# Qualitative Methods Review

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# Introduction to Qualitative Research

**"Qualitative research"** is an overarching term used to refer to a wide range of approaches for exploring and describing the world we live in. More specifically, **qualitative research** focuses on non-numerical data that are useful for questions that cannot be answered using numbers or objective measurements alone. In other words, **qualitative research** is used to address "how?" and "why?" questions, rather than "how much?" or "how many?" The data that qualitative researchers collect and analyze cannot be quantified or ordered numerically. Instead, qualitative data can involve meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things.

Qualitative researchers reject the idea that only knowledge that can be quantified/measured and verified through the scientific method is valuable. In fact, most qualitative approaches are primarily interested in something called **subjective knowledge**: knowledge generated by individuals about their own lived experiences. For example, a qualitative researcher might be interested in how the rise of dating apps has affected how teens perceive the ritual of dating. To examine this question, they might seek out the subjective and personal knowledge of teens who have experienced this phenomenon in various ways.

For the qualitative researcher, this subjective knowledge is valuable data because it reflects real peoples lived experiences in context. Using this qualitative data, researchers can explore a variety of phenomena. One might attempt to present teens' lived experience of dating in as much detail as possible. Another might focus on how gender norms in their particular school or community shape how they interact with dating apps. A third might look at how they understand the effect of dating apps on personal and community safety.

**Example of Qualitative Research**

A researcher has been tasked with writing a report on the impact of teen dating violence on student success. They decide that they want to explore how grade 11 students experience teen dating violence in their community—specifically, how it has affected their feelings and attitudes about school and their relationships with their teachers and classmates. To do this, they interview students, teachers, and parents at two high schools in a specific neighbourhood, on the topic. The transcripts of these interviews are coded for key themes about some of the ways that teen dating violence affects the students' relationship to school.

No matter the focus, qualitative research emphasizes the importance and significance of how real people experience and interpret the social world around them.

# Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Qualitative methods can also be very useful for quantitative researchers as they decide how to conceptualize some of the key ideas they want to measure. For example, a quantative researcher may be exploring the impact of teen dating violence on student success. However, before using quantitative methods to measure student success, the researcher might decide to examine what, exactly, "student success" means to different groups in this context. Focus groups, for example, might reveal that test scores carry little weight in this context, and that students and teachers have a much more holistic conception of "student success" shaped by their cultural context. The researcher can then use this exploratory qualitative work to inform the design of a survey that they can use for their quantative work.

**Whether an end in itself, or used in conjunction with quantitative methods, qualitative research helps us deepen our understanding of why things are the way that they are, while embracing complexity and real-world context.**

# Key Steps in Designing a Qualitative Research Project

In qualitative research, there are a number of steps that researchers should typically follow when designing a project:

1. **Develop a research question:** A clear and concise research question is an essential first step in a qualitative study. Your question should focus on the "how" or "what" of a phenomenon (rather than the "why"), indicating that your study will seek to explore and/or describe, rather than explain objectively. A concise research question will also help define the boundaries of what your study will examine, thereby keeping the project manageable. These boundaries will aid you in the following three steps.

> **Too broad:** What role do teachers play in addressing teen dating violence?
>
> **Better:** How do high school teachers working in Canada understand the multiple roles, identities, and responsibilities they take on to combat teen dating violence?

2. **Conduct a literature review:** A literature review is a review of what others have written either directly about, or related to, your topic of research. Often, no studies will have been conducted about your specific research question. However, a review of related studies and relevant concepts can help you fine tune your research question, research focus, and what new knowledge your research project can generate.

3. I**dentify your research context/participants:** A qualitative research project can be conducted in just about any context and will almost always produce some useful data about peoples' lived experiences. That being said, the qualitative researcher needs to be attuned to the practicalities, as well as the ethics, of their research. Some questions to ask before deciding on a context: How will I gain access to this community/organization? Who are the key gatekeepers in this context? Will they be receptive to this research project? Are there enough participants to address my research questions? Will participating in this research cause any psychological, physical, financial, or social harm? Who is benefiting from this research?

