
UNIT 3 DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The unit will discuss data collection tools which are primarily used for carrying out qualitative research. Often, you may see researchers taking multi-method approach to conduct qualitative research. For example, researchers have been employing ethnography or participant observation in combination with unstructured interviews for qualitative data collection. Therefore, the process of qualitative research is described to be complex as its data collection tools are varied in nature.

This unit will discuss oral history, case study, and life history, simple and participant observation, key informant interviews and focus group discussions as different tools that are employed to collect data in qualitative research process. Let us have a look at the objectives of reading this unit.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe different types of qualitative data collection methods;
- Explain steps involved in using these tools; and
- Discuss various contexts in which these tools have been put to use.

3.3 UNDERSTANDING DATA COLLECTION TOOLS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

To begin with, let us discuss what is understood by ‘tools’ in research. **Tools are simply referred to as techniques or methods for eliciting information from the respondents.** Without using the tools no empirical research can be completed. Each tool is used in a particular situation and has particular relevance. Sometimes more than one tool is employed to enrich the data.

Bryman (2007, p.8) describes five types of research methods associated with qualitative research. These are as follows;

- Ethnography
- Qualitative Interviewing
- Focus Groups
- Language-based Approaches
- Collection and Analysis of Texts and Documents

However, in this unit, we will be discussing those tools of qualitative data collection that do not have reference in the Unit 2 of this Block (Qualitative Data Sources) because these are used both as sources and tools of qualitative research.

In the following section we start with oral history as a tool of data collection.

3.4 ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is as old as antiquity. The usual practice of documenting oral history by oral historians is by preserving the **insights not found in printed sources.** In the process of documenting oral history, the objective is not to interpret, but to **record factual evidence**, thereby creating primary documents from which historians can reconstruct past. Oral history is one of the most important analytical tools available to researches today.

Methodology

The oral history **methodology** is based on a number of academic disciplines including history, sociology, anthropology, law, journalism and psychology. Each of these disciplines has contributed important insights into the art of interviewing and has enriched the methods used by oral historians.

The methodology entails three distinct tasks that are discussed in the following paragraphs.

- **Preliminary Research:** It involves a number of inter-related steps:
 - i) The first step is **literature search** that is identification and research of existing secondary and primary historical records. It involves preparation of a historical file containing materials from sources relating to the life experiences of the subjects and time period to be covered in the interviews.
 - ii) The second step in this is preparing **biographical** file, collecting information about each subject to be interviewed, from sources which includes newspaper articles, book reviews, journal articles and other related material such as entries from biographical dictionaries. Based on this research, a researcher determines the order in which the subjects should be interviewed for recording oral history.
- **Designing the Treatment:** In the process of designing a treatment, an overview interview is conducted to define the subject's involvement in the issues under investigation and to identify those areas, where he or she can shed new light.
- **Writing a Treatment for the Subject:** Treatment for the subject is writing based on the preliminary research and by using the learning from the first interview. The treatment **contains a list of the topics to be covered in the interview process**. In projects involving more than a single interview, each interview is designated as a chapter or is written as a point of distinct insight into the issue and as part of the overall study.

The treatment helps the respondent prepare for each recording session and enhances the accuracy of the testimony while preserving the spontaneity of the interview. While helping to give form to the interviews, **treatment is not a fixed series of questions, but rather a working outline**, which can be modified to include new material introduced by the respondent in the course of interview process.

The planning for the interview has to take into account certain key aspects such as, scheduling the interview. It should not be more than one interview a week. This will give the respondent time to think about the events covered that week and to prepare for the next session. And in the process, he or she will inevitably think of new facts that had been forgotten, or they may realize some correction and would like to amend.

It is a good practice to start each interview session with a question that will allow the respondent to add new information.

It is important to know that prior to the interview, questions should be prepared and memorised. The practice of taking questions into a recording

session usually results in the interviewer resorting to reading questions and this leads to loss of eye contact and if done in excess can produce doubts in the respondent's mind.

In this regard, it is advisable that line of inquiry should address points contained in the treatment for that particular interview. This will help in restraining the respondent from going off on a tangent and drift away from the set agenda.

- Questions for the oral history interview may be prepared using a **funnel approach**, that is, always moving from the general to the specific.
- Questions should be administered in a clear way, allowing inclusion of only one concept or issue in each question.
- Technical jargons, slangs and colloquialisms may be avoided and the questions may be kept simple and direct.
- Questions should be phrased in such a way that it may not suggest a response or presuppose a certain response.
- Use of adjectives, adverbs should be avoided in the questionnaire.
- Use of words with vaguely defined meanings, such as population, environment etc. may be avoided as they convey different meanings to different people.
- Posing hypothetical questions to the respondents may also be avoided.

