



FH KREMS  
UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED  
SCIENCES

# Qualitative Research Methods



erlebnis → studium

## **II. The different Qualitative Methods with special Focus on Focus-Group Interviews and Expert Interviews**

- **Observation**
- **Case Study**
- **Analysis of Texts and Images**
- **Focus Group Interview**
- **In-depth Interview**

## Definition:

**A systematic description of events, behaviours and artefacts in the social setting chosen for study.**



Don't shush me –  
and I don't care if she *is* writing in her little notebook,  
- just tell me where you were last night!" (Source: Larson, 1998)

Observation is about:

- “seeing” through the eyes of others
- paying attention to context
- providing detailed description
- allows the researcher to gain the trust of those under study
- can lead to a long term relationship with the researched
- the researcher can come to understand the talk, meanings, understandings of the researched
- the researcher can observe the sequence of events that precede and follow an incident

- observation is based on watching what people do, looking at their behavioural patterns and actions and at objects, occurrences, events and interactions
- to gain depth insights and understanding of specific practices (involve ethnographic dimensions)
  - to observe and monitor changes and developments
- unobtrusive technique (passive observation to observer participating in the daily life of the people under study)
- in some cases the only way of researching particular phenomena (e.g. drug sub-culture, youth sub-culture) – researcher becomes part of the group
- observation research can sometimes serve as a specific tool within a wider research methodology such as an ethnographic study (can be very time- and resource-consuming)

- researcher usually keeps a **diary** (fieldnotes) of all events and develops a framework or protocol for gathering data
- **problem of access** - gaining admittance to the social setting of interest may be a problem
- practical problem of how to record information
- the question of the researcher's relationship with informants also raises **ethical questions**
- **analysis**
  - ongoing process, interim conclusions
  - the very act of deciding what to view, what to say and what to record involves choices, which will be influenced by the researcher's evolving understanding of the phenomenon being studied.
  - iterative process, complex, personal one

- **Observation studies are appropriate/useful:**
  - where a study aims to confirm actions in a discreet manner without involving the subjects explicitly;
  - where the researcher's purpose is to expand his/her perspective;
  - when respondents may act unconsciously or find it difficult to articulate their views (e.g. patterns or habits in ritualistic or repetitive behaviour).
- **Observations are inappropriate** for the measurement or assessment of people's "internal" values, such as feelings and beliefs. They primarily record observable behaviour.



- structured or unstructured
- human or mechanical
- natural or contrived
- disguised or undisguised

## Roles that the Participant Researcher might play (Ryan 1995):

- 1. Complete participant:**  
becomes a genuine participant
- 2. Participant as observer:**  
is participating but making it known that he/she is doing research
- 3. Observer as participant:**  
reveals him/herself as researcher, participates in normal social process but makes no pretence at being participants, does not play a role in the group's happenings
- 4. Complete observer:**  
simply observes without being part of it in any way, present but not known to the group

- observing service process and performances
- customer-staff interactions
- mystery shopping...

Often used in combination with other research methods (e.g. preliminary research) but also a powerful tool in its own right.

# Case Study

- The aim of case studies is to seek to understand the phenomenon by studying single examples:
  - single individuals;
  - communities;
  - whole countries;
  - organisations and companies;
  - places and projects.
- It usually involves a relatively complex, social science issue about which little is known.
- They often involve a number of contrasting cases, but studied in a similar manner.
- They range from small-scale vignettes to major projects.
- The research problem is usually a “how and why?” rather than a “what or how should?”.

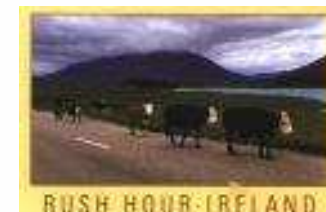
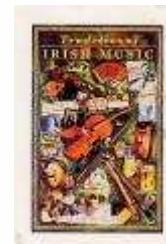
- As research method they can encompass a wide array of techniques: observations, interviews, text/image analysis.
- Case studies are common in tourism:
  - description of spatial change of destinations;
  - management of tourist flows through resort or attraction areas;
  - assessments of physical change due to tourism developments;
  - attitudes of residents towards tourists through the various months of the year in Vermont (Jordan 1980)  
(Jordan spent many periods of time as a participant observer in the village concerned).

- Analysing texts → embraces not just printed material, but also pictures, recorded music, film and television.
- **Analysis include:**
  - literary “reading” of texts,
  - the interpretation of texts (**hermeneutics**),
  - content analysis.
- **Literature:**
  - leisure portrayed in novels, biographies, travel literature
  - reveals insights into leisure at a particular time/particular form of leisure.
- **Film:**
  - role of tourism in the modern world (Cannibal Tours-MacCannell 1993).
  - Disney film and their role in contemporary culture (Rojek 1993).
  - “Piefke-Saga”



## • Postcards (image content analysis):

- Can be studied from different angles: interpretation of the message, interpretation of the picture.
- Dimensions (Cohen 1993, p. 43):
  - beautiful images – aesthetics
  - exotic images - consideration of that which is unfamiliar to the viewer;
  - cute images - a portrayal of familiar traits of sweetness or prettiness designed to elicit a ludic sense of enjoyment;
  - Comic images – designed to generate merriment through exaggeration or incongruence;
  - Neutral images: infrequent in touristic images owing to the symbolic functions of such images.
- Symbols of attitudes – researcher needs to categorise and interpret such symbols.



- are face to face;
- are informal, unstructured or semi-structured.
- The aim is
  - to elucidate the interviewee's point of view;
  - to investigate their beliefs, understandings, experiences and practices.
- This is achieved through generating accounts through talk.