4. **Choose your qualitative research approach and data collection techniques:** There are a range of approaches to conducting qualitative research and collecting data, many which we discuss in this handbook. You should select the research approach and data collection techniques that will best address your research question.

# Ethics in Qualitative Research

Qualitative reseachers working with human participants must take steps to ensure that they are doing research in an ethical manner that protects the safety and security of participants. While each qualitative research project will bring with it unique risks—shaped by the methods employed and subject matter covered—there are a number of general rules or principles that should be applied to all qualitative projects to reduce these risks as much as possible. Following these rules will provide the qualitative researcher with the building blocks of an ethical research project.

## Voluntary Participation

Participation in a qualitative research study must be voluntary. This means that recruitment cannot involve any form of coercion. Some forms of coercion—like physical coercion—are quite easy to recognize. Other forms, however, might be more difficult to spot. For example, students may feel they are risking a poor grade if they do not participate in their professor's study, and youth may feel they are jeopardizing a relationship with a community leader if they do not participate in their study. Researchers must do all they can to ensure that all participation is completely voluntary.

## Benefit to the Research Participants

Qualitative research should be conducted in a way that is beneficial to both the researcher and the participant. This does not have to involve direct payment to participants, but could also involve the opportunity to contribute to knowledge-building around a phenomenon that is relevant to their lived experience or a more concrete deliverable like a white paper or report for a partner organization.

## Privacy and Confidentiality

Qualitative research often involves participants sharing personal stories and experience. If made public this information or data could cause social, economic, emotional, and/or psychological harm to the participant. To avoid this, researchers must ensure that the identity of the participant is not disclosed to anyone except the researcher unless otherwise requested by the participant. To do this, the researcher can use pseudonyms for participant names, as well as other identifying information, such as the name of a restaurant or park the participant frequents.

## Informed Consent

The topics discussed in interviews can be emotionally draining and/or psychologically taxing, and in some instances participation could carry social and economic risks within the participant's community. For this reason, qualitative researchers must inform participants about the potential risks and harms of participation prior to receiving voluntary consent to participate. Participants should also be made aware of the kinds of questions they will be asked during the data collection process so that they can prepare for it or, if necessary, choose not to participate.

# Qualitative Approaches

# Qualitative Approaches

Because qualitative researchers come from a variety of traditions (e.g., sociology, anthropology, history) with different priorities, goals, assumptions, and world views, there are many **"approaches"** to qualitative research.

This following section provides an overview of a number of **approaches** to conducting qualitative research in communities. The approach that the researcher/team opts to use will shape the entire qualitative research process from start to finish. As a result, the approach selected should reflect the type of research question posed by the researcher/team from the very beginning of the project.

Once a researcher has decided what approach they will take for their research, they can then decide what specific data collection and data analysis techniques they will use. These different forms of data collection/ analysis will be discussed in a later section.

The approach that is taken by a researcher will play a significant role in shaping what questions we want to answer, who we want to answer those questions, and what we hope to be able to do with the data we collect.

# Qualitative Approaches

**1. Ethnography**

**2. Oral History**

**3. Participatory Action Research**

# Ethnography

**What is this?**

Ethnography refers to the art and science of describing the social interactions of a group. The group (or community, organization, or team) that the ethnographer studies is typically identified by something that a group of people have in common. They might be second-generation racialized students at a predominately white high school, or part-time employees at a grocery store chain. They could be custodial staff at a major university, or Toronto-based investment bankers under the age of 25.

The main goal of an ethnographic approach is documenting the culture, perspectives, and practices of the group **from an insider's perspective**. For ethnographers, research questions often take shape throughout the data collection/analysis process.

Some ethnographers take a "critical" approach to their research. After capturing and describing the social interactions of a cultural group from the subject's perspective, they ask how these perceptions are shaped by wider social structures and societal power relations. Finally, they ask what can be done to disrupt these structures and relations of power.

