**Methods in Community-Based Research**

Research methods are the strategies researchers use to collect, analyze and report data. Some methods follow rigid procedures, while others are more flexible. Different methods can often be used in combination to answer the research question. Data collection refers to the strategies and tools researchers use to gather empirical data to be used in the analysis. Many types of methods share data collection strategies. In other words, research methods are holistic strategies for going-about research while data collection is a key-part of a research method.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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</table>
| **Case study**  | To study and understand a complex issue or process in its real-life context | • Multiple forms of data collection  
• Quantitative and qualitative                                                      | • In-depth look at issues  
• Flexible  
• Demonstrate how common phenomena play out in different contexts  
• Useful for looking at outliers or atypical situations | • Can be time consuming                                                              |
| **Content analysis** | A systematic examination of the content (e.g., themes, concept or words, etc.) of a set of documents | • Primarily secondary data in the form of existing texts (e.g., books, newspapers, legal documents) | • Cost-effective  
• Fast  
• Does not (usually) require ethics approval  
• Easy to involve PRAs and community members in analysis | • Often results in exclusively descriptive research  
• Does not speak to lived experiences |
| **Conversational analysis** | To understand social interaction as it occurs through language (i.e., talking) | • Tends to use ‘natural’ data in the form of real life conversations rather than ‘collected’ data through interviews or survey | • Speaks to how people interact and make sense of the world  
• Speaks to how different social settings impact interaction  
• Cost-effective | • Does not address social systems or structures  
• Does not generally look at causes and impacts of larger social problems |
| **Discourse analysis** | To uncover the role of power in language and in ideas by examining the social context in which they are produced | • Primarily uses existing texts (e.g., magazines, policy documents, advertisements)  
• Can use collected data (e.g., semi-structured interviews, focus groups) | • Reveals how ideologies, stereotypes and other biases are hidden in texts and ideas  
• Can combine multiple forms of data  
• Often cost-effective | • Often does not provide insight into lived experiences  
• Can require high level of skill to perform the analysis  
• Not conducive to large investigative teams |
| **Environmental scan** | To describe the current state of an environment or organization in order to inform future changes | Flexible, multiple forms of data can be used  
- Often semi-structured interviews combined with existing documents | Provides a snapshot of existing resources in a community, which can be useful for community partners  
- Useful tool for needs assessment  
- Often cost-effective  
- Easily combined with other methods, often used as a ‘first step in projects’ | Often time-consuming  
- Primarily descriptive, does not provide much critical insight |
| **Ethnography** | To describe a culture, group, or an activity in great detail | Multiple forms of data collection  
- Primarily semi-structured interviews and participant observation | Flexible  
- Produces large amount of data  
- Gives insight into lived experiences and larger social processes | Time consuming  
- Can be expensive |
| **Grounded theory** | To build inductive theories about social or health related phenomena, especially processes | Generally semi-structured interviews or focus groups | Conducive to producing new theories directly from data | Tends to focus on ‘common’ experiences, not on diversity  
- Very structured analysis technique that requires a high level of skill  
- Results are limited to the production of theories |
| **Narrative analysis** | To understand individualized social experiences as told by people in the form of stories | Primarily in-depth interviews that may take hours to days  
- Some participant observation | Provides very in-depth understanding of experiences and the context in which they take place  
- Allows participants to convey information that is important to them and in a language that makes sense to them  
- Very flexible  
- Highlights atypical and ‘outlier’ experiences | Data is limited and usually not generalizable to larger populations |
<p>| <strong>Phenomenology</strong> | To describe the universal essence of a lived experience of a given | Generally semi-structured interviews | Well-defined process for proceeding with data collection and analysis | Tends to focus on commonalities, not as useful for exploring the |</p>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>phenomenon</th>
<th>Photo-voice</th>
<th>Policy analysis</th>
<th>Surveys*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>To promote a critical exploration of an issue or experience through photographs</strong></td>
<td>• Flexible, but usually involves providing participants with cameras to take photographs, and a follow-up interview or focus group to discuss their meaning</td>
<td>• Very inclusive method, particularly for participants who may be marginalized, vulnerable or who prefer not to express themselves verbally</td>
<td>• Can use quantitative (e.g., surveys, cost-benefit analyses) or qualitative data (e.g., semi-structured interviews, especially with policy experts) as well as examining policy documents</td>
<td>• Surveys</td>