The Interview Process: The interview process under the oral history recording involves the following steps to make the documentation process more inclusive and detailed. These are:

- Remind the narrator (respondent) of the appointment
- Practice with the tape recorder
- Record a formal introduction
- Setting up the equipment
- Establish rapport with the respondent
- Taking notes during the session
- Turning on the tape-recorder
- Closing the interview
- Verification

Though the methodology is simple, its use according to the relevance of the issue becomes complex, if the steps under the documenting process is not followed appropriately. To ensure this, one has to read some work on oral history. Some of the works on oral history are given below:

- Julie Jones-Eddy (1992). *Homesteading Women: An oral history of Colorado (1890-1950)* New York: Maxwell Macmillan International.
- Ruth Edmonds Hill (1991). *The Black Women Oral History Project*. Westport CT: Meckler.

Activity:

After reading any research done using oral history as a tool, enlist the process discussed in this text.

After reading how oral history serve as a tool of data collection, we will now read about another important method or tool of gathering data in qualitative research.

3.5 CASE STUDY

Johanson (2003) has explained that a case study is expected to capture the complexity of a single case and the methodology for this has been developed within the social sciences. This is applied not only in the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics, but also in practice-oriented fields such as environmental studies, social work, and education and business studies

The case study should have a ‘case’, which is the object of study. The ‘case’ should be a complex functioning unit, to be investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods, and it should be contemporary in status.

Robert Stake points out that crucial to case study research are not the methods of investigation, but that object of study is a case:

“As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used”. (Robert Stake, 1998, p. 64)

Other researchers, such as **Robert Yin** (1994), place more emphasis on the method and the techniques that constitute a case study. The inclusive definition expounded by Stake emphasizes ‘interest in individual cases’.

Case study method combines different methods with the purpose of illuminating a case from different angles, to triangulate by combining methodologies. In this regard, **case study could be said to be a meta-method.**

A case study focuses on one case, but simultaneously takes into account the context and so encompass many variables and qualities. A prerequisite of the development of case study is focus on contemporary events.

Do you know what is a case? Read about it in the ensuing paragraphs.

- **What is a case?**

The concept of case is not well defined and remains a subject of debate. The case may be relatively bounded object or a process, it may be theoretical, empirical, or both .

Box No. 3.1

At a minimum, a case is a phenomenon specific to time and space. The kind of case on which a case study focuses may change over time. It may change both in the hands of the researcher and in the hands of researcher's audiences (Ragin and Becker, 1992).

- **History of case study methodology/tool**

The first generation of case studies appeared around 1990, initially within the discipline of anthropology. It emerged from early accounts of journeys, systematic investigations of other cultures in the form of field studies, with participant observation as the predominant method of data collection.

Another source of case study methodology has been provided by descriptions of individuals within medicine, social work and psychology, often called “case work” or “case history”. The first generation of case studies culminated in the **Chicago School of Sociology**, in which the anthropologist’s field study method was practised on contemporary society in the University surroundings.

The second generation of case studies emerged as **Grounded Theory** (You have earlier read about it in Unit 2 of this Block). This methodology emerged from the qualitative field study methods from the Chicago School of Sociology in the form of quantitative methods of data analysis. The result was an inductive methodology that was based on using detailed procedures to analyse data. Case study methodology has developed in the direction of eclecticism and pragmatism. To quote Michael Quinn Patton,

“A paradigm of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality”. (Patton, 2002, p. 39)

- **Features of Case Study Methodology**

Unlike the first generation of case study research, the aim of second generation has been to make it more explicit. One of the important features of case study methodology is **triangulation**, which provides a way of ensuring the validity of case study research. Normally, data collection methods are triangulated; in addition to this, data sources, theory, or investigators might also be triangulated.

The essence of case study methodology is triangulation, the combination on different level of techniques, methods and strategies, or theories. The division between history and case study is often uncalled for when the case is an artefact. Case studies with a stronger methodological influence from historical research will probably develop historical case studies in which case study methodology and history combine.

Selection of the case for the study may be done by doing an in-depth study of the case with an intrinsic interest in the case as such and the researcher should have no interest in generalizing his or her findings.

The study of an individual case due to its uniqueness is referred to as intrinsic case study - the study of a case as an instrument to describe any issue is referred as instrumental case study, and when more than one case is studied, it is referred as **collective case study** (Stake, 1995 cited in Creswell).