**How would I do this?**

Ethnography involves intense field-based research conducted within the group's "natural" environment, rather than under conditions created by the researcher, such as a lab or office. Data are gathered from a range of sources including formal interviews. However, observation and informal conversations are the primary modes of data collection for the ethnographer. Designing an ethnographic project always involves a trade-off between breadth and depth. While typically studying a single site, ethnographers will recruit multiple participants, and examine multiple practices and processes within this context in order to develop a holistic understanding of the context.

The initial step in any ethnographic research project is receiving approval to access the research setting. This is both an ethical imperative, as well as fundamental to ensuring that all participant interactions occur in a positive, open, and constructive fashion, as good rapport is key to ethnographic research. As a result, ethnographers often spend a significant amount of time developing rapport with the community they are examining before pitching any sort of research project.

**Key Points**

- Describes social interactions of a group, community, organization, or team from an insider's perspective
- Can be purely descriptive or also involve a critical component
- Characterized by intense field-based research involving interviews and observations
- Requires extremely strong rapport with community participants

# Ethnography in Practice

Yasmine wants to understand how the phenomenon of teenage dating violence is experienced in a rural community context. She decides that the best way to do this is through an ethnographic study of teenage girls at a rural Ontario high school. After receiving approval from school administrators and the parent teacher association, she collects data using three methods: 1) observations in classrooms, the lunchroom, and hallways; 2) semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and adminstrators; and 3) focus groups with female students. After four months of data collection, she codes her transcripts and field notes according to key that emerged throughout the research process. Through her analysis, she decides to focus on how small town community dynamics shape conversations around teenage dating violence.

# Oral History

**What is this?**
Oral history is a systematic approach to the collection, and study, of living people's testimonies about their own experiences. This is accomplished through one-to-one interviews. However, unlike traditional interview formats that tend to be based around a specific theme or set of questions, oral history interviews are extremely open-ended. Typically, the researcher will ask participants to speak about their overall life experiences (or a specific experience) in narrative form. In doing so, the researcher is gaining first-hand knowledge from individuals who have lived through a particular event/set of events, or a particular period of time.

The main goal of an oral history approach is to document the subjective personal accounts of the narrator and to add to the historical record of a place or a set of events. It is important to note that this is different than attempts to produce a "true" account of an event or period in time. Oral histories can be used in conjunction with other sources to verify and analyze the oral history accounts, before placing them in proper historical context.

A key strength of an oral history approach is that it generates information and knowledge that cannot be gathered from any other source. This is because it is often conducted with individuals marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, nationality, and age, whose stories are not part of public record. In this way, oral history wields the potential to give voice to marginalized groups. At the same time, oral history is limited insofar as it is dependent on human memory and is therefore limited by the human lifespan. As a result, there are fixed boundaries on what subjects can be addressed through oral history (i.e., one lifetime).

**How would I do this?**
Oral history interviews look different than traditional qualitative interviews. The researcher can enter the interview with a list of topics in mind; however, they should not have specific questions prepared. Because the goal is to learn about the participant's life story, questions must be open-ended, particularly at the beginning. An oral history approach requires interviewers to have good listening skills, follow-up questions, nonverbal behaviors, and verbal encouragement (e.g., That's so interesting!) in order to encourage the participant to continue with their story.

Oral history interviews are lengthy, ranging from 1 hour (at the minimum) to a whole afternoon. Frequently, oral historians will have multiple interview sessions with a single participant, and will further supplement their interview with other artifacts or documents like letters.

**Key Points**

- Documents the subjective personal accounts of individuals whose stories are not a part of public record
- Accomplished through long-form open-ended interviews
- Often seeks to give voice to individuals from marginalizd communities
- Reliant on human memory and strong interviewer skills

# Oral History in Practice

Jackie is troubled by the fact that all the studies she's encountered on teen dating violence focus on the present day context. She wants to know how women of her grandmother's generation experienced this phenomenon. She decides that the best way to add to this archive is through an oral history approach. She contacts her 85-year-old grandmother and tells her that she would like to sit down with her for a series of conversations about this topic. To prepare, she reads everything she can about dating and gender during the 1940s and 1950s in Canada. After conducting three long interviews, Jackie decides not to transcribe the entirety of the conversations. Instead, she listens back to the recordings, carefully noting which sections are most relevant to the topic she is investigating. Using these sections, she constructs a detailed history of her grandmother's experience of dating and violence during her teenage years.