## Definition:

**A focus group is a concentrated and unstructured discussion among a small group of respondents who have something in common.**

- method of gathering ideas and insights (consumer perceptions, preferences, behaviour)
- they are often applied to generate hypotheses that can be further tested quantitatively

## Key Aspects

- informal discussion
- interview protocol
- directed by a moderator (interviewer)
  - guiding the discussion and ensures that all the aspects of the topic are covered
  - ensuring that everyone in the group has their say
  - the interviewer becomes the *facilitator* of a discussion rather than an interviewer as such.
  - assistant moderator (takes notes)
- always recorded, audio or video taped
- sometimes prompts are applied:
  - photographs of places, video extracts, using brochures

- typical session lasts from **1 ½ to 2 hours**
- **6-10 people**
  - usually homogenous group in terms of gender, class, ethnicity...
  - in general, participants should not know each other
- needs to be a match between the researchers topics of interest and the participants ability to discuss those topics
- use of non intimidating **venue**
- success is dependent on the ability of the interviewer to create a friendly and relaxed **atmosphere**

## Advantages of FG Approach:

- relatively easy to set up, relatively inexpensive;
- allow for serendipity - ideas can simply drop “out of the blue”;
- allow for “snowballing”;
- allow for flexibility in the topics covered and the depth with which they are treated;
- some feel more secure in the group than if they were being interviewed alone;
- responses are often more spontaneous and less conventional than they might be in a one-to-one interview.

## **Problems/Challenges with the FG Approach:**

- non-participation of group members;
- not always suitable for sensitive areas of research – there might be a reluctance to share ideas about experiences;
- practical issues, i.e. correct room set-up, adequate recording equipment, accurate transcription;
- difficult to moderate;
- researcher bias – results are influenced by the moderator and the specific direction her/she provides;
- unstructured nature of the responses makes coding, tabulation, and analysis difficult.

# **Planning and Conducting Focus Group Interviews**

- 1. Define the problem, determine objectives**
- 2. Specify the objectives of qualitative research**
- 3. State the objectives/questions to be answered by FG**
- 4. Write a screening questionnaire**
- 5. Develop a moderator's outline**
- 6. Arrange for the interview with the participants**
- 7. Conduct the FG Interviews**
- 8. Review tapes and write transcript**
- 9. Analyse data**
- 10. Summarise the findings and plan follow-up research**

## Definition:

An in-depth interview is a personal interview in which a single respondent is probed by a highly skilled interviewer to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings on a topic.

- used for:
  - getting detailed understanding of complicated behaviour ;
  - discussions of confidential, sensitive, or embarrassing topics;
  - detailed probing of the respondent;
  - interviews with professional people (expert interviews)
  - a topic to be explored as a preliminary stage in planning a larger study, possibly a quantitative study.



## Key Aspects

- an **informal style** is adopted around topics and themes using open-ended questions and answers
  - **checklist** of topics rather than a formal questionnaire
  - structured or unstructured
- this method concentrates on **individual cases** and **personal accounts**
- every interview in a study, although dealing with the same issues, will be different
- individuals may be interviewed more than once
- the in-depth interviewer encourages respondents to talk, asks supplementary questions and asks respondent to explain their answer.
- **30 min – 1 hour**
- **tape-recording** is common, otherwise notes must be taken during the interview or immediately afterwards.

## **Strengths of In-depth Interviews**

- uncover great depth of insights
- generate large amount of data quickly
- rapid immediate responses
- wide variety of info from a range of respondents
- unrestricted in scope and flexible
- allows for immediate follow-up questions and clarification, exploration of meanings – providing greater validity
- sharing of negotiation of understanding
- if used with observation can enable description to be checked against fact

## Limitations and Weaknesses

- interviews involve social interaction, need cooperation for it to work
- impact of social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, class and need for social approval
- interviewees might not tell the truth
- issue of decontextualisation
- interviewers need to have good social skills, i.e. listening, framing the question, style can affect data generated
- generates a mass of data that might be difficult to manipulate
- no more than one interview a day!

## Definition:

Interview with an expert on a certain topic area.

- technique for collecting, analysing and interpreting qualitative information about people's attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and opinions
- an **expert** is
  - often a representative of an organisation/institution
  - person knowledgeable in a certain area/topic
- useful in qualitative research about a topic area which has no established theoretical base or in established areas where the *researcher* happens to know little and wants to "get up to speed"
- often used as part of methodological mix of methods
- not the individual but his/her knowledge is subject of analysis
- limited number of interviews

### **1. Explorative expert interview (convergent interview)**

- used in the early stages of a research project
  - to define the research question
  - to develop an interview guideline
  - for thematic structuring of the field of investigation
  - to generate hypothesis
- relatively unstructured approach
- cyclic series of in-depth interviews

### **2. Systematic expert interview**

- for a systematic and consistent gathering of information on a certain topic
- the expert is considered as an advisor, who has specific knowledge in a particular area and can spontaneously communicate his experience and actions
- relatively structured approach

- 1. Define the research problem, determine objectives**
- 2. Decide how many people to interview and who to interview**
- 3. Arrange for the interview with the participants (time and setting of the interview)**
- 4. Determine interview guideline**
  - opening question (interview guideline)
  - probe questions for the specific information required
- 5. Conduct expert interview**
- 6. Review tapes, transcribe and paraphrase**
- 7. Analyse data**
- 8. Summarise the findings (develop theory) and plan follow-up research**

## A thought!

In this lecture we have examined and considered the usefulness of a range of qualitative methods.

It is always worth remembering that methods and methodologies aren't true or false, good or bad, rather they are **more or less useful dependent upon the aim of the research**. (Silverman, 1993)