What is important to an intrinsic case study is a purposefully or analytically selected case. A case may be purposefully selected because of being, for instance, information rich, critical, revelatory, unique or extreme (Stake 1995, Patton 2002).

Let us discuss an example of a qualitative case study.

The case study here, describes the impact of Self Help Group formation on women of a particular village. There can be several parameters that qualify this study as a case study.

- The researcher may identify any one Self Help Group or women collectives as the case.
- The case is bound by time and place.
- The researcher may use multiple sources of data collection to provide an in-depth and detailed description about women's empowerment through Self Help Group formation.
- The researcher may spend considerable amount of time to describe the context that is inclusive of physical, social, economic or cultural factors within which women achieve a sense of empowerment as a group.

The following section will acquaint you better with this tool by reading about the salient features of a case study.

Creswell (1998) describes case study with the following features;

- Case study can be a programme, an event, activities or individuals.
- The study is bound by time and place.
- It employs multiple sources including observation, interviews, audio-visual material, documents and reports to elicit information.
- The physical, social, economic or political setting is important for studying a case.
- It is recommended to choose a case which is promising and useful.
- The data collection is based on multiple sources of information.
- Holistic analysis (description of the entire Case), embedded analysis (description of any aspect of the case), analysis of the context of the case, within-case analysis (description of the case followed by themes) or cross-case analysis(thematic description across the cases) can be used to analyse the data.

Every case study needs to be based on a conceptual framework, therefore, a small set of research questions need to be organised around the case study. Questions need not be informational in nature, for example, who has formed a particular Self Help Group, but the questions need to be framed in relation to the themes or issues. The researcher often faces challenges while selecting the key issue in the enquiry.

Identification of the key issues helps in the proper planning of the study and facilitate various activities while conducting a case enquiry. In many studies, there are no clear steps to follow. Sometimes, a researcher documents his/her initial observation and continue to work on the issues till the end of the study. Team formation is a requirement for conducting a case study as responsibilities can be divided among its members. It is advisable to identify which parts to be studied and which expects to be excluded from the present study. The task of identification of issues is normally assigned to the young members in the team and each one generally, write his/her part in the case study report. Other team members need to study the write-ups critically to identify the data gap in the study.

Here is an example for you to read and learn of how to write a Case Study.

Lighting a Billion Lives (LaBL) Initiative of TERI**Step 1**

Aim: The case study aims at exploring the participation of women and men in the community based renewable energy project.

Step2

Scope: The study was carried out in six villages spreading over Virat Nagar, Khandar and Sawai Madhupur block.

Step 3

Team Management: With the commencement of the project, research team was deputed on the project site on a full-time basis.

Step 4

Design : The social outcome of the case study can be discussed on the basis of women's economic empowerment, freedom from violence and the improvement in their health status.

Source: TERI Report on LaBL

While narrating a case of women's economic empowerment and capturing it through a case study, you will see how this tool can be helpful while carrying out qualitative research. Look at the case of Rohitashi Devi, who is a middle aged Gurjar woman, married with five children. The main criteria for choosing her as Lighting a Billion Lives (LaBL) entrepreneur were due to her low literacy level and meagre source of income. The decision to be an energy entrepreneur was supported by her family members. She is earning Rs.2/- per solar lantern (rental) and her children are supporting her in renting out the lantern and maintaining the register. As a woman entrepreneur, she is an example of a successful village level micro-entrepreneur in the village. (Source: TERI, a draft report)

Check Your Progress:

- i) What is a case? Write its main features.

ii) What is meant by ‘treatment of a subject’?

In the next session you will read about another tool that is important in collecting data in qualitative research.

3.6 LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH

The term ‘life history research’ is used here to refer to the collection and interpretation of personal histories or oral testimonies, collected during an interview process, for the purpose of understanding. Robert explains,

“the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future”. (Roberts, 2002, p. 1)

In the past three decades, interest in life history research - the collection and interpretation of personal histories or testimonies - in the social sciences has continually grown (Roberts, 2002). For some, life history research reflects a turn away from objectivity and a privileging of subjectivity and positionality. For others, life histories provide a rich source of data that enable researchers to explore the life course and to examine the relationships between cause and effect, and agency and structure.