# Participatory Action Research

**What is this?**
Participatory action research (PAR) is a community-based and community-driven qualitative research approach.

The goal of PAR is to transform research from something done by outsider "experts," into a process conducted by community members who, through the research process, become agents of their own social and community transformation.

The PAR approach has two key components:

**Participation:** PAR emphasizes the participation of community members in the research project as co-researchers. In doing so, PAR is a collaborative process that critiques and pushes back against the traditional researcher-participant relationship that frames the researcher as "the objective expert" and the participant as "the subject of research." Thus, PAR is research done with people, rather than on, or for, people. In this way, PAR seeks to democratize who can produce, own, and use community knowledge.

**Action:** PAR focuses on how research can be used for community action or transformation. PAR projects examine questions and issues that are significant to the community members/co-researchers, and seeks to change communities and society through research, rather than simply viewing research as a means to observe and study it. Its chief concern is empowering marginalized peoples, rather than simply generating academic knowledge about people for the sake of science. In this way, PAR is explicitly political, and is committed to a politics of equity and social transformation that other research traditions might view as ideological, or overly abstract and conceptual.

**How would I do this?**
PAR projects begin with the establishment of strong relationships with all community stakeholders. From here, stakeholders collaboratively determine what issues are vital to their community, before identifying roles and responsibilities, and collectively designing research processes and tools. Data should be collected in a collaborative sense as well, in such a way that it enables the participation of all stakeholders involved in the project. After analyzing data, stakeholders will meet to identify how the research can feed back into the community, and collectively determine future research and impacts.

**Key Points**

- Driven by participants or a group of people who have a stake in the issue being researched
- Offers a democratic model of who can produce, own, and use knowledge
- Collaborative at every stage, involving planning, pooling skills, and working together
- Intended to result in some action, change, or improvement on the issue being researched

# Participatory Action Research in Practice

Three teenagers are fed up with the lack of administrative support at their school for survivors of sexual violence. They decide to conduct a research project that will change this. Together, they put out a call for like-minded students at their school, and are energized when 20 show up to the first meeting. At this first meeting, they hold a long discussion and decide that they want to document how their female classmates have experienced this lack of support, and present this document to their school's administration. As a collective, they settle on an interview protocol using semi-structured interviews, and divide up tasks. Over the next two months, they conduct and transcribe the interviews, and arrange excepts grouped by theme into a document that they present to the school administration. They meet again and decide that they will give a presentation on their findings to select grade 11 and 12 classes in the school. The response by the student body and administration is extremely positive, and the student organizers are asked to lead a series of workshops for the school on teen sexual violence. After seeing this success, the group meet up again begins planing to expand this project to other schools in the community.

# Data Collection Techniques

# Data Collection Techniques

The following section provides a brief overview of several common approaches to collecting qualitative data. These techniques can be thought of us as tools that we use—either by themselves, or in conjunction with one another—in order to collect the data necessary for a rigorous qualitative research study.

Qualitative data collection typically involves direct interaction with participants, either on a one-to-one basis, or in a group setting. However, as we will see, qualitative researchers also make use of "non-verbal texts" including images, letters, newspaper clippings, speeches, policy documents, and organizational memos. Qualitative researchers also use numerical and historical data found in archives and databases to bolster their qualitative analysis.

Popular qualitative data collection techniques include **participant observation, interviews, focus groups, archival research,** and **document/text analysis**. While these methods can stand on their own, qualitative researchers often combine methods—e.g., supplementing interviews with document analysis—to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the social phenomenon under investigation. The use of multiple data collection methods—and, therefore, the collection of multiple kinds of qualitative data—to examine a single research topic or question is called **triangulation**. Triangulation of data is key to a rigorous qualitative research project.

