport in any culture, and Table 9 suggests some ground rules that can help ensure that the focus group goes smoothly.

**Table 8. Behavioral techniques for building rapport in focus groups**

<b>Fostering a relaxed, positive atmosphere</b>	<b>Establishing mutual respect among researchers and group members</b>
Be friendly	Set ground rules at the beginning of the focus group
Smile	Have a humble attitude
Make eye contact with participants (if culturally appropriate)	Do not be patronizing, for example, by unnecessarily repeating everything participants say or “talking down” to them
Speak in a pleasant tone of voice	Do not scold or berate participants for the content of their responses or for personal characteristics
Use relaxed body language	Do not allow any participants to berate others in the group
Incorporate humor where appropriate	Do not coerce or cajole participants into responding to a question or responding in a certain way
Be patient and do not rush participants to respond	



## How should I handle participants' different personalities and emotional states?

Every focus group you conduct will be a unique experience, not only because what the participants say will be different each time, but also because the group dynamics will vary according to the personalities and moods of the people who attend. Some groups will have a gregarious tone to them, and others a serious or quiet tone. Whatever the case, your goal should be to keep the discussion moving along, with as many people participating as possible. If someone presents an obstacle to meeting this goal, such as by dominating the discussion, expressing a negative attitude, or having an emotional outburst, you need to know how to reduce that person's impact on the group and to steer the discussion in a more productive direction.

In an interview setting, the interviewer might try to adjust his or her style to the character of the individual participant. In contrast, in focus groups, the moderator has to maneuver the conversation among too many individuals for this technique to be practical. Following are suggestions for handling common personality traits and emotional states within the focus group context.

*If a participant is ...*

**Talkative.** If a participant holds the floor for too long, you may need to intervene. You could start by thanking the person for his or her contribution and inviting others to comment on what the person said or to provide alternative views. You might also try encouraging a talkative person to make only one point at a time. You could, for example, step in as the person is introducing a new topic and encourage the group to discuss the first point. You might also use body language to discourage someone from talking for an excessive amount of time, such as decreasing your eye contact with the talkative participant and increasing eye contact with other participants.

**Table 9. Suggested ground rules for building rapport in focus groups**

Taking time to establish ground rules at the start of the focus group can save the moderator (and sometimes the entire project staff) much grief later on. All parties will be much better positioned if participants are kind to one another during the focus group and if they respect one another's privacy afterward. Laying ground rules is your opportunity to address which behaviors are desirable and which are unacceptable.

Suggested ground rules include:

- Ask participants not to discuss details of the content of the discussion once they leave the focus group site.
- Ask participants to respect other group members by not divulging what any participant says during the discussion or the identity of any individual present once they leave the focus group site. Remind them that in the informed consent agreement, you have pledged not to disclose anything concerning their participation in the study with anyone other than the research team.
- Ask that participants speak one at a time. A moderator may prefer to have participants speak in turn according to seating, in the order in which participants indicate having something to say, or according to no particular arrangement. Speaking one at a time lets everyone hear and react to each contribution; it also makes the note-taker's job easier.
- Ask participants to treat one another with respect. This means not doing anything that could cause another member of the group to feel uncomfortable, such as singling out an individual for criticism, name-calling, or making pejorative comments about any given contribution. All participants need to feel free to express their opinions without fear of being attacked by the group.



**Prone to interrupt.** One strategy is to remind the group that one of the ground rules of the focus group is to refrain from interrupting other people. You might also thank the individual and suggest returning to his or her point after the first speaker's contribution has been completed.

**Aggressive.** You might first remind participants of the ground rule that no one is permitted to insult or personally attack anyone else. You could also try to decrease the level of aggression by calmly asking the individual in question to explain the reasoning behind the stated negative opinion and then involving the rest of the group in the discussion.

**Shy.** Some participants will be hesitant to join an ongoing debate or discussion. You could offer them a safer opportunity to speak by pausing the discussion and asking whether anyone else has something to contribute. You could also pose questions directly to individuals who have been especially quiet, thank them afterward for sharing their experience, and encourage them with body language, such as smiling.

**Angry.** If a participant becomes angry, try to soften the level of emotion by acknowledging that the issues at hand are indeed sensitive or controversial. If you consider it preferable to address the person's anger, steer the conversation toward the idea that it is the issue that is upsetting rather than another participant.

**Crying.** If a participant begins to cry, it is up to the moderator to gauge whether it is better to address the issue directly or not call attention to the person. If you decide to discuss it, you might ask the person to identify the source of his or her distress. When the source is an issue related to the content of the discussion, ask the group if other people feel emotional as well. If the issue has to do with group dynamics, react accordingly, reminding people of the ground rule of mutual respect, and so on. In some situations, the note-taker might take the crying participant aside to resolve the situation.

**Tired.** If more than one participant begins to appear tired or irritable, it may be time to take a break. Encourage people to get up and move around, use the restroom, and have refreshments (if provided).

### **What are some techniques for effective questioning?**

Proficiency in techniques for asking effective questions is especially important for leading focus groups in which participants speak liberally. This involves keeping track of which questions have and have not been asked and answered; knowing how to phrase questions that encourage participants to provide elaborate, detailed (rather than brief) responses; and asking questions that elicit the participant's own views and experiences as opposed to reflecting the convictions of the moderator. Relevant techniques include asking one question at a time, verifying unclear responses, and using follow-ups and probes. You can remain neutral by asking open-ended questions and avoiding leading questions.

### **What does it mean to ask one question at a time?**

Be careful not to pose several questions at once without giving the participant an opportunity to respond to individual questions. This is especially apt to happen when questions are grouped together in the focus group guide. When it does happen, participants are unlikely to address each of the questions in full. A better technique for getting answers to all the questions is to ask them

one at a time, which gives you the opportunity to provide clarification or to rephrase each question. If participants do not understand the question or seem to have misinterpreted it, rephrase it. If the question still does not stimulate a productive discussion, let it go and move on to the next question. You might also try reintroducing the question later if there is an appropriate time.

### **How do I stay neutral?**

Refrain from inserting your own biases by paraphrasing what participants have said or making evaluative comments like “good” or “that’s interesting.” Instead, repeat their comments in their own words, provide positive reinforcement by looking interested, and using neutral comments and probes, such as, “I see” and “Any other thoughts about this?” You may also address questions to the group, such as, “What do you [the group] think about what [name or identifier] just said?”

### **How do I verify unclear responses?**

If you are unsure that you accurately heard what a participant said, verify the response before going to the next question. You might say, for example, “I’m sorry, could you repeat what you just said? I didn’t quite hear you.” Be careful not to imply that the response was somehow incorrect. Alternatively, you might use the mirroring technique, where you reflect the participant’s answer back to him or her in question form. For instance, you might say, “So you told her that you think being in that study is a sign of having tuberculosis?”

### **How do I ask open-ended questions?**

Closed-ended questions are questions that may be answered with a single word or phrase, or with a “yes” or “no” response. An example is, “Have you ever used the family planning services at xxxx clinic?” It is difficult to glean much insight from these brief responses, because they usually do not indicate “why” or “how.” A better technique for getting in-depth answers is to phrase questions as open-ended – that is, requiring more than a “yes” or “no” response. Open-ended questions set no limits on the range or length of responses, instead giving participants the opportunity to explain their position, feelings, or experiences. An example is, “What were your experiences using the family planning services at xxxx clinic?”

### **What are leading questions and how do I avoid them?**

Leading questions are questions worded in such a way as to influence participants’ responses – in other words, questions that lead participants along a particular line of thinking. Asking leading questions risks conveying your own value judgments and biases and imposing a perspective on participants. When asked a leading question, participants are likely to provide a response that accords with it simply because they are reluctant to contradict the moderator. To avoid this, ask neutral questions free of preconceptions. Table 10, page 64, provides a comparison of leading and unbiased questions.

### **What are follow-up questions and how do I use them?**

Follow-up questions (or sub-questions) are intended to ensure that participants provide the complete set of information each main question was designed to elicit. They prompt participants to speak on some aspect that was not mentioned in response to the original question. Sub-questions are often provided in the focus group guide under each main question or topic, as cues for the

**Table 10. Unbiased versus leading questions**

Unbiased question	Leading question
"I've heard some people in this community say that most smart people use a condom, and others say that they know smart people who don't use condoms. What do you think?"	"Most smart people in this community always use condoms, don't they?"
"Why did you want to use the female condom?" Potential follow-up question: "What were you trying to protect yourself from?"	"Was one reason that you wanted to use the female condom because you were trying to prevent sexually transmitted infections?"
"What do you think stops people in the school community from talking about sex and condoms?"	"Do you think people in the school community don't talk about sex and condoms because they might be stigmatized and seen as loose?"

moderator. If a participant answers a sub-question in the initial response, it is not necessary to then pose that sub-question. Engaged listening will help you decide which follow-up questions to ask.

### What are probes and how do I use them?

Probes are neutral questions, phrases, sounds, and even gestures moderators can use in focus groups to encourage participants to elaborate upon their answers and explain why or how. Suggestions for probes are sometimes outlined in the focus group guide, but they are also left to the discretion of the moderator. The particular probe used depends on the response given by the individual participant. Probing therefore requires the moderator to listen carefully to participants and to engage actively with what they say.

You should use probes when a participant's response or contribution is brief or unclear, when a participant or the group seems to be waiting for a reaction from you before continuing to speak, or when a person appears to have more information on the subject. As much as possible, probe for more detail about what the participant thinks, feels, and experiences in relationship to the research topic. Do not assume that you understand the intent of a brief response. Instead, use probes to further or confirm your understanding and to encourage more explanation. Be careful, however, not to use probes to excess. Balance knowing when to probe with knowing when to move on to the next question. If responses are repetitive or lacking in substance, or if the participant becomes annoyed or upset about lingering on a particular topic, it is best to advance to the next question.

Probing is probably the most important technique in focus group moderation, but also the hardest to master. It requires practice, thorough knowledge of the focus group guide and research objectives, and a solid understanding of what kind of information each question is intended to elicit. It also requires patience and sensitivity, effective time management, and good interpersonal skills.

### What are indirect probes and how do I use them?

Indirect probes are verbal and physical expressions that indicate that the moderator is listening attentively. It is important to note that the appropriateness and effectiveness of indirect probes

vary from culture to culture. The box on this page offers examples of effective probes, including both direct questions and indirect probes.

## How do I manage the focus group discussion?

Moderating a focus group discussion is something of an art. The moderator must be vigilant about covering all the material in the focus group guide, while also ensuring that the entire group participates and that a wide range of perspectives has been solicited and expressed. The role requires you to be fully engaged in the discussion, yet refrain from participating too much in it. You must know how and when to interject and intervene, yet not interfere.

### Facilitating group discussion

- *Open with a general comment* and wait for a response. For example, you might say, “Family planning can be a complex issue ...” or “What do you think about the issue that has brought us here today?” Alternatively, you might address the first question to an individual who seems comfortable speaking in front of the group. The first question in the focus group guide is usually designed to engage participants in discussion and may not actually be intended to yield important data.
- *Invite a wide range of commentary* by asking participants for experiences, thoughts, and definitions. Also ask what others like them or others in their families think, say, or do that may be similar or different. If everyone appears to agree about a particular issue, verify this by inquiring, “Are there any other points of view?” or “Does anyone see it differently?”
- *Use silence to your advantage.* Give participants a chance to think about the questions, and do not be afraid to wait until someone speaks. In some cultures, people are comfortable with silence; in others, they are not. In the latter case, allowing for pauses could be advantageous, because eventually someone would feel compelled to speak to end the silence.
- *Limit your own participation* once the discussion begins. After going through the introductory material, set the stage by posing a question and then letting the participants react to it for a few minutes with limited direction from you. Do not provide commentary on each contribution or take on the role of counselor or educator. The moderator’s role is to elicit information, not dispense it.