In the social sciences, this shift, and the surge of interest in the life history method, can be attributed to a number of factors, which Roberts (2002, pp. 4-5) outlines in the following way;

- A rejection of positivism (the idea that social sciences can uncover empirical reality/truth through standardized methodologies).
- A growing interest in the life course.
- An increased concern with lived experience and how to best reveal it.
- A rise in the popularity of qualitative research and disillusionment with static approaches to data collection.

Life history research, which has its strongest roots in sociology, is used in a wide variety of disciplines including feminist studies, psychology, history, and literary and cultural studies. Feminist scholars employ the method primarily to uncover the diversity of women's experiences and to project women's voices into areas where they have previously been ignored (Ojermark, 2007).

In the more traditional view, life histories are seen as useful primarily at the 'exploratory' stage of research where information is scarce and conceptualisation is limited. Similarly, it is seen as a valuable complement to larger studies as it can provide detail, and bolster findings from other forms of research. Use of life histories in conjunction with other quantitative and qualitative methodologies is the most common approach adopted by researchers who seek to influence policy makers. Life histories can be used either alone or in conjunction with other methods.

The life history approach has the potential to deliver researchers with powerful insights. Like other approaches, it confronts researchers with choices (research design, interviewing, analysis, and dissemination of findings) and a corresponding set of challenges.

In the box given below we discuss some terminologies that are commonly used while dealing with life history as research tool.

Box No. 3.4

Terminologies in Life History

In the following section you will read about terms that are commonly used with regards to life history.

Biographical research: Research undertaken on individual lives employing auto biographical documents, interviews or other sources and presenting accounts in various forms (e.g. in terms of editing, written, visual or oral presentation, and degree of researcher's narration and reflexivity).

Ethnography: Written account of a culture or group collected as a member of that group or by part of that cultural identity.

Family history: The systematic narrative and research of past events relating to a specific family or families.

Narrative: A story, having a plot and existence separate from life of the teller. Narrative is linked with time as a fundamental aspect of social action. Narratives provide the organization for our actions and experiences, since we experience life through conceptions of the past, present and future.

Oral history: Personal recollections of events and their causes and effects. Also refers to the practice of interviewing individuals on their past experiences of events with the intention of constructing an historical account.

Case history: History of an event or social process, not of a person in particular.

Case study: Analysis and record of a single case.

Life history: Account of a life, based on interviews and conversation. The life history is based on the collection of a written or transcribed oral account requested by a researcher. The life story is subsequently edited, interpreted and presented in a number of ways, often in conjunction with other sources. Life histories may be

- topical, focusing on only one segmented portion of a life, or
- complete, attempting to tell the full details of a life as recollected.

Life story: The account of a person's story of his or her life, or a segment of it, as told to another person. It is usually quite an extensive account across the length of life, but may refer to a period or any experience/ aspect of the life experience.

Narrative inquiry: Similar to 'biographical research', or 'life history research', this term has a loose frame of reference for a subset of qualitative research that uses personal narratives as the basis of research. 'Narrative' refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a personal unity by means of a plot.

Testimonies: The first-person account of a real situation that reflects repression and marginalization.

3.6.1 Analysis of Life Histories

Analysis of life histories enables a researcher to learn the circumstances, in which individual agency and structural conditions meet and interact, and how changes occur in a period of life time. Documenting life histories can be an empowering form of social research, because it privileges voices

often excluded in other forms of research, as it reflects personal and social life that this method presents, which are not unmediated, but are communicated to a given audience by the researcher who collected the material (Riessman, 2001. (cited in Ojermark, 2007).

Life histories are most appealing when presented as a story, with a beginning, middle and the end. However, the oral reconstruction of one's life, often narrated over a series of interviews and under a variety of circumstances, is not always expressed in a logical or coherent manner. Moreover, issues of memory, truthfulness (validity), impact of researcher on the respondent(s) etc., all of this makes this tool difficult to handle by a novice researcher.

In the following section you will read about a useful way to discern between the most common approaches to the analysis of life histories.

- **Narrative:** The emphasis in this approach is on the active construction of life stories through the interplay between interviewer and the interviewee. The finished text is the result of the collaborative project. The informant's viewpoint is treated as a unique perspective, mediated by social context. Analysis is of the interview itself, or the informant's view of reality, the themes that emerge from the narrative, how they reconstruct the past and its meaning, all of this involves the microanalysis of the text to get at the perceptive and contextual nature of 'reality'.
- **Realist (inductive):** This approach uses grounded theory techniques of interviewing. Researchers begin with a hypothesis and through a series of interviews produce facts that will be incorporated into theory. Interviews go in series or rounds, starting with unfocused interviews. Once generalizations from the first are drawn, researchers return with more specific questions. Interviews stop at the point of saturation when no new ideas are generated and the theory has been supported. Analysis takes the form of categorizing the information gathered into 'building blocks' from which theory is constructed. This information is then validated against further empirical material transcripts or new interviews.
- **Neo-positivist:** This approach validates pre-existing theory against empirical reality. Previous work or a literature review on the topic of interest generates the form of the interview and the questions that will guide it. The aim is to fill gaps in the research or to provide a more holistic or nuanced perspective to phenomena. Theory is generated during research through an ongoing interrelation between a systematic data collection and data analysis. This approach depends on the data collected for theory building, rather than on existing theoretical approaches .