There are many different types of qualitative data collection techniques.

The key to good qualitative research is allowing your research question and the qualitative approach that you have chosen to dictate which data collection

# Data Collection Techniques

**1. Interviews**

**2. Focus groups**

**3. Field Notes**

**4. Document Review**

**5. Arts-Based Methods**

# Interviews

**What is this?**
Interviews are the most widely used form of qualitative data collection in social science research. At its most basic level, the interview is a conversation between a researcher (interviewer) and one or more participants (interviewee) to generate data that serves the researcher's goals (e.g., understanding an event or phenomenon). For this reason, interviews are organized as one-way dialogues where the researcher asks questions, and the participant responds. Within the qualitative research paradigm, the researcher and participant are understood to be co-constructing the knowledge produced in the interview. Thus, data produced through qualitative interviews is not only detailed and textual (rather than discrete and quantifiable), but it is also an interactive accomplishment in which respondents are collaborators in the research process.

The interview format can be completely **structured** and standardized, or completely open-ended and **unstructured**. However, the majority of qualitative interviews in social science research actually exist somewhere in the middle. These interviews are known as **"semi-structured"** interviews. It is helpful to think of interview formats as occurring on a continuum: on one end, the researcher seeks complete control over the content and structure of the interview (structured interviews). On the other end of the continuum, the researcher allows the interviewee to steer the conversation in whichever way they would like (unstructured interview). Semi-structured interviews exist somewhere in the middle.

| Structured Interviews | Semi-Structured Interviews | Unstructured Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| **Protocol:**<br>• Scripted/"closed-ended" questions<br>• Questions asked in fixed order and as written<br>• No clarifications or probes during interview<br><br>**Pros:**<br>• Efficient collection of data<br>• Expedient interviewing style<br>• No need for follow up interviews<br><br>**Cons:**<br>• Lack of detail<br>• No opportunity for probing | **Protocol:**<br>• Planned, open-ended questions guide conversation between researcher and participant<br>• Pre-written "prompts" aid researcher in probing for additional details and clarifications<br><br>**Pros:**<br>• Can rely on predetermined structure while still collecting detailed qualitative data<br>• One or two interviews per participant is sufficient<br><br>**Cons:**<br>• Requires well-developed research skillset to keep conversation on track | **Protocol**<br>• Limited (if any) open-ended research questions<br>• Functions like a normal conversation, albeit around the topic under investigation<br>• Researcher must listen closely, and probe participant to obtain richest data<br><br>**Pros:**<br>• Useful for building rapport and discussing sensitive topics<br><br>**Cons:**<br>• Typically involves long interviews and multiple interview sessions with a given participant<br>• Conversations can stray far away from topic in questions |

**How would I do this?**
In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks participants a few planned, yet open-ended, questions around a theme or themes. To do this, the researcher should prepare an **interview guide** containing a few key questions or a list of topics to be addressed. The interview guide should be based on the research question, as well as the conceptual framework that underlies the research. The researcher might also prepare a series of prompts for each question, which can help steer the interview back to the topic of interest, if necessary. Some researchers follow the interview questions sequentially, while others jump between questions depending on the answers the participants provide.

**When would it be best to use this?**
Semi-structured interviews are one of, if not the most, common form of qualitative data collection. They are particularly useful when the researcher will not have the opportunity for multiple follow-up interviews with the participant, as it balances detail with structure. For similar reasons, semi-structured interviews provide the kind of structure that is valuable in instances where multiple researchers or a research team are working on the same project. Finally, semi-structured interviews are useful when they are preceeded by observation, unstructured interviews, and literature reviews that provide the researcher and author of the interview protocol with a rigorous understanding of the topic in question.

## Asking the Right Kinds of Questions

**Open-ended questions:**
These are key to semi-structured and unstructured interviews. They give participants the opportunity to choose the terms with which to construct their descriptions and emphasize what is important and meaningful to them

E.g., "Are you close with your family?" is a closed question with fixed responses. Instead, try saying, "Tell me about your family."