### Covering the material in the guide

Moderators are responsible for asking all of the questions in the focus group guide. A good way to keep track of the questions addressed is to check them off in the guide. This is especially practical when you ask questions in a different order than they appear in the guide and when a response applies to a different or additional question than the one you initially presented.

### Examples of effective probes

#### Direct questions:

- “What do you mean when you say ...?”
- “Why do you think ...?”
- “How did this happen?”
- “How did you feel about ...?”
- “What happened then?”
- “Can you tell me more?”
- “Can you please elaborate?”
- “I’m not sure I understand X... Would you explain that to me?”
- “How did you handle X?”
- “How did X affect you?”
- “Can you give me an example of X?”

#### Indirect probes:

- Neutral verbal expressions such as “uh huh,” “interesting,” and “I see”
- Verbal expressions of empathy, such as, “I can see why you say that was difficult for you”
- Mirroring technique, or repeating what the participant said, such as, “So you were 19 when you had your first child ...”
- Culturally appropriate body language or gestures, such as nodding in acknowledgment

Checking off the questions also makes it easier to return to questions that were skipped in the natural progression of the discussion.

Although the guide is designed to help the discussion flow easily, you usually do not have to follow the exact order of questions. Try to cover each question thoroughly, because each question is designed to elicit specific information. Probe each topic as necessary to get sufficient information. Make notes in the discussion guide as a reminder to return to a question or address an issue further. Take advantage of natural shifts in the discussion as they relate to questions in the focus group guide. If an individual's comments do not pertain to the research focus, look for opportunities to steer the conversation back to the topic.

**A good moderator ...**

- Shows flexibility
- Shows sensitivity
- Has a sense of humor
- Links ideas together
- Encourages participation from everyone

**A good moderator tries not to ...**

- Dictate the course of discussion
- Lose control over the conversation
- Judge comments or be an "expert"
- Inform or educate *during* the group
- Lead a question and answer session

During the focus group discussion, moderators should not correct participants. It is important in qualitative data collection to elicit all the participants' perspectives, including misinformation. If inaccurate information is stated during the focus group, make a note to correct the misinformation but only after the focus group discussion is over. Afterward, however, the moderator should provide correct factual information. For example, if, during the focus group, participants mention that there are no HIV counseling services in the area, and the moderator knows this not to be true, he or she can provide referral information after the discussion ends. Or if someone mentions the belief that HIV can be transmitted by touching something an infected person has touched, you should explain how HIV is spread.

*Encouraging maximum participation*

Try to include as many participants as possible in the discussion, keeping track of their participation by marking the seating chart each time individual participants contribute to the discussion. Techniques for encouraging full participation include referring back to a reticent participant's previous comments if the current conversation relates it. For example, you might say, "What you are describing sounds very similar to (or different from) what Beverly was talking about earlier. What do you think about this, Beverly?" You might also direct one of the questions from the focus group guide to a particular participant. After he or she responds, ask whether others agree or disagree. Also, encourage participants to discuss the questions with each other rather than address the moderator. Finally, remain in charge. Do not allow a pattern to develop in which everyone orients toward one particular participant and his or her comments.

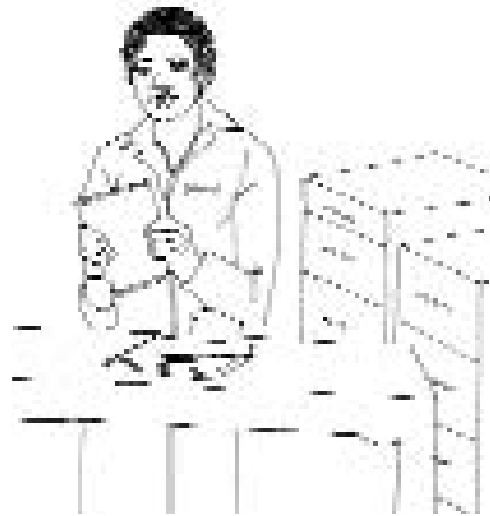
**How do I take field notes?**

Focus group moderators write brief notes on the focus guide or in a notebook as they lead the discussion. Moderators necessarily take less detailed notes than focus group note-takers because their primary responsibility is to engage in and lead the discussion with participants. (See the Case Study Sample, page 68.) However, focus group moderators must be prepared to take more detailed notes in the event that the note-taker has to leave the room. It can also be helpful to have

a backup note-taker available for this purpose. To facilitate note-taking and later transcription, either the moderator or the participant should state the person's identification (ID) number or pseudonym before they respond or contribute.

## How do I expand my field notes?

Key skills for qualitative researchers include the ability to take notes quickly and with discretion, and then to expand those notes into rich descriptions. Moderators should expand their notes as soon as possible after each focus group session. Expanding notes involves transforming shorthand into prose or a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations. Expanded notes are also called “field notes,” and they are written directly into your field notebook or a computer file. Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format as discussed in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.



Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes*, preferably within 24 hours from the focus group session. This requires discipline, because it is easy to tell yourself that you will do it later. A good time to expand your notes is just before or after the focus group debriefing session. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as the focus group, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook to expand the notes you wrote in the focus group guide. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.
- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words*. A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a descriptive narrative describing what happened and what you learned. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.
- *Identifying questions for follow-up*. Write down questions about participant responses or comments that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research, because answers to some research questions lead naturally to others. In some cases, your questions might be answered through further clarification from a participant.

## Sample Focus Group Guide

## Family Planning Users Focus Group Guide

Archival #: 2016071001

Site:

Capitol City Hospital

Moderator:

Sandrine B

Number of participants:

10

Note-taker:

Marie K

Date:

15.6.04

Transcriber:

Marie K

Start:

14:15:30

End:

14:50

## Excerpt from page 4:

(Question 4)

Have you ever gone to get your preferred method of contraception at the family planning clinic and found it was unavailable?

Yes

Price

of methods

(4a) If so, what did the clinic staff tell you?

leave

no advice

(4b) Did they ever try to give you a different method? Please explain what they said.

Yes

no sex /

(4c) Did they ever refer you to a different clinic? Please explain what they said.

No

See page 71 for the note-taker's sample notes from the same focus group.



- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.

## How to Be an Effective Note-taker

Note-takers play just as important a role in focus groups as moderators. Their efforts, focused largely on documentation, are essential in providing a record that can be used for immediate review of the focus group data, improvement of the focus group guide, and improvement of the facilitator's skills. Ideally, note-takers should have the versatility to conduct the focus group in the moderator's stead should the need arise, but their expertise draws for the most part on a different set of skills. These skills include mastery of an efficient system for taking copious notes and the ability to quickly identify and take down individual quotes that capture the spirit of a given point. Effective note-takers should also be careful observers of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and be discreet about note-taking as they operate the recording equipment. They should be able to synthesize their observations to serve as the basis for immediate discussion following each focus group session. Gaining proficiency in these areas rests on preparation for the focus group, developing effective note-taking techniques, and learning how to lead a productive debriefing session.

## How do I prepare for the focus group?

An effective note-taker knows the research material well and is practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for a focus group, become thoroughly familiar with the focus group guide for several reasons. First, as mentioned previously, you might need to conduct the focus group at the last minute or perhaps to fill in temporarily during a portion of the discussion. Thorough knowledge of the guide will enable you to step seamlessly into this role. Knowing the guide thoroughly is also essential for being able to track the questions as you take notes. You want to be able to easily identify and indicate the question to which a noted response pertains. Develop a system of shorthand for associating answers with questions that will be simple for you to expand when completing your notes later on. Finally, if you know the guide well, you are more likely to understand the purpose behind each question, which will enable you to identify quotations that capture the essence of an answer or stance.

Another step in preparing for a focus group is to practice taking notes in a pilot or mock focus group. Practicing note-taking is best done in cooperation with a moderator who is also rehearsing his or her part in a focus group. Mock sessions, in which the moderator uses the actual or real focus group guide and other project staff play the role of participants, allows you to test your knowledge of the questions and note-taking skills. (Some suggested exercises are provided in the Exercises for Training Data Collectors appendix, page 93.) You and the moderator might also conduct practice focus groups with people in the community who are not participating in the study. In that case, however, you must obtain informed consent, just as you would from someone who was participating in the study. Informal practice sessions – such as with friends, family, or support staff or other researchers – do not require informed consent.

*continued on page 72*

## Sample Note-Taker Form with Field Notes

**Focus Group Note-Taker Form**

Archival #: CCFGFP001

Site: Capital City Hospital

Date: 15-6-04

Focus Group Category: FFWers

Start time: 15:30

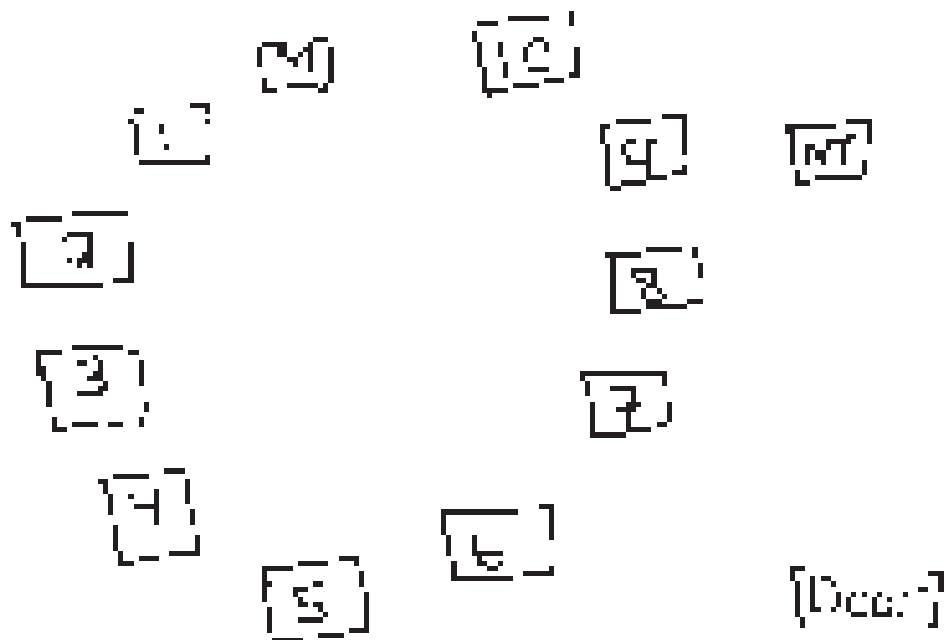
Moderator: Sandrine B.

End time: 16:50

Note-taker: Marie K.

**Seating chart :**

Make a seating chart indicating the participants and their number or identifier. Use this chart to identify speakers as you take notes.



## Sample Note-Taker Form with Field Notes (contd.)

### Focus Group Note-Taker Form

Archival #: CCFGFPU01 Date: 15-6-04 Note-taker: Marie K.