3.6.2 Matrix of Presentation Styles

The matrix given below the text lays out in brief some of the ways that the findings from life history interviews can be presented and disseminated. The type of matrix prepared depends on the audience, the researcher intends to reach.

Studies that are directed at an academic audience are less intent on legitimating their work as ‘truth’ or fact-based, but are more interested in the subjective ‘truths’ of interviewees. In such studies, the analysis of life stories takes up the bulk of the work. Others, seeking to influence a range of policy makers, tend to avoid lengthy renditions of the interview text. They display the findings in a way that is more accessible to a wider audience, such as by using text boxes or graphical representations.

The neo-positivist and realist methods present their findings in ways that are more accessible to the policy makers that researchers wish to inform and persuade. This often takes the form of thematic text boxes, short summaries, using a single case to illustrate larger issues, or presenting information graphically.

Lastly, the use of life histories or anecdotal life sketches that are common in the publications of NGOs and development agencies are used to add a ‘human quality’ to the research. This evokes compassion and understanding in order to persuade and influence their main audience, the general public.

Matrix for Presentation Styles

Types of Presentation	Sample Size	Approach to Collection	Approach to Data Storage and Analysis	Audience
Narrative Analysis				
Text Boxes				
Single Person/ household Focus				
Testimonies				
Graphics				

In the past two decades, studying individuals using life history research has become a prominent qualitative method. This brings empiricism and has gained prominence as a new field of study. Its use in multitude of ways has spanned across great many disciplines and sub-disciplines. It is likely that no shared approach (theoretically, methodologically or in regards to a framework for interpretation and presentation) is likely to emerge in the near future. However, as Roberts notes,

“One of the features of current biographical research is a pragmatic eclecticism in pursuing the collection, interpretation, and presentation of lives”. Roberts (2002, p 169)

While this characterization may be identified by some as exposing a relative lack of theoretical and methodological rigour in the method, others see great strengths in an approach that encourages such openness and flexibility in pursuing research and presenting findings.

Box No. 3.5

Recap:

- *Secondary research to choose a life history.*
- *Define the subject and methods of data collection.*
- *Use appropriate steps to avoid generalizations.*
- *Observe and record the uniqueness.*
- *Compile information using the suggested steps.*
- *Present using the matrix given on the previous page.*

After reading about history, terminologies, presentation styles and analysis of life histories, take up the following activity to get the grasp of the nuances discussed.

Activity:

Read ‘Lilavati’s Daughter: The Women Scientists of India’, Edited by Rohini Godbole and Ram Ramaswamy. Choose a Case Study and identify the steps taken to collect life history information.

In the next section, you will read about another important and useful tool of data collection in qualitative research which is very useful for carrying out empirical research in the field of women and gender studies.

3.7 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

A very useful and commonly employed tool of data collection in qualitative research is Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

The focus group technique is a method of interviewing that involves at least four interviewees. Focus group typically emphasizes a specific theme or topic that is explored in depth. The focus group practitioner is practically interested in the ways individuals discuss a certain issue as members of the group, rather than as individuals.

Most focus group researchers undertake their work within the traditions of qualitative research. Focus group discussion as a tool explicitly reveals, how the group participants view the issues with which they are conducting research.

Box No. 3.6

The focus group method is a form of group interview in which there are several participants in addition to the moderator. There is an emphasis in the questioning a particular fairly tightly, defined topic; and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning.

As such, the focus group contains elements of two methods: the group interview, in which several people discuss a number of topics, and what has been called focused interview, in which interviewees are selected because they are known to have been involved in a particular situation and are asked about the involvement.

3.7.1 Importance of FGD in Qualitative Research

A popular method among the researchers, who examine the ways in which people in conjunction with one another develops the topics in which the researcher is interested. The technique allows the researcher to develop an understanding about why people feel the way they do. The focus group approach offers the opportunity of allowing people to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view, i.e. any individual may want to voice their disagreement or agreement to something that he or she probably would not have thought of without the opportunity of hearing the views the of others. These possibilities mean that focus groups may also be very helpful in the elicitation of a wide variety of different views in relation to a particular issue.