**Prompts:**
One of the greatest challenges with semi-structured interviews is balancing between "structure" and "openness." On the one hand, too much structure will give you standardized responses, rather than the nuance, complexity, and uniqueness that you desire. With too little structure, on the other hand, you might end up with a 4-hour rambling interview with very little connection to you research question. A solution to this is preparing "interview prompts." Prompts are pre-prepared follow-up questions that can steer the conversation back to the topic of focus a way that feels conversational and organic. These are generally focused, rather than open-ended.

E.g., Question: "Tell me about you family."
Prompt 1: "Did you have any siblings? What role did they play in your childhood?"
Prompt 2: "Did your family have any customs or traditions growing up?"

# Focus Groups

**What is this?**
A focus group refers to any group discussion that involves a researcher who is actively encouraging and attended to the group interaction. The emphasis is on the interactions happening between participants, and not on the interaction between the facilitator and participants. Instead, the facilitator should take a "back seat" during the discussion, allowing participants to discuss the topics and questions in an in-depth manner. Because of this, focus groups have been referred to as "structured eavesdropping." The data collected would involve either an audio or video recording of the discussion, which typically results in a written transcript.

**How would I do this?**
To run a successful focus group, the researcher must stimulate discussion by listening closely, and asking probing questions, while anticipating the expected analyses. Therefore, the researcher must plan ahead to develop prescriptive texts or scripts, while also remaining flexible and open to allowing the conversation to unfold organically. Discussion should appear to emerge in a spontaneous fashion, but must actually be skillfully cultivated by the facilitator. A successful facilitator will have the skills to assess verbal and nonverbals cues to evaluate when to ask for more clarification or gently redirect the conversation, and when to sit back and allow participants to guide the conversation.

**When would it be best to use this?**
1. ***To engage with vulnerable and hard to reach participants:*** The informal nature of focus groups typically allows them to be seen as less threatening than one-on-one interviews or written surveys. For example, youth, minority groups, individuals not contacting services, and individuals who have refused care may be more willing to take part in a focus group.
2. ***To encourage people to discuss sensitive topics:*** Focus groups allow for a sense of safety because the individual is not alone with the researcher when discussing their thoughts and opinions. Participants have the liberty to choose to answer or withhold from the discussion to the extent that they choose; however, as they hear others expressing similar viewpoints, they may be more likely to engage than had they been interviewed alone.

**Some important aspects to consider when using a focus group:**

1. Where to hold the focus group.
2. Whether or not to audio or video record the session (video allows for non-verbal analysis, but may be more work as researchers have to code behaviors).
3. The possible match or mismatch between moderator and group members.
4. The extent of stimulus materials to prepare.
5. Clear development of rules within the group that involve respecting everyone's lived experiences, their right to speak, and safety.

# Field Notes

**What is this?**
Field notes are descriptive details of people, places, things, and events, as well as reflections on data and the research process as a whole. They function as a personal journal that the qualitative researcher keeps when they are in the field.

It can be helpful to think of field notes in terms of two sections: **observations** and **reflections.**

**Observations** refer to records of what we perceive with our senses in the field. These records can be text-based or audio-recorded. Observations can address everything from physical structures and interactions between individuals, to smells and sounds. They should be as descriptive as possible without any interpretation or analysis. Observations make up a significant portion of ethnographic field data. However, they also are important within formal interviews, specifically those that are audio-recorded. In these cases, important contextual information can be lost in the production of an interview transcript, including participant dress and demeanour; facial expressions and gestures, as well as the general space/setting of the interview.

**Reflections**, on the other hand, can be thought of as a record of the thoughts, ideas, and interpretations the researcher has throughout the research process. In both field and interview settings, reflections can serve as the analytic spark or idea that drives our future analysis of the data.