Question (# or key words)	Responses	Observations
# of FP supplies available	R1 - not available R2 - no pills / injections - price ch - ch. methods (injection) & 17 R	frustrated All agreed
4a. Abortion	R3 - shortage R4 - tell us to go R5 - leave us to go, no choice R6 - "They don't even tell us to come back!"	Agreed idea of dr's abandoning
4b. ...	R7 - Some clinics do with new methods from other clinic	(dr's only on coast)
4c. Alternatives	R7 - no service R8 - yes, get service R9 - Go home - make sure you can do it R10 - no new. w/ husband & laughter	Sp. Knows what means like laugh laughing up

4c.  
Retained

### Sample Expanded Field Notes

Archival #: CCFGFPU01  
Site: Capital City Hospital  
Note-taker: Marie K.  
Date: 15-6-04

A lack or shortage of FP supplies appears to be a recurrent problem at this clinic. All participants agreed that supplies are sometimes not available, for example pills and injectables. (How often does this happen???)

Another problem with the supply is that the prices change and women travel to the clinic to find they didn't bring enough money. They expressed that in that case coming to the clinic is a waste of time because they leave empty-handed even though the supplies were there. (Find out why prices change.)

One person said when there are supply problems they are told to switch methods. (Who recommends this? Doctor? Nurse? How often does this occur? How many women end up abandoning FP for this reason? Potential for problems adjusting to new methods – but no one mentioned this. Do women in fact switch methods?)

It seems like women are left to their own devices when the supply runs short. There don't seem to be any temporary solutions offered or advised. Participants laughed but nonetheless appeared frustrated about the lack of concern of the clinic staff. One person imitated a staff member throwing up her hands and saying, "Sorry, nothing we can do for you!"

It is also important to practice operating the recording equipment to prevent disruption during the middle of a session. Know how many batteries are required, the range of the microphone, how to quickly flip or change the tape, and the convention for labeling the tapes accurately. Bring a sufficient number of tapes and extra batteries to the focus group, and test the tape recorder before every focus group session.

Another important preparatory step is to label all materials that you will use during the focus group – including cassette tapes, notebooks, note-taking and debriefing forms, and the focus group guide – according to a previously established archival system. All items should be labeled identically. (See the Data Documentation and Management module, page 87, for information about archival numbers.)

Finally, arrive early to set up the focus group space and equipment. Be sure to arrange timely transportation to the site so that you have time to set up before participants arrive. You should also find out where the closest restrooms are located. It might be wise to allow for extra travel or set-up time if you have never been to the location, and take traffic into consideration. Set up the recording equipment according to the range of the microphone. Remember that you will need to sit next to the recorder during the discussion. (It is preferable for the note-taker to sit off to the side from the group, if possible.) You should then verify that the equipment is working properly. Make sure that features such as pause, voice activation, and high-low recording levels are turned off, and that extra batteries, tapes, and a spare tape recorder are readily accessible. Place chairs in a circle or around a table, so that all participants will be able to see the moderator and each other.

### **How do I take field notes?**

Focus group note-takers are responsible for taking detailed notes on what they observe and on what participants say during the focus group, regardless of whether the focus group is being tape-recorded. These notes serve as a backup when recording fails and to capture nonverbal information. Every note-taker develops his or her own style, which will undoubtedly evolve and become more precise and efficient over time. Although the specifics of how you organize your process is up to you, the tips on page 73 offer some suggestions. (See also the Case Study Samples, pages 70-71.)

### **How do I expand my notes?**

Key skills for qualitative researchers include the ability to take notes quickly and with discretion, and then to expand those notes into rich descriptions. (See the Case Study Samples, page 71.) Note-takers should expand their notes as soon as possible after each focus group session. Expanding notes involves transforming shorthand into prose or a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations. Expanded notes are also called “field notes,” and they are written directly into your field notebook or a computer file. Begin each notebook entry with the header information, including the archival number, site, date, names of the moderator and note-taker, and start and end times. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format, as discussed in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.

## TIPS

### Tips for taking focus group notes

**Create a form on which to write your notes.** If a note-taking form is not provided, creating one can help you organize your notes during the session and make it easier to expand your notes. For example, you might have several columns – one to identify the speaker, another to write quotes or the main idea of what a speaker said, and another in which to write your observations. Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event, and either leave space on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section in this module on “How do I expand my notes?”)

**Take notes strategically.** It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes. However, remember that your notes will be the only documentation of the session if the recording fails or is faulty. Try to capture the content of all essential verbal contributions, and when possible, to document especially representative quotes word-for-word.

**Record participant identifiers.** It can be a great help during later transcription if you note the identifier of each participant as they speak. The moderator can make this easier for you by asking participants to say their identifier before making a contribution.

**Use shorthand.** Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.

**Record both the question and the response.** If the question or probe comes from a focus group question guide, save time by noting the question number. If it is not possible to record direct quotations, write down key words and phrases.

**Distinguish clearly between participant comments and your own observations.** You could use your own initials or “MO” to indicate “my observation.” For example: “MO – embarrassed by empty beer bottles in room.” This documents the researcher’s observation that the participant seemed embarrassed about the empty beer bottles in the room.

**Cover a range of observations.** In addition to documenting what people say, note as well as you can their body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; and other information that could be relevant.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes*, preferably within 24 hours from the focus group session. This requires discipline, because it is easy to tell yourself that you will do it later. A good time to expand your notes is just before or after the focus group debriefing session. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as the focus group, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook to expand the notes you wrote in the focus group guide. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.

## Sample Focus Group Debriefing Form

## Focus Group Debriefing Form

Archival #: CLFGFLOI

Date: 15.6.21

Name of Study: FP-VCT integration

Moderator: Sandra B.

Note-taker: Maria K.

(1) What are the main themes that emerged in this focus group?

- lack of FP supplies
- Problems w/ FP will frustrate w/ health services affect integr
- still stigma re: FP (condoms) of VCT

(2) Did any information contradict what you learned in previous focus groups?

- Provider 2-1 said follow up clients when not good supplies, give new apps out for
- participants say don't even let them to come back

(3) What did participants say that was unclear or confusing to you?

- "Go home and take care of yourself"
- What do providers intend w/ this advice?

(4) What did you observe that would not be evident from reading a transcript of the discussion (e.g., group dynamic, individual behaviours, etc.)?

- lot of frustration in gp
- 24 silent

(5) What problems did you encounter (e.g., logistical, behaviors of individuals, questions that were confusing, etc.)?

- Q + R overlap

(6) What issues will you follow up?

- Ask about how clinic supplies - who? how often?
- Advice about changing methods when supplies run out
- No follow up of clients? why re methods
- prices change?

(7) Does the note-taker have any suggestions for the moderator and vice versa?

- VT → try to get more quotes
- Mod. → direct questions at participants who don't speak

- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words.* A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a narrative describing what happened and what you learned. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.
- *Identifying questions for follow-up.* Write down questions about participant responses or comments that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research because answers to some research questions lead naturally to others. In some cases, your questions might be answered through further clarification from a participant.
- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.

### **How do I lead a debriefing session?**

The note-taker typically conducts a debriefing session with the moderator immediately after the focus group. This should ideally begin shortly after the discussion session has ended, say within 15 minutes or a half-hour. Although the mood should be more relaxed than during the discussion session, it should not be completely informal. Debriefing is a very important part of focus group research and must be done with a certain degree of rigor to maximize its usefulness.

Debriefing has multiple purposes:

- To log any additional information about the focus group while it is still fresh in the memory. For example, even when audiotapes are used to record the session, there will be nonverbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, tension, that will not be picked up on tape.
- To discuss issues or comments that need clarification. Field notes explaining confusing parts of the focus group will be valuable for helping other researchers to interpret the transcripts later on.
- To discuss particular questions that did not work well and why.
- To note any information that contradicts or confirms data collected in previous sessions.
- To discuss new topics that arose during the focus group.
- To identify missing information. Comparing what information was being sought with what was actually learned can help moderators plan how to solicit this information more effectively in subsequent focus groups.
- To identify information that needs to be researched outside the focus group setting. This may have to do, for example, with cultural norms, fact-checking, or specifics about the study.



- To discuss trouble spots that came up during the focus group, with regard to participants, group dynamics, and questions. It may be necessary to develop new strategies for dealing with a particular issue for subsequent focus groups.
- To provide the moderator and note-taker a forum for giving each other constructive feedback.

### **How do I take and use debriefing notes?**

Note-takers use debriefing forms to record all points and issues that come up during the debriefing sessions. Creating and using a debriefing form will help you to be consistent and thorough about which aspects of the focus group you discuss at each session. (See the Case Study Sample, page 74.) These notes must then be typed and appended to the focus group transcript in the computer file.

Debriefing notes are used for two purposes. Before the start of every new focus group, moderators and note-takers review debriefing notes from previous sessions. This helps them to make adjustments and improvements as they conduct the next session. Debriefing notes are also shared and reviewed during staff meetings, when data collectors and other researchers discuss what they are finding and any questions or problems they may have. This helps all the researchers to get a sense of what is and is not working well, which issues require follow-up, and whether any new issues are emerging as potentially important.

## Suggested Readings

Greenbaum TL. *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*. New York: Lexington Books, 1993.

Krueger RA. *Moderating Focus Groups (Focus Group Kit)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.

Krueger RA, Casey MA. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.

Morgan D. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications, 1988.

Morgan D. *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. London: Sage Publications, 1993.

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For additional information on this topic, refer to Chapter 4: Collecting Qualitative Data: The Science and the Art, Appendix 4: Procedural Guidelines for Managing Focus Group Discussions, Appendix 6: Topic Guides for Focus Group Discussions on Reproductive Health, and Appendix 8: Common Errors in Moderating Focus Groups in these companion guides:

*Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research*

*Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health*

## Sample Focus Group Transcript

## Family Planning Users Focus Group

Archival #: CCFGPU01  
 Site: Capital City Hospital  
 Number of participants: 10  
 Date: 15-6-04  
 Start: 15:30 End: 16:50

Moderator: Sandrine B.  
 Note-taker: Marie K.  
 Transcriber: Sandrine B.  
 Typist: Samuel D.

M = Moderator  
 R = Respondent

## Excerpt from page 5:

(Question 4)

M: Even the way you are all here, I believe you are under different family planning methods. There are those who are under the injection, there are those who are using pills, there are those who are even using condoms; let me ask, is there a time you went to an FP clinic and found that injectables were not available? Or the pills were not available? Is there any time that this has happened?

R: Yes. (in chorus)

R10: That one is very common. You could have prepared that you are coming for injections or pills, then they tell you that the pills are not there. You wait ... maybe you go to buy and find they are not even there and you know ... you could get that they are selling them at thirty shillings and you don't have that.

M: Mmm

R10: Coming back they tell you the pills are not there, they tell you we don't have this type ... change to this ... you know it causes a lot of problems and we are having that problem. Especially people who are on pills.

M: There has always been a shortage?

R5: Oh yes.

Respondents: Yes yes. (in chorus)

(Question 4a)

M: Now when you experience such a problem of shortage of stock, let's say for pills or so, what do these providers advise you?

R2: They just tell you to go.

R8: Because the pills are not there, they therefore just leave you to go.

M: They are not there.

R8: There is no single advice they give.