In focus groups participants are able to bring to the fore, issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant. Individuals will often argue with each other and challenge each other's view. This process of arguing means that the researchers may stand a chance of ending up with more realistic accounts of what people think because they are forced to reflect and possibly revise their views.

This technique offers a researcher the opportunity to study ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it. It is a central tenet of theoretical positions like **symbolic interactionisms** that the process coming to terms with social phenomena is not undertaken by individuals in isolation from each other. Focus group discussion reflects the processes through which meaning is constructed in

everyday life and to that extent can be regarded as more naturalistic than individual interviews (Wilkinson, 1998).

3.7.2 Beginning and Ending a Focus Group Sessions

You must have realised by now that FGDs must go through a process and it requires particular skills to reach the desired conclusion. In this light it is recommended that focus group sessions must **begin with an introduction**, then briefly outlining goals of the research, the **reasons for recording the session** are given and the format of the focus group session is sketched out. Here, it is also important to **present some of the norms** of focus group participation such as:

- all data will be treated confidentially and anonymized,
- only one person should speak at a time,
- the session is open and everyone's views are important; and
- the duration of the discussion should be informed to the participants.

3.7.3 FGD as a Tool for Feminist Research

Focus group is more akin to feminist research as it is less artificial than many other methods. It emphasizes group interaction, which is a normal part of social life. It does not suffer from the problem of gleaning information in an unnatural situation.

Feminist researchers have expressed a preference for methods that avoid de contextualization that successfully study the individual within a social context. The tendency for most methods to treat the individual as a separate entity, devoid of a social context, is disliked by many feminist researchers who prefer to analyse the self as relational or as socially constructed' (Wilkinson 1999b, pp. 229-230).

Feminist researchers decry individual interview method as exploitative and create a power relationship between researcher and respondent. Thus, the risk of this occurring is greatly reduced because focus group participants are able to take over much of the direction of the session from the moderator.

Arguments favouring a suitability between the focus group method and feminist research is extended to suggest that it may have further role in allowing the voices of highly marginalized group of women to surface. **Madriz** argues

"For a group like lower socio-economic class, focus group constitute a relatively rare opportunity for them to empower themselves by making sense of their experience of vulnerability and subjugation". (Madriz 2000, p. 843)

Focus group discussion as a tool presents both opportunities and challenges to the qualitative researcher. It needs to be planned and organised very carefully in order to minimise the potential ethical issues arising out of the group context. In these situations, data obtained through FGD is hard to manage and may generate data that is difficult to transcribe and analyse. Yet, when thoroughly well-planned and thought through, focus groups can offer an interesting and illuminating insight into individuals' attitudes and opinions as they operate within the group context.

Bryman (2001) notes, the group context may also lead to atypical behaviour or opinion going unreported as individuals shy away from openly disagreeing with any emerging group view.

Take up the activity given below to build a better understanding of focus group discussion as a tool of data collection.

Activity

Organize a FG Session amongst your peer group on a gender related issue and observe the steps discussed in the above text.

In the following section, you would be read about yet another tool that is essential constituent of qualitative research.

3.8 SIMPLE OBSERVATION AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Here, we will discuss the most simple but important tool of research which has added significance in qualitative research . This is '**observation**'. It is employed by the researcher while collecting data from the field by using any technique of data collection. Researchers have started adding their observations in quantitative research too as it enriches the data and captures those nuances of research that at times remain oblivious to the research team.

3.8.1 Types of Observations

Observation can be **simple** or **participant**.

- **Simple observation** is a neutral activity, which generates research data that are direct and immediate, that is, not generated or coloured by interpretation, artificial experimental conditions, memory, or other factors. This data may bear upon some perspective held by the observer

or they may be used to help develop a theory at a later time. They are often used in research areas that are not yet well developed, where careful observation can generate hypotheses for future research. But, the simple observation method has several pitfalls, which affect data gathering and interpretation in research.

- **Participant observation** as explained by ‘Sociology Central’ is sometimes called a form of subjective sociology, not because the researcher aims to impose their beliefs on the respondent, but because the aim is to understand the social world from the subject’s point-of-view.