**How would I do this?**
Carry a notepad and pen with you at all times. Schedule some quiet time to jot down field notes after every data collection "session." Keepp in mind that it is important to write your field notes as soon as possible; memories have been known to fail us, particularly when it concerns details and a research session that was rich with experiences and that activated many senses. Finally, make sure not to discuss the day's research with others until you have completed your field notes—even your research team! It is vital that your field notes reflect your thoughts and memories alone.

**When would it be best to use this?**
Whether referring to observations or reflections, field notes should not serve as a primary qualitative data source—the exception being biographical approaches to qualitative research. At the same time, field notes are vital within every qualitative research project. While qualitative research is concerned with the subjective experiences of participants as data, rather than the researcher's thoughts and observations, field notes can and do add colour and depth to other forms of qualitative data and have an important purpose in all qualitative research projects.

# Document Review

**What is this?**
Document review is a broad term used to refer to the use of existing documents as data sources—in other words, documents that *were not produced by the researcher.* Review of existing documents is extremely helpful for understanding the social, political, and cultural context that the researcher is entering, as well as for bolstering primary interview data or field data. However, documents can also serve as important pieces of primary data for analysis as well.

Broadly speaking, documents are text-based files, as well as visual materials like maps or photographs. These can typically be broken down into two categories:

1. **Primary data documents** are those that are collected by the researcher. These might include annual reports, website content, and organizational pamphlets.
2. **Secondary data documents** are materials gathered and archived, or published, by someone other than the researcher. This includes, among other things, demographic data and national surveys contained in government archives; century-old newspaper and magazine clippings stored in an archive; or a dissertation on the Ontario Education Curriculum. Secondary data documents can be used to investigate new research questions, extend original analyses, or bolster other forms of primary data.

**How would I do this?**
The internet is your friend! Once you have your research question solidified, start your search. You might be surprised by what is public and freely available. For example, Statistics Canada data is easily accessible, and annual reports are available on the websites of organizations addressing teen dating violence. You can even find a lot of information through online libraries and museums archives, which are increasingly digitized and accessible through the web.

**When would it be best to use this?**
There are a number of advantages to document review as a data collection technique. It can result in significant savings in time, money, and labour compared to gathering primary data through interviews, ethnography, or focus groups. The data already exist—either as data, or for some other purpose. As a result, even extensive document reviews can be accomplished by a single researcher. Finally, document review does not involve new human study participants. As a result, it can mitigate some of the participant risks associated with primary data collection.

When it comes to document analysis, it is not difficult to find and collect your data. The tricky part is placing definite boundaries on what data to include and exclude in your study.

# Arts-Based Methods

**What is it?**
Arts-based research methods integrate artistic activities and practices in the data collection process. Qualitative researchers are increasingly using artforms like filmmaking, painting, journaling, and craft as stimuli for data collection within interviews or focus groups.

**How would I do this?**
A researcher's approach to using arts-based methods, or arts as stimuli for qualitative research, are shaped by the artistic practice in question.

*Photography*
Photography can serve an important role in helping the researcher gain a more holistic understanding of the research participant's lived experience. By giving participants a camera and assigning them a pre-interview task—often with a prompt in mind—photography allows participants to provide the researcher with a glimpse of the world through their eyes. The photos can be discussed collaboratively with the researcher, while also serving as another form of data to supplement the interview data.

*Vignettes*
Another popular arts-based tool is the vignette. Vignettes refer to a range of stimuli—including written text/stories, songs, and images, for example—that participants are invited to respond to, commonly within an interview or focus group setting.

*Drawing*
Drawing is often included as part of the interview process. The participant(s) may be asked to draw spontaneously, or in response to a prompt (e.g., Show me who hangs out where in the school lunchroom). In these instances, the drawing process may continue through the duration of the interview, alongside new questions and prompts from the researcher.

*Artifacts or Craft*
In this approach, participants will participate in the creation of an artifact within the context of the interview. One popular approach is the use of "creative mask-making". In this arts-based method, the researcher provides the participant with art materials and a prompt (e.g., imagine a creature/being that represents how you feel in your current job). Upon completion, the participant is asked to describe the mask, their experiences making the mask, and any discoveries they made during the process. This may lead into a traditional qualitative interview.