M: No single advice?

R8: They tell you that the pills are not there.

M: So you go?

R8: Yes.

M: Come back maybe when ... when they have ...

R5: (Interjects) They don't even tell you to come back!

M: Mmm ... they don't tell you anything?

R3: But in some places they advise you. If you find that there are no pills the doctor can get them for you from elsewhere immediately.

M: Where is this sister?

R3: XXXXX

M: So they provide an immediate solution?

R3: Yes.

R1: But here it's like you wait on till the stock is brought.

## Sample Focus Group Transcript (contd.)

(Question 4b)

M: Do they ever attempt to advise you on an alternative?

R7: No they don't.

M: They don't?

R: Yes (some respondents say yes).

R2: They just tell you to go back home and take care of yourself.

M: That you just go back home and take care of yourself? Now, how do you take care of yourself?

R6: You should not have sex with your husband.

M: You should not have sex with the old man?

R6: Mmm.

R8: Or they say to use condoms but if there are none then the advice is no good.

(Question 4c)

M: So there's no time that you are referred to another place or there's nothing like that?

R: (Majority) There's nothing like that ...

## Steps in Moderating a Focus Group

### Preparing for the Focus Group

- 1 Study the focus group guide.
- 2 Study the informed consent document.
- 3 Practice both moderating and taking notes.
- 4 Decide with the note-taker how you will handle not using participants' real names.
- 5 Review debriefing notes from previous focus groups.
- 6 Prepare a checklist of everything you need to bring to the focus group. (See the Focus Group Checklist, page 82.)
- 7 Confirm the reservation of the focus group location and arrange for refreshments (if applicable).

### Day of the Focus Group

- 8 Before leaving for the focus group, use a checklist to verify that you have all equipment.
- 9 Arrive early at the focus group site to set up the room and materials.
- 10 Label all data documentation materials.
- 11 Greet and check in participants.
- 12 Obtain informed consent from each participant before they join the group (unless the note-taker has this responsibility).
- 13 Assign identifying pseudonyms or numbers to participants and provide materials for making name cards (unless the note-taker has this responsibility).
- 14 Make a seating chart to identify speakers in your notes.
- 15 Introduce yourself and explain your role.
- 16 Lay the ground rules.
- 17 Lead the discussion according to the focus group guide.
- 18 Take brief notes in the focus group guide during the discussion.
- 19 End the question-asking phase of the discussion.
- 20 Give the note-taker the opportunity to ask questions.
- 21 Give the participants the opportunity to ask questions.
- 22 Obtain oral confirmation of the group's informed consent while the tape recorder is still on (if specified in the protocol).
- 23 After the focus group, clarify any factual misconceptions expressed by participants.
- 24 Reimburse the participants in accordance with study procedures.
- 25 Wrap up all conversations and clear the room.

### Immediately after the Focus Group

- 26 Take a break.
- 27 Participate in the debriefing session led by the note-taker.
- 28 Using a checklist, gather all forms and notes.
- 29 Expand your notes, within 24 hours if possible.

## Steps in Note-taking for a Focus Group

### Preparing for the Focus Group

- 1 Study the focus group guide.
- 2 Study the informed consent document.
- 3 Practice taking notes and moderating.
- 4 Obtain or create note-taking and debriefing forms.
- 5 Prepare a checklist of everything you need to bring to the focus group. (See the Focus Group Checklist, page 82.)
- 6 Decide with the moderator how you will handle not using participants' real names.
- 7 Review debriefing notes from previous focus groups.

### Day of the Focus Group

- 8 Before leaving for the focus group, use a checklist to verify that you have all equipment.
- 9 Arrive early at the focus group site to set up the recording equipment.
- 10 Test the recording equipment.
- 11 Label all data documentation materials.
- 12 Greet and check in participants.
- 13 Obtain informed consent from each participant before they join the group (unless the moderator has this responsibility).
- 14 Assign identifying pseudonyms or numbers to participants and provide materials for making name cards (unless the moderator has this responsibility).
- 15 Make a seating chart to identify speakers in your notes.
- 16 Introduce yourself and explain your role.
- 17 Monitor the recording equipment discreetly throughout the focus group.
- 18 Write notes on the note-taker form about what people say and what you observe.
- 19 Turn away latecomers or extra participants, but provide them with the reimbursement, outside the room where the discussion is being held.
- 20 Provide reimbursements to participants who drop out of the focus group early.
- 21 At the end of the discussion, ask the group for clarification of any questions you have.
- 22 Stop the tape recorder after the group has orally confirmed their consent.
- 23 Reimburse the participants in accordance with study procedures.
- 24 Wrap up all conversations and clear the room.

### Immediately after the Focus Group

- 25 Take a break.
- 26 Lead the debriefing session.
- 27 Using a checklist, gather all forms and notes.
- 28 Assemble all materials into one envelope. Double-check that you have completed all forms and that all materials are appropriately labeled. Note and explain any missing materials on the archival information sheet. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.)

## Focus Group Checklist

### Make arrangements for

- ☐ Private setting for focus group site
- ☐ Transportation of staff to focus group site
- ☐ Transportation of participants to focus group site
- ☐ Refreshments for participants (if applicable)

### What to take to the focus group

#### *Equipment*

- ☐ 1 tape recorder (plus 1 extra, if available)
- ☐ 2 blank 90-minute cassette tapes per focus group
- ☐ Spare batteries
- ☐ Field notebook and pens
- ☐ Name card materials

#### *Focus group packet*

- ☐ 1 large, heavy-duty envelope
- ☐ Archival information sheet with archival number
- ☐ 2 copies of focus group guide (1 for moderator, 1 for note-taker)
- ☐ Informed consent forms (enough for all participants)
- ☐ Note-taking form
- ☐ Debriefing form
- ☐ Participant reimbursement (if applicable)
- ☐ Reimbursement form (if applicable)

### What to place in the envelope after the focus group

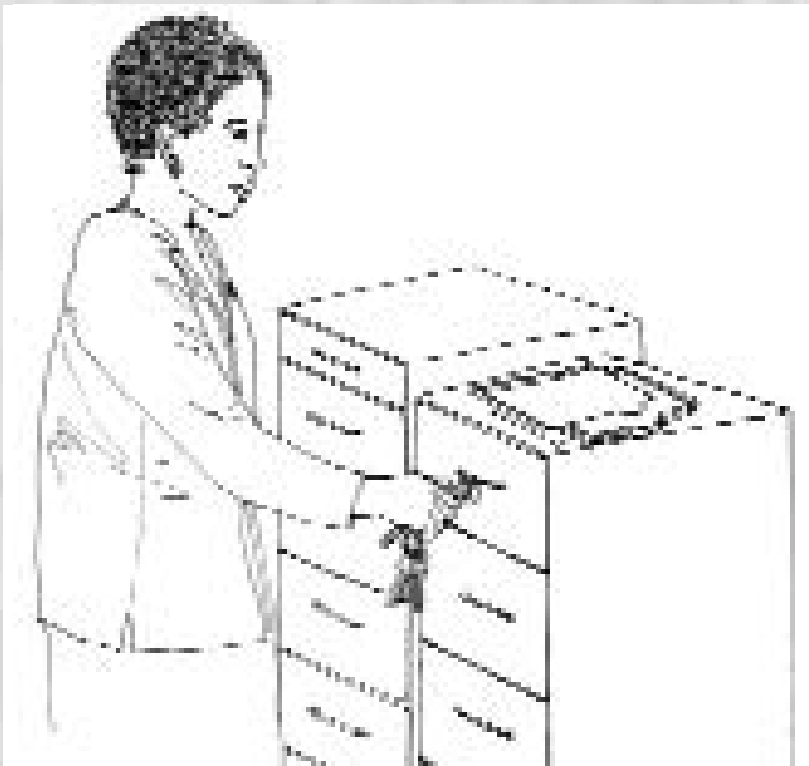
- ☐ Completed archival information sheet
- ☐ Signed informed consent form (signed by moderator and/or note-taker)
- ☐ Labeled focus group guide with notes (moderator's copy)
- ☐ Labeled focus group guide (note-taker's copy)
- ☐ Note-taker's field notes
- ☐ Labeled cassette tapes, re-record tabs punched out



## Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

### Module 5

## **Data Documentation and Management: Organizing and Storing Your Data**



# Data Documentation and Management: Organizing and Storing Your Data

**B**ecause they capture the thoughts and experiences of individual people, every set of qualitative data collected (from every participant observation event, interview, and focus group) is distinct. In addition, individual researchers inevitably have differences in style that affect how data are managed in the field, and different locations have unique logistical constraints. Thus, systematically comparing and analyzing qualitative data in raw form is challenging.

Organizing data in a rigorous, standardized way is essential to their security and to the validity of the study results, however. Consistency is important for every study but is especially crucial for large, team-based projects involving extensive amounts of data located in multiple sites.

Your study's local principal investigator or data manager will set up a data management system that is specific to your site. This module suggests a general method for the complex task of systematically managing qualitative data, covering the following topics:

- Converting Raw Data to Computer Files
- Organizing Data Storage
- Suggested Reading
- Data Archiving Steps
- Data Management Checklist

For a specific study, the procedures outlined in this module may be followed exactly or adapted, as the principal investigator or data manager sees fit. The Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105, contains a detailed example of a transcription protocol and data archive model, which should be of interest to your study's data management personnel but is likely less relevant for field workers.

## Converting Raw Data to Computer Files

### What do we do with audio recordings?

In-depth interviews and focus groups are tape-recorded whenever possible. Preparing these recorded data for analysis requires transcribing all tapes and typing the transcriptions into computer files. Before transcription, the tabs on the tapes should be punched to prevent them from being recorded over. Next, backup copies of the tapes should be made. The backup copies should be securely stored in a separate location from the original tapes.

### What happens to the handwritten field notes?

Participant observers, focus group facilitators, and interviewers take handwritten notes to document a wide range of information, including:

- casual and structured observations
- verbatim quotes
- paraphrases of participant responses
- interview and focus group backup documentation
- the researcher's questions
- questions, conclusions, and observations discussed during the staff debriefing sessions

These notes are written on standardized forms, the interview or focus group question guide, or field notebooks, according to the situation.

For focus groups and interviews, after transcribing all relevant recordings, the transcriptionist types up the interviewer's or focus group moderator's corresponding handwritten field notes. These typed field notes could either be appended to the transcript within the same file or kept in a separate file (the principal investigator or data manager would make this decision). Whatever the case, the typed field notes provide contextual information that could enhance the researchers' understanding of the transcript and therefore need to be easily identifiable as part of the same data collection event. Expanded notes from each participant observation event should be typed as separate computer files.

### **When should we begin typing the data?**

Transcription of recordings and typing of field notes should begin as soon as possible after the data collection event. Tapes of interviews and focus groups should be processed as soon as they are archived, rather than allowed to accumulate. Field notes should be typed as soon as the data collector has expanded them (if they are not typed while they are being expanded).

### **What does transcription involve?**

To transcribe an audio recording, the transcriptionist listens to the tape and simultaneously writes down or types everything that is said on the tape. Nonverbal sounds (such as laughter, sirens, someone knocking on the door) are also often noted on the transcript. Transcription is performed by either the data collectors themselves or other staff hired specifically as typists or transcriptionists. When the transcriptionist is not the person who collected the recorded data, the interviewer or focus group moderator who did collect it should review completed transcripts for accuracy. Transcripts may also need to be translated into the language(s) of the organization sponsoring the study.