Sociologists who use participant observation aim to discover the nature of social reality by understanding the actor’s perception / understanding / interpretation of the social world. For this reason, participant observation is sometimes called a **naturalistic method** and tends to be associated with the **interactionist** or **social action perspective**. The methodology is primarily interpretive in nature.

3.8.2 Uses of Participant Observation

It is flexible as a research method because a researcher doesn’t pre-judge the issue by deciding in advance what is / is not important when studying social behavior. Researcher can react to events / ideas and follow lead, pursue avenues of research that had not occurred to them before their involvement with a group. In this respect, a researcher can test hypotheses and may be able to redefine possible personal preconceptions about someone’s behaviour in the light of their experience in the group.

Box No.3.8

It can be concluded that participant observation generates a rich source of highly-detailed, high-quality, information about people’s behaviour. In short, this type of research produces in depth and detailed information about all the aspects of a group’s behaviour.

The researcher can understand the social pressures / influences / group norms, which may create particular forms of behaviour. This gives researcher insights into individual and group behaviour and it may allow researcher to formulate hypotheses that explain such behaviour.

While using this tool, the researcher should have knowledge about the culture of a group, which will facilitate his understanding about the group behavior. If a researcher is too different for the group they want to research (e.g., too old, young or from a different class, etc.) this will cause problems of participation. If a researcher is involved in participant observation, his ability to blend seamlessly into a group is absolutely crucial to the success of the research project.

Participant observation can also be of two types; overt or covert. Let us read how the two are different.

- ***Overt Participant Observation:*** Overt Participant Observation, as the name suggests, involves the researcher being open with the group they are going to study. In other words, in overt participant observation, the researcher is likely to inform the group about the purpose of research, it's scope, how long the research will last and so on. The research is done with the permission and co-operation of the group and the fact of being open with the group being researched carries with it certain advantages and disadvantages as far as the overall conduct of the research is concerned.
- ***Covert Participant Observation:*** In covert participant observation, the researcher interacts the researching a group without informing the members of that group. In this respect, the research is carried out without the knowledge of the group (covertly). The other members of the group think that the researcher has simply joined (or been admitted to) the group to participate in their usual activities.

In the Covert participant observation, at times, researchers have to become involved in various forms of unethical or personally distasteful behavior/activities. They will have to balance the twin roles of researcher and participant whilst keeping the former role under wraps from other group members.

Covert participant observation has a number of advantages over more traditional methods of research (such as questionnaires and interviews) and also overt participant observation. For example, this method makes it possible for the researcher to gain access to groups that would not normally allow them to be studied.

3.8.3 Reliability of Participant Observation

Participant observation (whether overt or covert) is not the most reliable research method. Such studies by their very nature are impossible to repeat. The data they produce is, simply the opinion of one observer.

In addition, the reliability of overt participant observation can be further questioned in terms of the extent to which the presence of the observer actually changes the behaviour of those being studied. However, while such studies may lack reliability it is evident that the validity of the data gained can be impressive.

3.8.4 Validity of Participant Observation

Participant observers study people in their natural environment, gaining a deep insight into the behavior and practices that come not simply from close, detailed observation but also from the researcher's own experiences within the group being studied. It is a technique that provides first hand insights into why people behave as they do.

In addition, participant observation does not prejudge issues and events. It is for these reasons that it is possible to argue that such a method provides data that has a high level of validity.

This method in research requires a great deal of skill and commitment as the success of using the methodology is in the ability to fit-in with the people being studied and the ability to communicate with the groups members on their level and terms. It will also, at different times, require tact, clear and careful observation and the ability to separate the role of the participant from that of the observer etc.

In this method, data is collected on the subjective impressions of the observer; hence the piece of research may simply be the subjective interpretation of the researcher about what is happening within the group rather than the reality of the situation from the group's point of view.

There are **ethical problems** involved in covert observation, ranging from the fact that by spying on people you are not being entirely honest with them (you are, in a sense, exploiting them for your own ends) to the problem of suddenly ceasing to involve yourself in the lives of people who may have grown to like, trust and depend on you.

Let us now look at yet another source of data collection which has a special significance in feminist research.

3.9 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

A **key informant interview** also known as **Key Person Interviews(KPI)** has a very specific purpose. It involves identifying different members of the community (whom we call key informants), who are especially knowledgeable about a topic and asking them questions about their experiences while working or living within a community. KPI is a tool, in which people with more than average knowledge compared to an interviewee. These interviews are usually conducted face to face with informants, by an outside interviewer specifically hired to conduct the interviews or by the researcher herself/himself. The length of these interviews varies and depends on the number of questions a researcher decides to ask.

