



## The Caring Communities Program: Qualitative Research Methods

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Qualitative research involves obtaining textual information. Often qualitative research stands alone, but it can also add depth and meaning to information gathered by quantitative methods. Qualitative research should not be seen as any less rigorous than quantitative research and requires a systematic and a planned approach.

### Interviews

One of the most commonly used tools to obtain qualitative information is the interview. There are different types of interviews, which depend on the sort of information that you are trying to obtain. The information obtained through interviews may be recorded using notes, or they can be taped and later transcribed. For details about interviewing, a useful text is *In-Depth Interviewing* (Minichiello et. al., 1995).

keep to the key themes. Interviews of this kind may not be a one-off event, but may take place over a period of time, each interview adding depth and richness to the information obtained previously.

In palliative care, a good example of this type of interviewing is in the book *Crossing Over: Narratives of Palliative Care* (Barnard et al, 2000). The authors use on-going interviews to supplement their observations (see below) over a period of time with palliative patients in order to let them tell their own stories.

### Structured interviews

Structured interviews use a pre-conceived interview schedule which the interviewer should try and stick to. This technique is useful if an overview of the subject is required from often a large sample of people, rather than a smaller more detailed study.

### Focus groups

A focus group is a structured group interview. It is an exploratory technique that sets out to find a range of opinions about a particular topic (Hawe et. al., 1990). Successful focus group discussions require a facilitator who keeps the conversation moving and ensures that one particular person does not dominate the discussion. It is also important that someone else should take notes of what is said in the meeting. Even if the meeting is being taped it is important to record the interactions and dynamics of the group, and whether some people were more dominant than others in having their opinion heard.

### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews focus on a list of key themes or questions that the interviewer wants the respondent to address. The semi-structured interview does allow for the respondent to add new information but they should attempt to

A useful chapter regarding conducting a successful focus group can be found in Penelope Hawe et al "*Evaluating Health Promotion*".

## **Group discussions**

Group discussions are less formal and structured than focus group discussions. They may for example involve talking to a particular interest group, such as volunteers about their experiences. Small group discussions are a useful way of talking to a range of different groups in a community. For example, in a remote Aboriginal community you may wish to consult with older men, older women, young men and young women as separate groups.

## **Participant observation**

Participant observation is a technique derived from anthropology. It involves the researcher immersing themselves in the everyday lives of a particular group of people, and learning about how they see their world through observing what they do, and how they relate to each other. This sort of research is by necessity long term as it takes time for the researcher to develop relationships of trust with a particular community.

Information is recorded through detailed field notes. Traditionally, participant observation was used as a way of studying societies or cultures that were different to that of the researcher. It often involved living in remote communities and learning a different language. More recently this technique is being used to study sub-groups of Western society. In palliative care, an excellent example of this sort of research is Julia Lawton's *The Dying Process, Patients' experiences of*

*palliative care*' in which she provides a detailed study of a hospice in the UK and the experiences of the patients and staff.

Participant observation has the ability to provide great depth and richness to research, but it is time consuming and resource intensive.

## **What do I do with all the information I have gathered?**

The results of qualitative research will be texts, sometimes neatly defined as in the results from structured interviews, sometimes lengthy and detailed as in field notes. There are many different ways of analyzing this sort of data, but perhaps the easiest is to examine results for key themes. These themes can be coded to help with analysis. For detailed information on how to analyse qualitative data see Neuman, 1997 Chapter 16 "*Analyzing qualitative data*".

It is also a good idea, whatever research methods that you are using, to keep a diary to record chronologically the progress and/or difficulties that you may have encountered along the way.

## **What method should I use?**

The qualitative research methods you use will be determined by:

- the sort of research you are undertaking (for example is it exploratory or does it seek a range of opinions?),
- the resources available to you,
- the time you have; and
- your experience.

Please contact a member of the CHSD team if you require any further assistance.

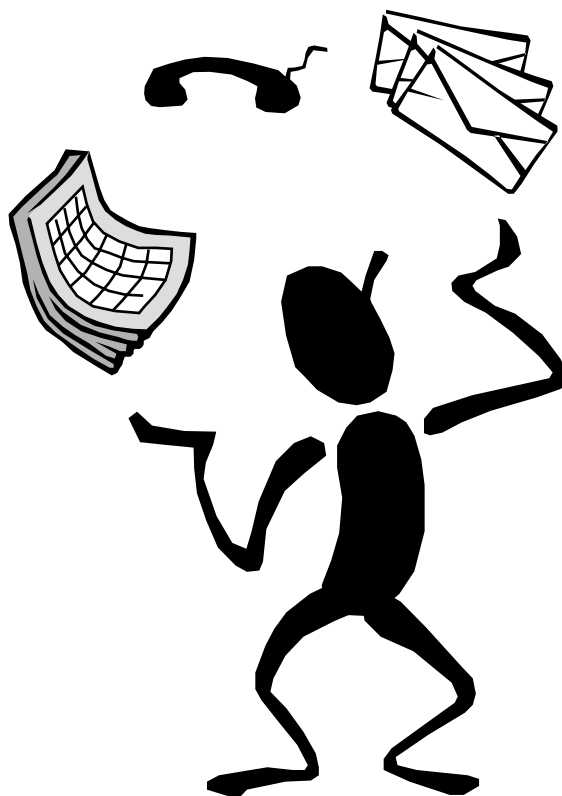
### Recommended reading:

Barnard, D, Towers, A, Boston, P, Lambrinidou, Y, 2000, *Crossing Over Narratives of Palliative Care*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hawe, P, Degeling, D and Hall, J, 1990, "how to run a focus group" in *Evaluating Health Promotion*, MacLennan and Petty Sydney.

Lawton, J, 2000, *The Dying Process, Patients' experiences of palliative care*, London, Routledge.

Neuman, W. L, 1997, *Social Research Methods, Qualitative and Quantitative approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.



### Some thoughts on project management:

- A problem shared is a buck passed.
- A little risk management saves a lot of fan cleaning.
- If you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs, you haven't understood the plan.
- If at first you don't succeed, remove all evidence you ever tried.
- Good project management is not so much knowing what to do and when, as knowing what excuses to give and when.
- If everything is going exactly to plan, something somewhere is going massively wrong.