



Qualitative Methods of Collecting Data: Gathering Descriptive Data from a Small Sample

Content developed from YouthREX's Evaluation Toolkit

Qualitative data is non-numerical and is especially useful for gathering rich, in-depth, descriptive data from a small sample. Read on to learn more about three common ways to collect qualitative data!

1. Focus Groups



Typically, focus groups last 1-2 hours, are composed of 5-7 participants, and are held in a neutral and comfortable environment. Focus group guides are usually composed of 5-10 questions with follow-up questions (probes).

Here are some tips for creating a good focus group guide:

- Use open-ended questions
- Use probes and follow-up questions
- Avoid vague and ambiguous questions
- Avoid overly wordy and complex questions - keep it simple!
- Don't ask questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"
- Use questions that get youth thinking and involved
- Use reflections and examples
- Finish the focus group by asking youth to reflect on the entire focus group and if they would like to add anything

Remember that focus groups work best with youth participants when they are fun, informal, and conversational. A meal, refreshments, or other incentives are often provided to participants, and the focus groups are always audio recorded (and transcribed at a later date).

Focus Group Facilitators

Ideally, focus groups should be co-led by a trained facilitator and another youth. The role of focus group facilitators is to:

- Use purposeful small talk to build group rapport and create a warm and friendly environment
- Guide the conversation using the focus group guide

- Encourage participation when youth get quiet
- Ensure that one or two participants aren't dominating the discussion
- Redirect the conversation if it goes off-topic
- Use probes to get more information (e.g., Can you explain further? Can you give an example?)

Click [here](#) for more resources on designing and conducting focus groups.

2. In-depth Interviews



In-depth interviews are conducted with a single participant, typically last 30-45 minutes, and are held in a private and comfortable environment. Like a focus group guide, an interview guide should be composed of 5-7 major questions with follow-up questions (probes).

Here are some tips for creating a good interview guide:

- Do not begin the interview with sensitive questions
- Build rapport with the youth participant with small talk
- Avoid vague and ambiguous questions
- Avoid overly wordy and complex questions; keep it simple!
- Don't ask questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"
- Use probes:
 - Go deeper ("Can you tell me more about...?")
 - Go back ("Earlier you mentioned Please tell me...")
 - Clarify ("So you mainly keep in touch with friends via text?")
 - Steer ("That's really interesting, but can we return to ...?")
 - Contrast ("How would you compare your experiences...")

Further Interview tips (Padgett, 2012)*

1. Familiarize yourself with your interview guide
2. Ask follow-up questions as they come up organically
3. Avoid leading questions ("What do you think of _____'s terrible privacy policy?")
4. Explore but don't interrogate

5. Ask questions when something isn't clear
6. Don't lead with questions about feelings (let them emerge)
7. Encourage the sharing of experiences
8. Don't talk about yourself too much!
9. Don't interrupt or try to control the conversation
10. Silence is okay – don't try to fill every void (unless participant is stuck)
11. Laugh and appreciate humour
12. Remain professional
13. Take notes but don't allow note-taking to become distracting
14. Remember that everyone has a bad interview day!
15. Document the noise (e.g., interruptions, distractions during interview)

3. Observations and Field Notes



Observations can be another rich source of program data that can provide meaningful information that is especially relevant to your process evaluation.

Padgett (2012) offers some tips for making observations and taking field notes:

- Write down your observations as soon as possible
- Describe! Have an awareness that memory is often inaccurate
- Things to note: Physical space, people, behaviour, interactions, relationships, affect (expression of emotions)

Helpful Hints (Lofland & Lofland, 1995)**:

- Be concrete and specific; avoid inferences
- Distinguish between first-order (verbatim) and second-order (paraphrasing) accounts
- Record observations of yourself too (e.g., impressions, feelings, concerns)
 - Allows you to identify personal biases, and to manage them
 - Strive for balance
 - Don't get too caught up in the details, be thorough yet practical

For more information, resources and tools on evaluation, visit our **Evaluation Toolkit** on [the eXchange](#).

*Padgett, D. K. (2012). *Qualitative and mixed methods in public health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

**Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Woodsworth.