### **Does it matter what format is used for transcription?**

Whether one person or many staff members are involved in transcription, it is highly recommended that everyone involved in a given study use a common format for transcribing all recordings. That is, there should be standard conventions for identifying the researcher and individual participants throughout the transcript. There should also be a uniform way of presenting information on the location, date, and type of data collection event.

These conventions should be detailed in a project-specific transcription protocol which precisely outlines procedures and formats for transcribing recorded data. A sample transcription protocol is

provided in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 108, for your use or adaptation. Note, however, that this protocol reflects the specifications of the data-analysis software frequently used by the authors. The transcription protocol you develop for your own study should similarly reflect any formatting or other requirements of the software that you will use. Whether the research team or some other entity is in charge of data analysis, it is important to determine such requirements before even the first transcription is done. Doing so will save much work later. If you find that the software does not require any specific format, it is still important for you to design a systematic and consistent transcription protocol.

### What do we name the computer files?

You should name the computer file for each interview and focus group transcript according to a standard convention specified in the transcription protocol. As previously noted, such conventions are project-specific. To avoid confusion, consider using the archival number as the computer file name for the transcript. As with the archival number, the file name should indicate the site name, method of data collection, participant category, and sequential number. (See the box above for a sample.)

#### Naming transcript files

To avoid confusion, consider using the archival number as the computer file name for the transcript. As with the archival number, the file name should indicate the site name, method of data collection, participant category, and sequential number.

For example, for your fifth individual interview with a health care service provider at your study's Capital City site, the naming convention might be:

File name: CCIIISP05.doc

CC = Capital City

II = In-depth interview

SP = Health care service provider

05 = Fifth data collection event (either in this category, or sequentially for all events)

### What other information should we include in the computer files?

Each transcript or set of notes should begin with a standard header that indicates the archival number, site, data collector's name(s), date of data collection, data collection method, transcriber, translator, typist, and date of computer entry. (See the sample on page 86.)

## Organizing Data Storage

### Who organizes the data?

The site coordinator or principal investigator typically assigns a member of the research team or other staff member to be the data manager. This person is in charge of creating a system of organizing and archiving (that is, storing) the data, and for ensuring that all staff members follow these procedures for the duration of the study. This helps ensure the security and integrity of the data. It is also a good idea to have one person who always knows where all data are located.

### How should the data be organized?

In the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105, a detailed sample protocol for organizing data (called the Model Data Archive Protocol) is provided for the data manager to use as a model. However, it is important that each project have a set of procedures that are appropriate for the site and that make sense to the research team. If a project has multiple sites, one system should be used in all sites to avoid confusion.

### Sample Header for Typed Field Notes or Transcripts

Archival #:

Site:

Data collector(s):

Date of data collection:

Data collection method:

Transcriber:

Translator:

Typist:

Date of computer data entry:

*Note: This is the same header information that you will have written at the top of your field notes, the interview and focus group guides, note-taker form, and debriefing form.*

### What steps should we take before data collection?

A strategy that works well for keeping data organized, and which should be implemented even before data are collected, is to create packets of all necessary forms for each kind of event using large, heavy-duty envelopes, sometimes called “archival envelopes.” Then, when you are ready to do the data collection – for example, a focus group – you can go to the study office and get a focus group envelope containing the focus group guide, note-taker form, informed consent forms, debriefing form, reimbursement form, and all other materials you will need. At that time, the data manager should assign an archival number to the data collection event. (See the section on page 87, “What are an archival number and archival log?”) This strategy enables researchers to label all materials with the appropriate archival number before the event.

### Where should we put the data after collection?

Centralizing data, or keeping them all together in one place, is a key element of managing data in an organized and systematic fashion. All physical data (notes, tape recordings, transcripts, etc.) should be kept in a locked filing cabinet or equally secure location. We recommend keeping all documents related to a given data collection event in a secure location at each field site, in one large, heavy-duty archival envelope per event with an archival information sheet. (See the Case Study Sample, page 88.) The envelope’s contents will include typed transcripts, expanded field notes, debriefing notes, handwritten versions of the notes, and possibly cassette tapes.

The data manager may also decide to store the original tapes in the envelope, but backup copies of tapes should be stored separately (or vice versa). Eventually, both copies of the tapes will be destroyed for reasons of confidentiality. Once you are instructed by the project manager or coordinator to destroy the tapes, it will be necessary to put documentation of this in the archival envelope.

Copies of all electronic files should be sent to the sponsoring organization and also maintained at the field site.

### **What are an archival number and archival log?**

All data, both electronic and paper, are organized and identified according to archival numbers – numbers assigned in sequential order to each data collection event. The archival number is used to label all documentation related to a particular data collection event. The archival log is the list of sequential numbers assigned to each data collection event and is used to track data. (See the Case Study Sample, page 89, for an example of an archival log created to track interviews. For more information, see the sample Model Data Archive Protocol in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.)

### **Suggested Readings**

McLellan E, MacQueen KM, Niedig J. Beyond the qualitative interview: data preparation and transcription. *Field Methods* 2003;15(1):63-84.

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For additional information on this topic, refer to Chapter 5: Logistics in the Field and Chapter 6: Qualitative Data Analysis in these companion guides:

*Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research*

*Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health*

## Sample Archival Information Sheet

## Archival Information Sheet

Study: FP Util. Intervention Archival # 10075P01

Data type: (circle one)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Interview	Focus group	Participant observation
Indicate type of participant(s) or observational setting:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FP Provider <input type="checkbox"/> HIV Clinic Staff <input type="checkbox"/> FP Users <input type="checkbox"/> FP Non-users	<input type="checkbox"/> FP Users (# _____) <input type="checkbox"/> FP Non-users (# _____)	<input type="checkbox"/> FP Clinic <input type="checkbox"/> HIV Clinic
Gender (circle one): <input checked="" type="radio"/> Female Male	Age: <u>30</u>	Ethnicity: <u>Burmese</u>	Language of Data: <u>Burmese</u>

Data in this envelope:		Staff:	Name	Date
Cassette tape	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Data collector	<u>Beatrice B</u>	<u>7-6-04</u>
Interview guide notes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Transcriber	<u>Beatrice B</u>	<u>7-6-04</u>
FG note-taker notes		Translator	<u>Savva D</u>	<u>12-2-04</u>
FG guide notes		Typist	<u>Savva D.</u>	<u>12-6-04</u>
FG debriefing notes				
Handwritten field notes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Expanded field notes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Handwritten transcript	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Translation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Hardcopy of Electronic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			

Data Sign-out:			
Name	Item(s)/Purpose	Date Out	Date In
<u>Beatrice B</u>	<u>Handwritten transcript / Interview</u> <u># typed translation / transcription.</u>	<u>12-6-04</u>	<u>12-6-04</u>



## Sample Archival Log

### Interview Data Tracking Form

Archival #	Category*	Interviewer	Transcriber	Translator	Typist	Date of Interview	Language of Interview	Sex	Age	Date to Manager
00156001	SP	Amelia D.	Emilia B.	Samuel D.	Samuel D.	1-2-04	Swedish	F	28	

\* SP = Health care service provider  
 HP = Provider for HIV/AIDS-related services  
 FPU = Family planning users  
 FPN = Family planning non-users

## Data Archiving Steps

### In the Field

- 1 Label all materials (tapes, guide, field notes, forms).
- 2 Punch the re-record tabs on each cassette after the interview/focus group is completed.
- 3 After data collection, return **all** materials to the large, heavy-duty envelope.

### At the Research Office

- 4 Return all materials, including field notes and expanded field notes, to field office as soon as possible (no later than 48 hours).
- 5 Obtain the archival number if you did not do so before data collection.
- 6 Write the archival number on the archival envelope, **all** materials, and **all** pages of the question guide.
- 7 Complete the archival information sheet and place it in the envelope with the other items.
- 8 Duplicate tapes as soon as possible (within 24 to 48 hours).
- 9 Store materials in a secure location.

### Translating and Transcribing Data

- 10 Sign out the duplicate audiotape (on the large envelope itself) and other necessary materials for transcription or translation (e.g., notes). **Do not take the entire envelope from the secure location.**
- 11 Conduct the translation or transcription.
- 12 Write the archival number on the translated or transcribed data.
- 13 Record new materials (e.g., diskette and hard copy of transcription or translation) on the archival information sheet.
- 14 Return **all** materials to the envelope.
- 15 Return the envelope to the secure data area and record the return of data per the data manager's procedures.

### Data Transfer to Project Manager or Coordinator

- 16 Verify the accuracy of the translation and that transcription protocol has been followed.
- 17 Remove identifying information from the transcript (if necessary).
- 18 Send the transcript to the project manager or coordinator and send a copy to individuals designated in the study protocol. If you send the transcript electronically, we recommend that you password-protect it and place a hard copy in the archival envelope.
- 19 The project manager or coordinator should confirm receipt of data. Document this in writing and put it in the archival envelope.
- 20 Make sure **all** materials are returned to the archival envelope and return it to the secure data storage area.
- 21 Print any correspondence regarding a particular archival number and place it in the archival envelope.

*Maintain security and confidentiality of data at all times.*

## Data Management Checklist: Items to Be Labeled and Placed in the Archival Envelope

### Participant observation

- ☐ Handwritten notes, including maps and diagrams
- ☐ Expanded notes
- ☐ Archival information sheet
- ☐ Any additional documentation relevant to the event

### In-depth interviews

- ☐ Consent form signed by the interviewer (and participant if obtaining written consent)
- ☐ Audiotape(s) of the interview
- ☐ Handwritten notes
- ☐ Expanded notes
- ☐ Transcripts (handwritten and typed, with translations)
- ☐ Archival information sheet
- ☐ Correspondence related to the data collection event

### Focus groups

- ☐ Consent form signed by the focus group moderator (or participants if obtaining written consent)
- ☐ Audiotape(s) of the focus group
- ☐ Handwritten notes
- ☐ Seating chart
- ☐ Expanded notes
- ☐ Debriefing notes
- ☐ Archival information sheet
- ☐ Correspondence related to the data collection event



## Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

### Appendices and Glossary



FAMILY HEALTH INTERNATIONAL

# Appendix A:

## Exercises for Training Data Collectors

The most effective way to learn how to use the qualitative methods described in the preceding modules is to practice them. The following exercises have been used extensively in training workshops for developing country settings. Trainers should feel free to use and modify them as they see fit.

### Participant Observation

#### Exercise 1: Planning for participant observation

##### Objectives:

- To choose an appropriate location for doing participant observation
- To decide how to best match field staff to the study population and context
- To create a list of topics or questions to guide observation

##### What you will need:

- A research topic (real or hypothetical)
- A study population (real or hypothetical)

##### Instructions:

As a class, in groups, or in pairs, discuss places that would be appropriate for doing participant observation on a research topic of interest. Consider which field staff members would be best suited for each location and how they might adjust their appearance in order to be inconspicuous. Determine the best times to do participant observation activities, including times of day and days of the week. Create a list of questions or topics to direct focused observation. Discuss safety issues that might arise.

