

Entering the Field

Greetings! Welcome to the screencast on entering the field in qualitative research.

Learning Objectives

The goals for this screencast are as follows:

- Understand what fieldwork is in qualitative research.
- Recognize ethical considerations in conducting fieldwork.
- Differentiate between appropriate terminology for qualitative vs. quantitative fieldwork.
- Determine appropriate action steps for researchers in entering the field.

What is Fieldwork?

**In fieldwork, researchers are working within a natural environment to collect, or generate their data. This means that instead of conducting research in a laboratory like environment, researchers who conduct fieldwork are out in the world working with people in it. So, the field could be a school, a group of people, an organization, or a public library. For qualitative researchers, fieldwork includes conducting observations, interviews, focus groups, etc.

**Fieldwork is how qualitative researchers “generate” their data. In research you hear the term “data collection.” While this term is absolutely correct, I believe the term “data generation” more accurately accounts for the role of the researcher as the instrument, which adds a human, subjective lens to the data “collection” process in qualitative research. To “generate” means that someone or something causes something to arise or come about. Because of the role of the researcher in qualitative research, you are often actually generating new data through your work and interaction with your participants rather than objectively collecting already existing data.

**One of the first considerations for qualitative researchers is how to gain access to the natural environment in which they would like to conduct their research. Because qualitative researchers more often work closely with people while in the field, getting access to a site involves gaining permission by “gatekeepers” that allow a researcher to be there. Flick explains that researchers must ask how they can “secure the collaboration of potential participants” and how they can do so in a way that “actually leads to concrete interviews or other data” (p. 162). Researchers must obtain consent to access a field by institutions and by individual participants. This includes applications to institutional review boards and recruitment with consent by individuals the researcher hopes will be participants (or will give researchers access to those participants). In recruitment, researchers will generally explain the purpose of the study, research questions, and why they would like to work with that specific individual.

**How a researcher presents themselves in the field and to their participants will determine the successful generation of data. How a researcher presents themselves will be determined by the level of participation they plan to have while working in the field. This could range from complete participation to no participation (keeping in mind that qualitative researchers do not strive for a “fly on the wall” role for a variety of reasons including practicality and ethics).

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**In qualitative research, researchers often use purposive sampling to identify a site with participants with whom they would like to work for their study. Purposive sampling is one of several sampling methods used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling is the intentional or purposeful identification of possible participants based on characteristics or experiences the participants supposedly hold. This sampling method is opposed to methods like random sampling that one sees in quantitative studies. Qualitative researchers need to be sure their participants have the experiences they're interested in researching, otherwise data generated with them will not help answering research questions.

**Qualitative researchers will refer to the individuals who participate in their studies as participants rather than subjects. This change in terminology recognizes their more active role in a research project, their part to play in the generation of data, and that qualitative researchers often see themselves as doing research with these individuals rather than on them.

Orientation to the Field

**Once in the field, researchers must orient themselves to being there. This first requires a researcher to determine the role they will play in their fieldwork. They must decide how involved they will be in the scene while in the field? For observations, this means they must determine their level of participation. For interviews, this means researchers must determine the type of interview they will conduct and what their behavior needs to be to reflect this. They must consider how their participants will see and respond to them while in the field and plan to tailor their behavior accordingly. These are just a few of the considerations researchers must make upon entering the field.

**For observations in particular, many of the first few trips to the field will be a time when researchers will orient themselves to it. They will make more general observations and try to get a comprehensive picture of the setting as a whole. They will pay close attention to things that may seem routine and be overlooked by participants in the setting. It is important for a researcher to maintain the viewpoint of an outsider here, even if they are not actually an outsider, so they can keep an open eye to and reflect upon the every day behaviors of actors within the setting.

**While an outsider view is helpful in the beginning of the study, Flick explains that the goal of a researcher is to obtain the insider's view to the phenomenon under study. This means, that it's a researcher's goal to become an insider (if not in reality then in a metaphorical way) throughout the course of a study. He explains that the knowledge a researcher wants is the inside perspective, "to understand the individual's viewpoint or the organizational principles of social groups from a member's perspective" (p. 167).

**At times researchers will experience barriers to entering the field. There are gatekeepers who don't want to give access, activities that will remain hidden regardless of the role of the researcher, or participants who do not feel comfortable being in a specific study. In these cases, the researcher respects the wishes of the players in the field and works with rather than around these barriers. At times concealment of the researcher's purpose and goals of fieldwork can be appropriate, but only in very specific research circumstances.

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**When experiencing these barriers, when researching sensitive topics, when working with children, adolescents, or marginalized populations, or in other situations, researchers use a variety of strategies to gain access to the field. These include, but aren't limited to:

- **Spending extended time in the field before research begins so that possible participants become comfortable with researchers as people. Building rapport this way enables potential participants to learn about researchers themselves and become comfortable with their presence before deciding whether to participate in the research or not.
- **Gaining permission from authority figures of people with power in the field. These individuals can help vouch for the researchers and encourage potential participants to feel comfortable participating in a study
- **Snowball sampling (also called snowballing) is a process where researchers use current participants to recommend future participants. Many researchers use this strategy to identify potential participants who have had the experiences the researchers are interested in studying. There are pros and cons to this method and researchers must understand these before following this course.

Ethics in Fieldwork

**To ethically conduct fieldwork, the researcher must keep in mind and work to safeguard the rights, interests, and sensitivities of their participants (i.e. those whom you are observing). You must keep your participants' interests in mind and remember you have a responsibility to them as a researcher. "When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals come first" (Spradley, 1980, p. 21).

**You must be clear to communicate the objectives of your research and your interests and expectations as a researcher. Deception is only appropriate in very specific research circumstances.

**You must also work to protect the privacy of your participants and work to keep their identities anonymous or confidential. "These strictures apply to the collection of data by means of cameras, tape recorders, and other data-gathering devices, as well as data collected in face-to-face interviews or in participant observation" (p. 23).

**Researchers work to never exploit their participants for personal gain and work to treat each participant in their project fairly.

**Finally, written reports and collected data should be made available to participants should they wish to review them.

References

How to enter (and then leave) the field is one of the first considerations researchers must make. They must decide where they will go, who they will contact to gain access, how they will explain themselves and their study, and how they will follow ethical conduct while there.

Flick, U. (2019). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE.

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Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Wadsworth Thompson Learning.