

The Tools of the Qualitative Research Trade

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Choosing the right qualitative research method is like choosing the right tool: When trying to cut a plank, a hammer is mostly useless. A key question to ask when attempting to choose the right qualitative research method is thus, *What are you trying to do?* Identifying your goal should help you choose the right method. Remember, however, that (1) your tools will be more useful if carried in the right toolbox (i.e., methodology or approach),¹ (2) your research will be more impactful if you join a scholarly conversation by using theory and relating your work to that of others, and (3) each method has pros and cons.

METHOD	GOAL	SAMPLE QUESTION	ISSUES TO CONSIDER
<p>INTERVIEWS^{2,3} Data: What individuals say in answering an interviewer's questions; notes taken during interviews.</p> 	Discover individual perceptions, experiences, or understandings of a specific topic, situation, or phenomenon.	How do residents working in the intensive care unit perceive the role of palliative care services?	Who should you be interviewing (sample)? Does your interviewer have the right training to elicit rich responses? Is his/her role likely to bias interviewees' responses? Is the topic likely to cause reputational or psychological harm to participants?
<p>FOCUS GROUPS^{2,4} Data: What homogeneous or heterogeneous groups say during facilitated conversations; shared responses to facilitator's questions and to one another's perspectives.</p> 	Explore the range of perspectives on a topic within (and sometimes between) different stakeholder groups.	How do students and faculty members see the undergraduate professionalism curriculum? How is it meeting (or not meeting) their needs?	Is your moderator skilled enough to manage group discussions and different personalities? Is his/her professional role likely to alter participants' responses? Is the topic covered too private for a group discussion? Are hierarchies among group members problematic?
<p>OBSERVATIONS^{2,5} Data: What people do in everyday activities or during planned scenarios or simulations, as recorded in field notes and/or via audio or visual recordings.</p> 	Develop an understanding of actual rather than narrated behavior. Situate behavior in its broader context. Evaluate the impact of a policy on practice.	How are faculty members modeling the CanMEDS Advocacy Role for students?	What kinds of observational data are you interested in—count data, workflow data, social interaction data? Do you have enough time to observe or to train an observer? Do you have access to sites? Do the ethics of your clinical role conflict with the nature of your role as a researcher?
<p>TEXTUAL ANALYSIS^{2,6} Data: What is articulated in key texts identified through purposive sampling. Texts can include anything with text or images.</p> 	Make discourse—the main sociohistorical influences on our world—visible. Explore relationships among people, organizations, and institutions, over time and in a specific place.	How has accreditation been used as an argument to implement new educational interventions since the 1960s?	Are there readily available and legitimate documents to answer your research question? Are you able to and interested in paying close attention to subtle changes in language? Do you have time to read hundreds if not thousands of pages, iteratively develop a coding scheme, and read and code again?

References:

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