#### Exercise 2: Practicing collaborative participant observation in a natural context

##### Objectives:

- To experience being a participant observer
- To discover the challenges of taking notes during participant observation
- To practice describing settings, people, and activities
- To work collaboratively with other field staff to combine multiple perspectives
- To become more aware of researchers' potential biases
- To practice differentiating objective observations from subjective interpretations

**What you will need:**

- An observation site accessible from the training facility
- A research topic (real or hypothetical)
- A study population (must be real people)
- Field notebooks
- Large sheets of paper, such as flip chart paper
- Markers

**Instructions:**

In pairs or small groups, go to a location specified by the trainer, with the objective of describing the setting and people in it. Spend anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours at the location, depending on the type of place it is.

*a. Writing field notes*

While at the site, write your observations in your field notebook. Address the following questions:

- Where are you?
  - Area description
  - Map of the area
- Who is there?
  - Approximate age
  - Ethnicity
  - Languages spoken
  - Gender
  - Occupation
- What are they doing?
- As you observe, what questions come to mind?

*b. Combining your observations with those of other staff for a class presentation*

Return to the training facility. Spend one to two hours working in small groups to prepare a 15-minute group presentation synthesizing what you observed. Draw a map of the location where you did participant observation to show as part of your presentation. (See Exercise 3, page 95, for a more detailed map exercise.)

*c. Supportive class critique*

After each group presentation, other class members will question and critique the presenting group in a constructive manner. Give special attention to distinguishing between objective and subjective elements of the group's presentation. The goal of this critique is to encourage each group to think about what they may have not considered, help them identify their biases, and practice distinguishing observation from interpretation.



#### *d. Debriefing session*

Complete the exercise with a general debriefing session among class members. Address the following questions:

- How did the participant observation experience go overall?
- Were you able to engage in conversation with people? How did you do this?
- Describe what you did to map out the site.
- What note-taking strategies did you use?
- How did you practice discretion?
- Did you feel uncomfortable at any time?
- Did you decide to explain your identity and purpose to anyone? If so, what did you say?
- Did you choose to remain an outsider or did you try to blend in?
- What could you have done to more effectively assimilate with the people in the setting?
- How would you change what you did in this exercise if you could do it again?
- What evidence do you have for the observations you made?

### **Exercise 3: Making an ethnographic map**

This exercise can be done in conjunction with Exercise 2, page 93.

#### **Objectives:**

- To collaboratively create a map of the participation observation setting that will be useful to consult throughout the project
- To experience being a participant observer
- To practice investigating a location, including asking people to help you understand particular aspects of it
- To practice revealing your purpose to people in the observation site
- To describe a setting in detail
- To work collaboratively with other field staff to combine multiple perspectives

#### **What you will need:**

- An observation site accessible from the training facility
- A research topic (real or hypothetical)
- A study population
- Courage
- Field notebooks
- Large sheets of paper, such as flip chart paper
- Markers

**Instructions:***a. Investigating the site*

In pairs or small groups, go to a specific nearby location for the purpose of making a map of the location and its environs. While you are there, ask people around you for help in understanding the activities taking place and in identifying any organizations, stores, etc., that may not be obvious to you. Take care not to alarm people about the purpose of your map. Reveal your identity and purpose to the extent you think reasonable and appropriate. Also take advantage of this opportunity to talk informally with people who are potential key informants.

*b. Sketch a map and write field notes at the observation site*

Sketch a small map in your field notebook. Observe what activities are being done where and note them on your map. Note the types of people who are there and anything else you observe.

*c. Collaboratively make a map and present it to the class*

Return to the training facility. Using your notes and any drawings you made while at the site, work in your small groups to create a combined, detailed map of the observation area, indicating where pertinent activities are occurring and the key actors involved (each small group should create one map). Make it as complete as possible, including any significant markers, businesses, buildings, or geographical formations. When you have finished, brainstorm about the implications of your map. Based on what you learned, what recommendations might you make concerning potential participants or about doing research in this community? Present your map, its implications, and your recommendations to the class for feedback.

*d. Supportive class critique*

After each group presentation, the class or a specific group should question and critique the presenting group in a constructive manner. Give special attention to distinguishing between the presenting group's objective and subjective elements. The goal of this critique is to encourage each group to think about what things they may have not considered, to identify their biases, and to practice distinguishing observation from interpretation.

**Exercise 4: Practicing objectivity in reporting****Objective:**

- To practice differentiating objective observation from subjective interpretation
- To practice taking notes in the observation setting

**What you will need:**

- An observation site or sites
- Observation objectives
- Field notebooks

**Instructions:***a. Reporting observations*

Individually or in teams, go to different observation sites or different areas of a single site. Spend 30 minutes to one hour there quietly observing. In your notebook, record what you see. On one page, present your observations as objectively as possible. On a second page, report the same observations in a more subjective manner, indicating your own interpretation of what is there.

*b. Supportive class critique*

Return to the training facility and divide into pairs. Exchange notebooks with your partner. Read your partner's notes describing objective observations and subjective interpretation. Provide your partner with constructive feedback about his or her ability to distinguish between objective observation and subjective interpretation. When everyone has finished, each pair will present a summary of the feedback to the class. Data collectors should always be able to provide evidence for their observations.

**In-Depth Interviews****Exercise 1: Interview circle**

This exercise works well with both large and small groups.

**Objectives:**

- To practice interviewing and probing
- To experience being interviewed
- To become familiar with the interview guide
- To enable trainers/project leaders to evaluate each team member's strengths and areas for improvement

**What you will need:**

- An interview guide (preferably one to be used in the study)

**Instructions:***a. Round robin*

One person starts by asking the person next to him or her the first interview question. The interviewer should ensure that the question is addressed completely, including following up with appropriate probes. That interviewee responds to the question, and then turns to the next person and asks him or her the second question in the interview guide. Continue going around the room until everyone has had an opportunity to ask and answer a question, or until all the questions on the interview guide have been exhausted.

*b. Self-critique*

At the end of the round robin, each individual team member should describe the difficulties experienced as an interviewer and as an interviewee.

*c. Supportive class critique*

Individuals comment on the performance of other team members, focusing on whether the interviewer was successful in eliciting answers that satisfied the question.

*d. Instructor critique*

After everyone has had a chance to describe their experience, the trainer provides feedback regarding what team members did well during the round robin, as well as areas needing improvement. The trainer should also review interviewing techniques as necessary.

## **Exercise 2: Establishing rapport**

### **Objectives:**

- To practice putting participants at ease
- To become more conscious of how your behavior could affect people negatively

### **What you will need:**

- Familiarity with local cultural norms

### **Instructions:**

*a. Identify positive techniques*

As a class, make a list of suggestions for culturally appropriate ways to put someone at ease from the beginning to the end of an interview. Address the following questions:

- How should you start the interaction?
- What could you say or do initially to make the participant feel relaxed?
- What could you say or do to make the participant feel more comfortable during the interview if the conversation becomes tense?
- What would make a participant feel that he or she could trust you?
- What parting words or behaviors will help the participant leave with the feeling that he or she had a positive interview experience?

*b. Identify potentially damaging techniques*

As a class, make a list of things an interviewer might do that would be offensive to a participant or that would discourage the participant from speaking freely. Address the following questions:

- What sort of blunder might an interviewer commit that would make someone feel uncomfortable? Offended? Hurt? Angry?
- What kind of clothing would express disrespect for the participant in this culture?
- What kinds of culturally specific words or gestures would convey interviewer bias?

### Exercise 3: Paired interviews

#### Objectives:

- To practice conducting interviews
- To practice probing
- To become familiar with the interview guide

#### What you will need:

- An interview guide

#### Instructions:

##### *a. Interviewing*

Pick a partner in the group and decide with that person who will play the role of interviewer and who will be the participant. Spend 10 minutes asking your partner questions from the interview guide. The person playing the participant should feel free to take on a persona, such as talkative, irritable, shy, etc. This will help the interviewer to work on probing. After 10 minutes, exchange roles and repeat the exercise for another 10 minutes. Use different questions so as to become familiar with the entire interview guide by the end of the exercise.

##### *b. Performance and supportive class critique*

At the end of the 20 minutes, each pair will perform their interview for the class. The class will then critique each pair, citing both the positive points of the interview and areas needing improvement.

### Exercise 4: Mock interviews

#### Objectives:

- To practice interviewing someone outside of the research team
- To practice recording and taking notes during an interview
- To practice identifying and avoiding leading and closed-ended questions
- To practice transcribing an interview

#### What you will need:

- Someone who is not a member of the research team
- Tape recorder, cassettes, batteries
- An interview guide

#### Instructions:

##### *a. Mock interview*

Outside of the training facility, do a mock interview with someone who is not a member of the research team (for example, a friend or family member). Use a real interview guide. Tape-record the interview and take notes just as you would during a real interview.

### *b. Transcription*

The trainer will assign you a point at which to begin transcribing the interview. You may transcribe by hand or at a computer. Transcribe about five minutes of the tape.

### *c. Supportive class critique*

After you have finished transcribing a five-minute segment, exchange your transcript with a partner and give each other feedback on:

- The positive points of the interview
- Areas for improvement
- Use of leading and closed-ended questions
- The quality of the transcription

After all pairs have had a chance to critique their work, each pair will present a summary of their critiques to the class.

## **Exercise 5: Probing**

### **Objectives:**

- To become more proficient at knowing when to probe
- To become more proficient at using the probes scripted in the interview guide
- To improve your ability to create probes spontaneously based on individual participant responses
- To practice identifying and avoiding leading and closed-ended questions
- To know the questions well enough to not have to focus on reading from the guide

### **What you will need:**

- An interview guide

### **Instructions:**

Either in pairs or in interview circle fashion, team members will play the roles of interviewer and participant. Interview each other using a real interview guide, and focus on probing both with scripted and original probes. Probing requires being attentive and responsive to the participant. To practice this skill, cover up the interview guide after asking each question. This will force you to focus your attention on the participant instead of the guide.

Probes should be purposive and related to the objectives behind each question. After asking a question and following up with probes, ask yourself if the information you received from the participant is useful and satisfies the intent of the question. Identify any leading and closed-ended probes you asked and discuss with your partner how to word them differently.

## Focus Groups

### Exercise 1: Role-playing

#### Objectives:

- To practice leading a focus group
- To practice probing
- To practice accommodating different types of personalities

#### What you will need:

- A focus group guide
- At least four people (one to play the moderator, three to be participants)

#### Instructions:

##### *a. Assign roles*

Select one person to be the moderator. The other members of the research team will suggest a type of personality they would like to play. These could include types such as talkative, aggressive, shy, or scornful, as well as other culturally relevant examples (devout, elderly, young, silly, joker, etc.).

##### *b. Mock discussion*

Have a mock focus group discussion, with each person playing the role he or she selected. Let speakers take turns playing the moderator.

##### *c. Supportive class critique*

As a group, discuss positive points about the mock discussion as well as areas that need improvement. Give each other suggestions on how to respond and react to each type of person.

### Exercise 2: Note-taking and role-play

This exercise can be done in conjunction with Exercise 1, above.

#### Objectives:

- To practice taking notes during a focus group
- To practice probing
- To practice accommodating different types of personalities

#### What you will need:

- A focus group guide
- At least four people (one to play the moderator, two to be participants, and one to be the note-taker)
- A note-taker form

**Instructions:***a. Assign roles*

Select one person to be the note-taker and another to be the moderator. Identify types of characters and assign them to other team members, as described in Exercise 1, page 101.

