

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING WITH LGBTQ COMMUNITIES

Qualitative research (QR) seeks an in-depth understanding of human lives. Rather than focusing on numerical data, such as statistics, QR examines people's beliefs, emotions, cultures, social movements and experiences. QR uses interpretive analysis and draws upon textual, visual, audio and/or audio-visual data.

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

-Albert Einstein

WHY DO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH LGBTQ COMMUNITIES?

- The personal stories obtained in qualitative research can be powerful tools with which to address health disparities among LGBTQ people. Personal narratives enable policy makers to relate to LGBTQ health issues. The combination of qualitative evidence and statistical data has been found to be more persuasive than either type of evidence on its own (1).
- As a researcher, qualitative studies provide opportunities to go into the LGBTQ community, meet with people, have the privilege of being trusted with very personal stories, and experience the deep learning that can come from these opportunities.
- From a social justice framework: qualitative research is an essential tool to give voice to stories that have been suppressed or silenced, and to illustrate the complex impact of oppression on individual and LGBTQ community health.

WHEN TO USE QUALITATIVE METHODS

- When you want to *generate* a hypothesis or a theory (in contrast to quantitative methods, which usually involve hypothesis *testing*). The insight of expert informants (those participants whose experience is relevant to your question) can form the foundation for theory generation.
- When the quantitative tools available are inadequate (e.g., when instruments to measure relationship satisfaction presume heterosexual marriage).
- When the experience you want to study is too complex to capture through statistics. Qualitative interviews can capture the complexity and nuance of LGBTQ lives, which can be very difficult to reflect through quantitative statistics.
- When you want to give voice to stories or experiences that have often been silenced through systemic oppression.
- When your goal is to collect very detailed information from a few people (vs. limited information from many people).

KEY APPROACHES TO QUALITATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH

- Grounded theory emerges from sociology. The goal of a grounded study is to develop a general, abstract theory that is firmly grounded in the experience of the participants. Grounded theory studies offer answers as to *why* something is happening.
- Researchers use grounded theory to explain social processes, actions and interactions, while studying them in the environments in which they take place. This can enable us to examine homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, cissexism, monosexism, or heterosexism in terms of how it impacts people in their daily lives. For example, one recent study used interviews and focus groups with bisexual people explain the interaction of social, interpersonal, and individual factors in determining the mental health of bisexual people in Ontario (2).
- Analysis of grounded theory data typically involves open, axial and selective coding to develop the conceptual framework. In open coding, topics discussed in the interviews are identified and categorized (e.g., biphobia, social networks, isolation). In axial coding connections are made between these categories, and a general framework for understanding the subject is developed (e.g., family support and community support are grouped together under the meta-category “social support”). Selective coding identifies a central category—the core to which the other categories relate (e.g., isolation, which is exacerbated by biphobia and buffered by social networks). The core category forms the foundation of a grounded theory study (3).
- Phenomenology emerges from philosophy, psychology, and sociology, and uses detailed description and close analysis of individual *lived experience* to capture the meaning and common features of an experience or event. This can help us to understand the experiences of LGBTQQ people in their cultural and social specificity.
- Researchers use phenomenology to understand experiences through the descriptions and stories people tell about their lives. Phenomenological studies focus on memories, images and the meaning these have for the participants.
- Phenomenology can be *interpretive* or *descriptive*. Descriptive phenomenology identifies common experiences across interviews to answer a question about *what* is happening, without substantial interpretation by the researcher (i.e., a relatively literal interpretation of participants’ own words). A 2011 study used phenomenology to describe the lived experiences of bisexual people accessing mental health services in Ontario (4). In interpretive phenomenology, the researcher draws out meanings of individual lived experiences that may not be consciously perceived by the participants’ themselves (e.g., the researcher identifies ageism at work in the way several bisexuals report having been treated by their doctor, although the participants themselves reported noticing only biphobia).
- Analysis of phenomenological data can involve a similar inductive analytical approach as in grounded theory analysis, or can involve identification of “meaning units” (key words from the interviews, e.g., “resist,” “organize,” or “fight”) which are then organized into categories (e.g., activism) (5).
- These methodological traditions (grounded theory, phenomenology) can also be approached through the lens of anti-oppression theory, such as critical race theory or queer theory, and principles of community-based research can also be applied.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING AN INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Begin with an opening question that breaks the ice and builds rapport between interviewer and interviewee, but also provides important historical context for the interview. Information about a person's relevant history enables the interviewer to ask effective probe questions later on in the interview. A question used in a study of LGBTQQ people who had used assisted human reproduction (AHR) services was, "How did you come to the decision that you wanted to have children?"
- Follow up with 4-5 open-ended questions, such as, "What did you imagine [the AHR service] would be like?" Include probe questions that can be used as needed to draw out additional details (e.g., "Were you looking forward to your first visit? Feeling apprehensive? Did you have any specific worries or concerns?").
- Good interviewing involves picking up on cues. This may include sensing when the participant is holding back and needs to be encouraged, or asking about experiences that seem connected to you, but which have not been identified as such by the participant.
- End with a question that leaves participants with a sense of closure, but also try to close the interview on a positive note (e.g.: "Based on your experiences, if you had five minutes with someone who could really make changes in the assisted human reproduction system, what would you recommend to them?").
- The purpose of the interview guide is to ensure that key areas get covered during the conversation with the participant. However, the interview guide is *only* a guide. Participants may bring in topics or experiences you didn't expect, and these can sometimes be the most informative parts of the interview.
- Holding the project's research questions in your mind as you interview will help you to best apply the guide. Unlike quantitative surveys, qualitative interview guides may change over time as new themes emerge in the research.
- Seek feedback on your interview guide from members of LGBTQ communities. There are many LGBTQ perspectives and experiences that can inform an interview.
- Be aware that participants will answer our questions as they anticipate we want them to. In an LGBTQ-focused study, for example, if we ask about their "identity", they will presume we mean LGBTQ even if that's not our only interest. If you want to know about intersecting identities you will need to indicate this specifically.
- Communicate your interest to the participant through gestures such as open body language, eye contact, nodding, or encouraging vocal expressions. Be aware that such gestures may be culturally specific, so know something about how your participants understand respectful listening.
- Ask participants to clarify terms they use (e.g. poly, kinky) as they may mean something different to them than they do to you.