**When would it be best to use this?**
These methods can be understood as a resource to be used during traditional interview and focus group formats. However, some methods are particularly effective for specific age groups. Drawing, for example, is extremely generative when working with children as it provides a concrete visual tool for them to express how they understand themselves. Vignettes, on the other hand, might involve a level of analysis and reflection that would prove too advanced for young children. Researchers should select the arts-based method based on the specific participant group they are working with.

# Conclusion

# Conclusion: What are the Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative Research?

Neither qualitative research nor quantitative research can provide the answers to all our research questions. Both have strengths as well as limitations. For this reason, it is important to let your research question(s) and interest(s) determine whether you should employ a qualitative approach in your study. To help you in this process, this page contains an overview of some of the strengths and limitations of qualitative research.

## Strengths

1. **Recruitment:** Research is typically carried out with a small group of participants from a specific community or organizational context. As a result, once you are welcomed into the context, participants can be recruited quickly through snowball sampling.

2. **Action-Oriented:** Because the sample is small and concentrated in a particular setting, qualitative researchers can study pressing community or organizational issues as they emerge, and with the explicit goal of generating context-specific solutions.

3. **Detail and Complexity:** Allows us to examine the "how" and "why" questions of social phenomena with an emphasis on detail, complexity, and the lived experiences of real people in context.

4. **Theory-Building:** By emphasizing description and interpretation, qualitative research often leads to the development of new concepts, perspectives, and theories.

5. **Open-Ended Nature:** The various techniques used all typically endorse the use of a flexible approach to the methods being used. Good qualitative research protocols evolve during the research process as the researcher learns from the data. This occurs both on a micro level (e.g., during an interview) as well as on a macro level (e.g., revising overarching research questions).

6. **Multi-Method:** There are a range of approaches and techniques that get at different aspects of the research context. Qualitative researchers can combine (or triangulate) these methods to develop a holistic understanding of a given phenomenon.

## Limitations

1. **Recruitment:** Recruitment can be challenging, as participation can be time-intensive and potentially psychologically or emotionally taxing. Also, participants—from both marginalized and privileged communities— can be suspicious of the researcher. For this reason, some researchers spend years establishing rapport with their participant community before engaging in research.

2. **Generalizability:** Qualitative research does not aim to discover and describe universal knowledge or truths. Its greatest strength—describing specific phenomena in context—means that findings should not be used as the basis for representing a wide audience or the public. However, theory generated from qualitative research is often applied in studies that seek to make sense of similar phenomena in other contexts.

3. **Need for Topic-Specific Expertise:** The quality of the data collected is largely dependent on the researcher's skills and experience in the topic being researched. For example, if a qualitative researcher lacks interviewing skills or does not have a strong understanding of the phenomenon or topic being studied, the data they collect will be superficial or inaccurate

4. **Time-Intensive:** Data analysis/coding and interpretation are very time-intensive. This is compounded by the fact that, in theory, there exists an endless amount of qualitative data that can be collected on a given topic. It is therefore extremely important to delineate the scale and scope of a qualitative research project from the onset.

# Conclusion: Further Information

The approaches and data collection techniques described in this review represent broad overviews, and do not provide in depth instructions of how these techniques should be implemented. This primer does not provide instructions on how to organize and analyze the qualitative data collected through these processes—an important next step in any qualitative research project!

There are also many more details about, and approaches to, qualitative research that cannot be included in this guide! If you are interested in more information about qualitative research, we recommend that you reach out to the community of practice for more resources and guidance, and consult the following introductory guides:

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). The Sage handbook of qualitative research. Sage.

Given, L. M. (Ed.). (2008). The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods. Sage publications.

Leavy, P. (Ed.). (2014). The Oxford handbook of qualitative research. Oxford library of psychology.

Bradbury, H. (Ed.). (2015). The Sage handbook of action research. Sage.