*b. Create a note-taking form*

The person chosen to play the note-taker will devise a form to use in keeping track who is speaking.

*c. Mock discussion*

Have a mock focus group discussion, with each person playing the role he or she drew and the note-taker taking notes on the discussion. Let team members take turns in the note-taker role.

*d. Supportive class critique*

After everyone has taken a turn as note-taker, compare and discuss as a group the adequacy of the different note-taking forms created, the specific difficulties you had taking notes, and solutions for how you might address these. Discuss how effectively the group feels each note-taker documented what was important in the discussion.

**Data Management****Exercise 1: A Day in the Life**

This exercise can be used with any size group and adapted to any qualitative method. It can also be done as part of a longer mock interview or focus group exercise.

**Objectives:**

- To rehearse the steps of data management from beginning to end
- To practice creating and using data collection checklists

**What you will need:**

- Flip chart and markers
- Paper and pens for each team member
- Large, heavy-duty envelopes
- Equipment relevant to the method
  - Interviews: tape recorders, cassettes, batteries, field notebook, pens
  - Focus groups: tape recorders, cassettes, batteries, field notebook, pens
  - Observations: field notebook, pens

**Instructions:**

Choose the method you will practice during the exercise (participant observation, interview, focus group). Adapt the instructions below according to the method you select.



### *a. Creating checklists*

As a group, create two checklists appropriate to the data collection method. One should be called “What to Take with You” and the other, “What to Submit after Data Collection.” The checklists provided at the end of the interview and focus group modules can serve as models. Each team member should make a handwritten checklist to use later.

### *b. Creating forms*

As a group, create the forms you will need for data collection with the particular method. These include:

- Observations: list of focal points for observation
- Interviews: informed consent forms, interview question guide, reimbursement forms
- Focus groups: informed consent forms, focus group question guide, note-taker form, debriefing form, reimbursement forms

### *c. Getting ready for data collection*

Assemble the materials you would need for data collection on a table. Include equipment, large envelopes, and forms. One by one, each team member should approach the table and use their checklist for “What to Take with You” to make up a packet of materials. One person acting as the data manager should stand at the table and assign a sequential archival number to each person as they complete their packet.

### *d. Practice using forms and equipment*

Label all materials with the assigned archival number. Fill out all forms as if you had done the data collection. Sign the informed consent and reimbursement forms. If practicing interviews or focus groups in the exercise, test the recording equipment. Do not forget to make a page labeled “Expanded Notes.”

### *e. Submitting the data*

Using the checklist for “What to Submit after Data Collection,” assemble the completed forms and all other data collection materials you would need to submit. Return the packet to the data manager.

### *f. Supportive class critique*

The data manager will open one packet and check its contents for completeness in front of the group. Then each team member should be given a packet not their own, check its contents, and report back to the group.



## Appendix B: Tools for Data Managers

All data collectors will perform some aspects of data management as they collect and handle data, using the forms and procedures described in the preceding modules. However, it is likely that a person in the role of data manager will take primary responsibility for keeping close track of all the data at once. In this appendix we provide models of data archival and transcription protocols that data managers may use or adapt to meet the needs of the project.

### Model Data Archive Protocol

#### How to archive the data

1. Create a master archival log for each field site, such as the one in the sample below. Each data collection event will have its own entry on the log and be assigned an individual archival number. The archival number is made up of letters indicating the name of the field site (CC for Capital City), the data collection method (FG for focus group), participant category (FPU for family planning users), and a sequential number. For simplicity, some data managers will elect to assign each data collection event a sequential number as it is entered into the archival log, grouping participant observation, interview, focus group data together – for example, CCFGFPU01, CCIISP02, CCIIFPN03, etc. Other data managers may choose to keep a separate log (and number sequence) for each type of data collection method and category of participant – for example, CCFGFPU01 (focus groups with family planning users), CCIISP01 (in-depth interviews with service providers), and CCIIFPN01 (in-depth interviews with family planning non-users). (See sample, page 89.)

Sample Master Archival Log					
<b>Master Log</b>					
Site Name: _____					Page # _____
Archival #	Interview	Focus Group	Participant Observation	Date Assigned	Number Assigned by:

2. Assign an archival number to each data source as you enter it on the archival log. The data manager should assign each event an archival number before the data collection event. (This could be done as the field staff member checks out the recording equipment and other necessary documentation materials.)

## Sample Archival Information Sheet

## Archival Information Sheet

Title of Research Phase/Project: FP - vci Integration Archival # 15-06-04

Data type: (circle one)	Interview	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Focus group	Participant observation
Indicate type of participant(s) or observational setting:	<input type="checkbox"/> FP provider <input type="checkbox"/> HIV clinic staff <input type="checkbox"/> FP users <input type="checkbox"/> FP non-users	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FP users <input type="checkbox"/> FP non-users	<input type="checkbox"/> FP clinic <input type="checkbox"/> HIV clinic

Number of persons interviewed/observed: <u>10</u>	Gender of person(s): (circle): <input checked="" type="radio"/> Female <input type="radio"/> Male
Approximate age of person(s): <u>18 - 40</u>	Ethnicity (if appropriate): <u>Black</u>
Method of recording data (mark all that apply):	Additional/backup location(s) of data:
Audiotape <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u>Storage closet</u>
Field notes	
Interview guide notes	
Focus group note-taker notes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u>Transcriptions of all</u>
Focus group guide notes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u>for storage, also</u>
Expanded field notes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Transcription <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Translation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Electronic, translated transcription <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u>1</u>

Person(s) who collected data: <u>Sandra B. - mmp</u> <u>Marie K - NT</u>	Date: <u>15-6-04</u>
Person(s) who transcribed data: <u>Marie K</u>	Date: <u>14-6-04</u>
Person(s) who translated data: <u>Marie K</u>	Date: <u>14-6-04</u>
Person(s) who typed data: <u>Marie K</u>	Date: <u>14-6-04</u>

3. Label a large, heavy-duty envelope with the archival number and place all labeled items from the data collection event inside it. Do not write any potentially identifying information such as full or partial names or addresses on the envelope or any other item. Use one envelope for each interview, focus group, or participant observation event. Do not include materials from more than one interview or focus group in a single envelope. Write the archival number on every item that is related to a data collection event and that is placed into the archival envelope.
4. Create an archival information sheet for the data source, such as the one in the sample on page 106. It should ask for type of data, date of data collection, data collector, translator, typist, number/age/gender of people interviewed or observed, characteristics of participants (such as sex worker, truck driver, community leader, elder, employer, service client, or medical research participant), data collection method (such as notes or tape recordings), location of original data, and the electronic file name. Note that the first box on the archival information sheet requests the archival number.
5. Fill out the archival information sheet with as much information as possible.

### **How to keep track of collected data**

1. Make every effort to ensure that envelopes containing data are filed at the research office as soon as possible and no later than 48 hours after data collection. Between the time the data are collected and the time the envelope is filed at the research office, all materials must remain in the possession of the interviewer/moderator or in a securely locked location. Under no circumstances should a field worker give data to someone outside the research team, even to hold or watch temporarily.
2. Follow the sign-out procedures established by the data manager. Whenever an item is removed from an archival envelope, record the following information: the name (not just the initials) of the person removing the item(s), the date removed, and the reason for removal. Record the date the items are returned. Note that these procedures apply to removal of tapes even for transcription, for translation, and for checking a transcription or translation against the original tape. Sign-out procedures must be followed even if the item is removed only for a few minutes.
3. List all transcripts, translations, and typed notes on the archival information sheet when you add such materials to the archival envelope.
4. Note the location of all computer files on the archival information sheet, including the specific computer where the digital copies are stored and the specific folder where the files are located.
5. Submit transcripts, typed field notes, and typed debriefing notes to the sponsoring organization electronically, by fax, or by courier. We recommend that you include an itemized list of all materials being sent and include the archival number.
6. Place copies of all materials documenting the transfer of files to outside parties in the archival envelope. This includes copies of e-mails showing electronic transfer of files, and copies of fax cover sheets and fax delivery confirmations. For material sent by courier, include copies of the cover letter, shipping instructions, and tracking number.

## Model Transcription Protocol

The following, adapted from McClellan, 2003, is an example of what a transcription protocol might look like. Data managers are free to adapt it to suit project needs.

### Tape Storage

Store all tapes that are not actively being transcribed or reviewed in a locked cabinet.

### Text Format

Transcribe all interview and focus group recordings using Times New Roman 12-point font, with one-inch margins on all sides and left justification of the text.

### Interview Transcript Header

Label all individual interview transcripts with the following header, left justified at the top of the document:

Participant ID:

Interviewee Category:

Site/Location:

Date of Interview:

Interviewer ID:

Transcriptionist:

For individual interviews, the Participant ID is composed of the archival number of the interview tape, followed by the sequential number assigned to each participant. For example, for the participant interviewed on the tape with the archival number LL007, the Participant ID is LL007\_1.

For Interviewee Category, indicate Service Provider, Community Gatekeeper, or Service Consumer, as noted on the tape. Record the location, date (day/month/year), and the interviewer's identification numbers.

**Press “Enter” twice after the header**, leaving a single blank line between the header and the interview transcript.

**Type the speaker ID.** Before the transcript of each question or response, identify the speaker using the Interviewer ID or Participant ID, preceded and followed by a double pound sign (##). For example: ##LL007\_1##.

**Press “Enter” once after the speaker ID.**

**Start the text of the question or response on the next line.**

The first part of every document will thus resemble the following sample:

### Sample Interview Transcript Header

#### Interview Transcript

Participant ID: LL005\_1  
 Interviewee Subgroup #: Service Provider  
 Site: Lilongwe Clinic  
 Date of Interview: 05/11/03  
 Interviewer ID: ILL3  
 Transcriptionist: John Smith

##ILL3##

OK, before we begin the interview itself, I'd like to confirm that you have read and signed the informed consent form, that you understand that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, that you may refuse to answer any questions, and that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

##LL005\_1##

Yes, I had read it and understand this.

##ILL3##

Do you have questions before we proceed?

### Focus Group Transcript Header

Label all focus group transcripts with the following header, left justified at the top of the document:

Focus Group Archival #:

# Participants:

Site:

Focus Group Sample:\*

Date of Interview:

Moderator ID:

Note-taker ID:

Transcriptionist:

\* The Focus Group Sample refers to the subgroup of people who are participating in the focus group (for example, truck drivers, community stakeholders, public health officials).

**Press “Enter” twice** after the header, leaving a single blank line between the header and the focus group transcript.

**Type the speaker ID.** Before the transcript of each question or response, identify the speaker using the Interviewer ID or Participant ID, preceded and followed by a double pound sign (##). For example, ##LL007\_1##.

The Participant ID for each individual participating in the focus group is the archival number from the focus group tape, followed by \_1 for the first speaker, \_2 for the second speaker, etc. (for example, tape archival number LL007 becomes Participant ID LL007\_1 for the first speaker, LL007\_2 for the second speaker, and so on.)

For focus group participants who cannot be readily identified on the tape, type the archival number from the tape, followed by \_UNKNOWN. For example: LL007\_UNKNOWN would mean unidentifiable participant for the focus group with archival number LL007. Do not use “UNKNOWN” in interview transcripts.