Let us read about the stages in conducting KPIs.

3.9.1 Planning the KPI

Conducting key informant interviews requires careful preparation and planning. The first step is to think about what is required to be learnt out of these interviews. Other important factors to keep in mind are:

- What are the specific issues to be asked?
- Any specific problems or issues within the community that a researcher wants to understand?
- Do the questions covered make sense?
- Will it get the required information?
- Do the questions help people to “tell their story”?

It has to be kept in mind that longer the interview and more the number of questions, more information is with the researcher to analyse and interpret after the interview is completed. But, care has to be taken that the questions are not repetitive and the interview is not too long so that the key informant does not lose interest or runs out of time.

3.9.2 Process of Conducting the Interview

Confidentiality is an important consideration in conducting key informant interviews. The information obtained in the interviews should not be directly attributed to any particular individual. Assuring confidentiality will make the informants feel more comfortable sharing information that may be controversial or of a personal nature. Also, reports on the interview results will then focus on the content rather than on ‘who said what’.

During the KPI, the questions lined up in a certain order may be changed to make the interviewee more comfortable. It is entirely possible that a person may start talking and end up answering any number of questions without the interviewer specifically asking the same. In case someone introduces a subject not included in the questions, they may be allowed to talk within reasonable limits.

The point of this whole experience is to allow the person to tell you their story, including their particular knowledge, opinions, and experiences. The interviewee may be provided the space to say what they need to say. If the interviewee deviates completely from the topic, then s/he could be pulled back by referring to the specific question.

3.9.3 Recording the Information

Once the interview is over, the relevant notes may be documented. One advantage of using a two-person team is that one person can take notes while the other person focuses on keeping the interview flowing. The

researcher should write notes immediately after (within a few hours) the interview. It is because the longer you wait, it is more likely that you will forget the details. You may forget entire sections of the interview if you wait for several days to write up. Then important information is lost and the interview itself loses its value. During the interview, a researcher should record any direct quotes that are particularly effective at conveying a description or experience. These can be used later in the report (without attribution) to support the argument.

3.9.4 Analyzing and Reporting Result

After conducting several interviews, a researcher will be able to begin analyzing the results. This process involves comparing and contrasting what the informants has told him/her. Overall, there will be common themes among the informants' interviews. Although there are no shortcuts to thoroughly reviewing and discussing interview information, there are some approaches that may make analysis easier. It is helpful to analyze initial interviews to identify early themes that can then be added to the interviews done later. If there are a lot of interviews one might actually list issues/themes that emerge and tally how frequently these come up. One can also list themes by category or type of interviewee.

3.9.5 Reporting on the Results

Once the data has been analyzed, look for the most important common themes and disagreements, and then the results could be written. The report can follow a variety of forms depending on your original purpose. It may be a simple summary of themes and issues used for internal planning purposes by a small number of staff and leaders. The information may be used to produce a report that will be released to the public along with the announcement of your organization's effort. One might also make a written summary for use at community forums or for larger organizational planning sessions or in meetings with local policymakers and media.

3.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learned that tools are techniques; and these are used to elicit information from the respondents. These techniques and tools are not employed in a 'stand alone' manner but in combination.

In the beginning we discussed oral history that is very useful when there are no written records available to study the research topic. After talking about the methodology that entails a preliminary research, designing and treatment of the subject, we move to study the next tool. Case study has a single case as the object of study, which is a complete functioning unit

that needs to be studied in its natural environment and context in diverse ways and manners.

Next, we read about life history as technique to gather interpretations of accounts that the respondents provide about their past or present life courses. Life history also examines relationship between cause and effect; agency and structure, thus, becoming an important tool in the feminist research.

Focus group discussion has emerged as a common, popular and useful technique to elicit group response and joint construction of wide variety of meaning in relation to a particular issue. This is also a key tool of feminist research as it is conducted in natural environment, within a social context allows the voices of that marginalized women to surface up. Observation is also a tool that can be used in overt or covert manner, depending on the topic of research. Lastly, key informant interview is discussed with regards to its use, process and importance in the qualitative research.

3.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the relevance of different techniques of data collection in qualitative research.
- 2) Explain the difference between talking, conversation and focus group discussion within a community. Discuss how each of these activities lead to data collection in qualitative research.
- 3) Draw a list of research topic from the field of gender studies. Discuss suitable tool(s) to elicit responses from the respondents. Justify use of these in each situation.
- 4) You have to study the lives of sex workers in a red light area of any city. Discuss a suitable technique of data collection.

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3.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

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