FOCUS GROUPS

- Focus groups are interviews with several people (usually 5-8). These group interviews reveal *how* people think, not just *what* people think. A focus group interview is a good choice if you want to examine the values, attitudes or experiences of a subculture or group.
- Focus groups can be useful for helping people to express and clarify their views. For this reason they can be helpful for including shy or low-response participants. As well, because focus groups are discussions, they are a good choice if the population you are studying has low literacy rates.
- Focus groups offer an opportunity to analyze relations of power among people. Researchers are able to examine how opinions are formed within groups, how ideas are challenged, and how authority is claimed.
- A focus group interview is a good choice if you are generating hypotheses, determining what your survey will measure, assessing the relevance of your research question for a particular population, or identifying the vocabulary your participants use.
- Focus groups work best when the group is invested in the topic and when the discussion questions are open-ended. If the group is too large or too small, participants may not feel free to speak.
- Power imbalances (e.g., managers/employees, parents/children) and differences (e.g., gender, age, race etc.) may limit the conversation. Researchers can reduce participants' fears or anxieties by making sure group members share key similarities and by avoiding power imbalances.

“INSIDER” & “OUTSIDER” INTERVIEWING

- “Insider” researchers share key identities or experiences with study participants, and may belong to the same communities. Insider researchers may use their inside knowledge to shape the interview questions, probe for deeper meaning during interviews, and may be well-positioned to understand the significance of the data they collect.
- The primary advantage of “insider” research is that shared experiences promote a sense of trust on the part of participants. Particularly for communities that have experienced discrimination and pathologization in the research context (including LGBTQ communities), shared identity or community belonging helps assure people that the intentions of the research are good.
- There are also challenges associated with doing research as an insider. In small communities and/or in community-based research, interviewers will often know the participants. The burden on the interviewer to maintain participant confidentiality is therefore higher, since they may move in the same circles as participants. Interviewers require thorough training and support regarding confidentiality. It is good practice to disclose the name of the interviewer when scheduling the interview, and allow people the option to be interviewed by someone else (usually the Principal Investigator on the study) if they prefer.
- A potential disadvantage to insider interviewing is that participants may not state the obvious, or the interviewer might assume someone else's experience is essentially

similar to their own when it is not (e.g., if the participant's experience is also shaped by an another identity that the interviewer does not share).

- Outsider research about LGBTQ communities is often viewed with suspicion, due to numerous examples of previous outsider research that ultimately resulted in pathologization of LGBTQ identities (most particularly for trans people).
- An essential first step in conducting research with communities as an “outsider” (i.e., someone who does not share a key identity with the study participants) is to build trust with the community. Consider collaborating with LGBTQ partners who are known and trusted. These partners can help you to ensure whether your research question is relevant to LGBTQ people, whether the language you are using in your interview or focus group guides is appropriate, and can help in establishing credibility and trust within the community.
- Outsider researchers should consider whether they have sufficient community knowledge for the interpretation of qualitative data about LGBTQ people or experiences (or experiences of other communities to which the researcher is an outsider). Since outsider researchers are often unfamiliar with community norms, values, and language, misinterpretation is often a possibility. Involving LGBTQ in the data analysis can help prevent misinterpretation.
- Even as LGBTQ-identified researchers, we are almost always outsiders in relation to some important aspects of our participants' identities and experiences (e.g., with respect to racialization, social class, experience with the mental health system, to name only a few possibilities). Any engagement in research as an outsider requires critical reflection about how power imbalances between the researcher and the community or individuals being researched will be attended to throughout the research process.

COMPENSATION

- Research participants are sharing their time and expertise with you, and it is appropriate to compensate them. Compensation also reduces the burden participants may experience by participating in qualitative research. In most cases, compensation is a token amount, so that the monetary gain does not undercut participant's ability to give informed consent.
- Compensation varies widely, and depends on the type of research being done, the budget available, the type of participants involved, and the time and effort being compensated. In general, compensation may include cash or gift cards in exchange for interview time, as well as travel reimbursement (e.g., TTC tokens).
- Not all participants will want or need compensation. You may wish to enable participants to donate their compensation to an LGBTQ charity or service organization if they prefer.

ANALYZING AND INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE DATA

- Unlike quantitative analysis, there are many different approaches to qualitative data analysis, even within a single tradition (e.g., phenomenology).
- Although general principles to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative data analysis also apply, researchers working with LGBTQ (and other marginalized) communities have an added responsibility to ensure that their analysis and interpretation reflect community realities and will not serve to further marginalize LGBTQ people. This may mean that contentious or potentially pathologizing findings undergo substantial community consultation to ensure the researcher's interpretation is grounded in the data and to determine the safest way to communicate and disseminate the results.
- It is important for researchers, especially those who are doing “outsider” research, to use terminology that the LGBTQ community uses and understands. Be respectful about people's choice of pronouns, sexual identity terms, and community affiliations.

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