### Indicating the Start of a New Tape

Indicate the start of a new tape for an interview or focus group by typing “START OF TAPE \_, SIDE A.” Be sure to use capital letters. You should also indicate in the transcript when you turn the tape to side B. For example:

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

Transcript

SIDE B

Transcript

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

### Indicating End of Interview/Focus Group

Press “Enter” twice after the last line of interview/focus group transcript text, leaving two blank lines.

Type **END OF INTERVIEW** in capital letters on the last line of the transcript to indicate that the interview session has ended. For example:

#### Sample End of Focus Group Transcript

##### Excerpt from Focus Group Transcript

##ILL3##

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

##LL007\_1##

Nope, I think that about covers it.

##ILL3##

Well, thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW



## Transcribing Contents of Tape

**Transcribe all tapes verbatim** (that is, word-for-word, exactly as words were spoken).

**Indicate all nonverbal or background sounds in parentheses.** This includes laughter, sighs, coughs, clapping, snapping of fingers, pen clicking, car horn, birds, etc. For example: (short sharp laugh), (group laughter), or (police siren in background).

**Do not “clean up” the transcript** by removing foul language, slang, grammatical errors, or mis-used words or concepts.

**Transcribe any mispronounced words exactly as the interviewer or participant pronounced them.** If a transcribed mispronunciation risks causing problems with the reader’s comprehension of the text, use the following convention: [/word as it would correctly be pronounced/]. (For translation, mispronunciations will be ignored and only the correct translation will be provided.) For example:

I thought that was pretty pacific [/specific/], but they disagreed.

**Standardize the spelling** of key words, blended or compound words, common phrases, and identifiers across all interview and focus group transcripts.

**Transcribe both standard contractions** (e.g., contractions of the following words: is, am, are, had, have, would, or not) **and nonstandard contractions** (e.g., betcha, cuz, ‘em, gimme, gotta, hafta, kinda, lotta, oughta, sorta, wanna, coulda, couldn’tve, couldna, woulda, wouldn’tve, wouldna, shoulda, shouldn’tve, or shouldna).

**Transcribe all fillers**, sounds that are not standard words but that do express some meaning. For example: hm, huh, mm, mhm, uh huh, um, mkay, yeah, yuhuh, nah huh, ugh, whoa, uh oh, ah, or ahah.

**Transcribe repeated words or phrases.**

I went to the clinic to see, to see the nurse.

**Transcribe truncated words** (words that are cut off) as the audible sound followed by a hyphen. For example:

He wen- he went and did what I told him he shouldn’tve.

### *Unclear Speech*

**Indicate tape segments that are difficult to hear or understand on the transcript.** For words or short sentences, use [inaudible segment]. For example:

The process of identifying missing words in a tape-recorded interview of poor quality is [inaudible segment].

For lengthy segments that are difficult to hear or understand, or when there is silence because no one is talking, record this information in square brackets. Also provide a time estimate for the information that could not be transcribed. For example:

[Inaudible: 2 minutes of interview missing]

### *Overlapping Speech*

**Indicate overlapping speech** (when multiple participants are speaking at the same time) that is difficult to separate and assign to individual speakers by typing [cross talk]. Resume transcription with the first speech that can be attributed to an individual.

### *Pauses*

**Mark brief pauses with periods or ellipses (. . .).** Brief pauses are breaks in speech lasting two to three seconds. They often occur between statements or when the speaker trails off at the end of a statement. For example:

Sometimes, a participant briefly loses . . . a train of thought or . . . pauses after making a poignant remark. Other times, they end their statements with a clause such as but then . . .

**Mark pauses longer than 3 seconds by typing (long pause).** For example:

Sometimes the individual may require additional time to construct a response. (long pause)  
Other times, he or she is waiting for additional instructions or probes.

### *Questionable Accuracy*

Indicate that a word or phrase may not be accurate by typing the questionable word between question marks and parentheses. For example:

##LL004\_1##

I went over to the ?(clinic)? to meet with the nurse to talk about joining up for the study.

### *Sensitive Information*

When an individual uses his or her own name during the discussion, replace the name with the appropriate Participant ID. For example:

##LL008\_2##

My family always tells me, “LL008\_2, think about things before you open your mouth.”

#LL008\_4##

Hey LL008\_2, don’t feel bad; I hear the same thing from mine all the time.

If an individual uses the names of people, locations, organizations, etc., identify them by typing an equal sign (=) immediately before and after the sensitive information. For example:

##LL001\_1##

We went over to = John Doe’s= house last night and we ended up going to = O’Malley’s Bar  
= over on =22nd Street= and spending the entire night talking about the very same thing.

### *Proofreading and Reviewing for Accuracy*

**Proofread** (read through for errors) and check the accuracy of all transcripts against the audio-tape, then revise the transcript computer file accordingly. Check each transcript while listening to the tape three times before submitting it.

**Check transcripts for accuracy.** If the transcriptionist is not the same person who led the interview or focus group, then the interviewer or focus group moderator who did lead the session must also check every transcript for accuracy against the tape.

#### *Removal of Sensitive Information*

**Replace sensitive information in the transcript with generic descriptive phrases enclosed within brackets.** Sensitive information includes incidental mention of names of individuals, organizations, or locations that may compromise the identity of the participant or another person, such as a family member, friend, partner/spouse, coworker, doctor, study staff, clinic, hospital, social service agency, public figure, religious leader, entertainer, print media, restaurant, educational facility, or place of employment. The use of generic descriptions for names, places, groups, and organizations permits analysts to retain important contextual information while protecting the identity of the individual, place, or group.

Transcriptionists will have already identified sensitive information in the transcript by enclosing it within equal signs (=). To locate these easily, do a “search” for equal signs (=) in the text file. However, it is important for the interviewer or focus group moderator also to review the entire transcript in order to catch any sensitive information that the transcriptionist may have missed. For example:

[counselor’s name omitted]  
[name of local AIDS service organization omitted]

#### *Saving Transcripts*

**Save each transcript as an individual MS-DOS ASCII text file** with a .txt extension or a rich text file with an .rtf extension.

To name individual interview transcript files, use the interview name followed by the participant ID. For example: SOCLL007\_1.txt = TDF interview for Lilongwe participant #007\_1.

To name focus group transcript files, use the study name followed by the archival number for the site/location, followed by the designation for the sample population. For example: SOCLL009TDF.rtf = TDF focus group for Lilongwe, archive #LL009, TDF participant.

#### *Backup Transcript Files*

**Backup all transcript files to a diskette or CD.** Do not store diskettes or CDs in the same location as the audiotapes.

#### *Destroy Tapes*

**Destroy all audiotapes when transcription is complete,** unless the research protocol specifies a length of time to keep them. Once a transcript has been reviewed for accuracy against the audiotape and the corrected transcription file has been saved and backed up, erase all tapes using an audiotape eraser. Recycling of audiotapes is permissible, provided that their sound quality is tested and new labels are affixed to the tape.



# Glossary

archival log	The list of sequential numbers assigned to each data collection event; used to track data. Also called the master archival log.
archival information sheet	An information sheet to be included in the envelopes containing data, to indicate what is inside (transcripts, tapes, field notes, etc.).
archival number	A number assigned in sequential order to each data collection event as it is entered on the master archival log.
beneficence	Taking steps to minimize psychological and social risks to research participants while maximizing benefits to them.
community	All people living in a geographic area (village, city, state, or region) or a group of people who identify with one another or share a common characteristic (for example, a religious, ethnic, or immigrant community).
community gatekeepers	People whose position in their community affords them formal or informal power to influence researchers' access to members of the study population (for example, village chiefs, elected officials, government appointees, religious leaders, highly respected or influential members of the study population).
data collection instruments	Tools or forms used to collect data from research participants. Data collection instruments include in-depth interview guides, focus group guides, observation guides, and interviewer scripts. Equipment used during data collection, such as tape recorders or microphones, are not data collection instruments.
data tracking	Monitoring the status of data processing.
facilitator	The moderator or note-taker of a focus group.
focus group	A qualitative research method in which one or two researchers and several participants (usually representatives from, or individuals associated with, a target/study population) meet as a

	<p>group to discuss a specific research topic. This technique is effective for quickly accessing a broad range of views on a specific topic. During a typical focus group, one researcher (the moderator) leads a discussion by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions while a second researcher (the note-taker) takes detailed notes on the discussion.</p>
in-depth interview	<p>A qualitative research method in which a researcher/interviewer gathers data about an individual's perspectives on a specific topic(s) through a semi-structured exchange with the individual. The researcher/interviewer engages with the individual by posing questions in a neutral manner, listening attentively to responses, and asking follow-up questions and probes based on those responses.</p>
informed consent document	<p>Form(s) approved by all relevant ethics review boards containing information about the purpose of the research study, expectations for research participants, expected risks and benefits to them, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and contact information for study officials available to answer questions. Research staff read the forms to prospective study participants, ask them questions to evaluate their comprehension of the contents, and then ask if they consent to participate. Participants may or may not be required to sign the form, depending on ethics review board requirements for the study. Signed forms are kept on file.</p>
instruments	<p>(see data collection instruments)</p>
interviewer	<p>Person who conducts in-depth interviews; can also refer to the person who asks questions during focus groups. Also known as the moderator.</p>
iterative	<p>Subject to continual revision and adjustment. Researchers continually consult collected data throughout all stages of qualitative research and use what they learn to shape and inform what they do next. This may occur at the level of study or instrument design, such as revising and creating research questions, or at the level of researcher-participant interaction, such as when an interviewer decides what questions to ask based on the responses of the participant.</p>

justice	The fair distribution of risks and benefits resulting from participation in research; includes treating research participants fairly and making sure they have equal access to all available information, prevention methods, effective treatments, and research results.
moderator	Person who facilitates a focus group. Also known as a facilitator.
note-taker	Person responsible for taking notes during a focus group. Also known as a facilitator.
participant observation	A qualitative research method in which researchers gather data either by observing or by both observing and participating, to varying degrees, in the study community's daily activities, in community settings relevant to the research questions. Examples include bars, brothels, and health clinic waiting areas.
quota sampling	A process for selecting research participants in which the criteria and number of people to be included in the study are predetermined. A target number of participants is set, and people who meet the desired criteria are recruited until the target number is reached.
reimbursement	Money or goods given to research participants to acknowledge the time they have taken from other obligations and the expenses they may have incurred in order to participate in the study.
reimbursement form	A statement the interviewer or facilitator signs to certify that each participant was given the reimbursement. In studies that require written informed consent, participants may be asked to sign a receipt.
respect	Commitment to ensuring that research participants are not used only as a means to achieve research objectives by ensuring their autonomy, voluntary informed consent, and confidentiality, and by protecting persons with diminished autonomy.
sponsoring organization	The institution that provides funding and scientific oversight for the study; is responsible for overall management of the project; ensures the scientific integrity of research at the local site; and serves as a link between the funding institution and local research activities.

study population	The pool of people from which research participants are drawn. For example, for a study of family planning users, a study population might be users and non-users of family planning among women of reproductive age in Capital City, Developing Country.
textual	In the form of written words, phrases, and sentences, as opposed to numeric (characterized by numbers) or pictorial (in the form of images).
theoretical saturation	The point at which new data collected and analyzed no longer bring additional insights to the research questions. For example, if interviews 11 through 15 contain the same information found in the first 10 interviews, theoretical saturation has been reached.









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