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<td><strong>To define or examine a policy problem (e.g., how well a current policy meets its intended outcomes). Also to provide a general layout of a policy environment in a given region and/or to provide a critique of existing or proposed policies</strong></td>
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<td>• Provides good insight into structural and policy issues</td>
<td>• Cost-effective</td>
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<td>• Can be cost-effective</td>
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<td>• Results are generalizable to larger populations</td>
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<td>• Can provide useful resource for community partners that is useful for knowledge mobilization activities</td>
<td>• Allows researchers to focus on very specific variables</td>
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<td>• Widely considered a rigorous and convincing method</td>
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<td>• Analysis often requires a high level of skill</td>
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<td>• Does not speak to lived experiences</td>
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<td>• Standardized questions can be inflexible, inappropriate for some participants</td>
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<td>• Analysis may be complex to perform</td>
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<td>• Policy experts may be unwilling or unavailable to participate in interviews</td>
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<td>• Relevant policy documents may difficult to obtain</td>
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<td>• Still a ‘new’ method, many are unfamiliar with it</td>
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<td>• Can be challenging to analyse the images</td>
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<td>• Time consuming, especially for participants</td>
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<td>• May be costly to supply cameras</td>
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Resource developed by the Community Based Research Program at the Pacific AIDS Network.
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<th>Data Collection Strategy</th>
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| **Document analysis**    | ● Quick  
● Cost-effective  
● Does not require ethics approval | ● Some documents may be difficult to obtain |
| **Focus groups**         | ● Large amount of data gathered quickly  
● Useful for gathering information about social values and shared experiences  
● Can be energizing and rewarding or participants  
● Visual aids can be used | ● Difficult to get participants  
● Group dynamics difficult to manage  
● Difficult to analyzes  
● Requires multiple researchers and high level of energy to be successful  
● Confidentiality more difficult to ensure  
● Requires voice or video recorder, can be difficult to transcribe |
| **In person survey**     | ● Access to wide range of participants  
● Large amounts of data  
● Good control of sample | ● Inflexible  
● Impersonal  
● Can be expensive  
● Time-consuming |
| **Internet survey**      | ● Quick  
● Cost-efficient  
● Produces large amounts of data  
● Easy for participants to fill out on their own time | ● Limiting participants to those with internet access  
● Impersonal  
● Relies on self-reporting  
● No opportunities for participants to ask clarifying questions  
● Some survey programs are based in the US and data may be subject to US privacy laws |
| **Literature review**    | ● Quick  
● Cost-efficient  
● Gives necessary background to any study  
● Provides theoretical and empirical information about the issue or phenomena of interest | ● Does not provide information specific to the particular region or population of interest |
| **Mail survey**          | ● Confidentiality and anonymity are easily achieved  
● Quick  
● Cost-efficient  
● Produces large amounts of data  
● Easy for participants to fill out on their own time | ● Expensive  
● Impersonal  
● Relies on self-reporting  
● No opportunities for participants to ask clarifying questions |
| **Narrative interviews** | ● Detailed & in-depth  
● Allows participants to speak in their own voices  
● Participant-driven  
● Flexible  
● Strong rapport between participant and research | ● Long & time-consuming  
● Does not produce a lot of data  
● Can be difficult to find suitable participants and to ensure ‘good’ data |
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| Semi-structured interviews (in person) | Very personalized to each participant  
 Gets at lived experience | Requires voice recorder/transcription, can be costly  
 Time consuming  
 Data not always generalizable  
 Some participants may be uncomfortable sharing in interview context  
 Can be challenging to ensure interview stays on track |
| Semi-structured interviews (by telephone) | Flexible  
 Can be participant- or researcher-driven  
 Can build strong sense of rapport between participant and researcher  
 Can be personalized to participant  
 Gets at lived experience | Can be impersonal  
 Researcher may miss important visual or social cues  
 Data not always generalizable  
 Some participants may be uncomfortable sharing in interview context  
 Can be challenging to ensure interview stays on track |
| Telephone survey              | Quick  
 Access to wide range of participants  
 Large amounts of data  
 Good control of sample | May be limiting to participants who do not have telephone access  
 May be difficult to track down phone numbers of participants, or to ensure representative sample  
 Many participants are not comfortable answering personal questions over the phone |