

# DECIDING ON A METHOD FOR YOUR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Academic Skills II

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In this document, you find a collection of book chapters concerning the choice of a qualitative research method from the book “Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners” by Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun. This book is also available at the FHWN-library. Please read the chapters carefully so that you can justify your choice of research method in your research proposal.

Clarke, Victoria, and Virginia Braun. 2013. *Successful Qualitative Research : A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: SAGE.

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## 1. WHEN TO USE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

(Braun and Clarke 2013, 81)

### WHEN AND WHY WOULD I USE INTERVIEWS?

Interviews are ideally suited to experience-type research questions (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3). For example, British feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Jo Willmott used interviews to research the experiences of women with polycystic ovarian syndrome (see Illustrative Research Example 4.1). Interviews can also be useful for exploring understanding and perception- and construction-type research questions – such as (supposedly) healthy men’s constructions of their health-promoting practices (Sloan, Gough, & Connor, 2010). In this case, they are best suited to exploring understandings, perceptions and constructions of things that participants have some kind of personal stake in – people without a personal stake in a topic are unlikely to generate the rich and detailed responses you want from interviews. Focus groups (FGs; see Chapter 5) or qualitative surveys (see Chapter 6) are better methods when people don’t have a personal stake in the topic. Interviews can also be used to explore practice-type research questions, such as the clothing practices of fat women (Colls, 2006). Grounded theorists have used interviews to answer influencing factor-type questions, such as the factors that influence people’s decisions to continue regular genetic screening (Michie, McDonald, & Marteau, 1996).

## 2. WHEN TO USE FOCUS GROUPS (Braun and Clarke 2013, 110-113)

### WHEN AND WHY WOULD I USE FOCUS GROUPS?

FGs have the potential to access forms of knowledge other methods cannot (Wellings et al., 2000) and generate completely unexpected or novel knowledge (Wilkinson, 1998a), as Illustrative Research Example 5.1 shows. They can provide an open, supportive environment in which participants talk in-depth on often quite sensitive issues (Wilkinson, 1998c) and the interaction between participants can result in elaborated and detailed accounts (Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998c). Because FGs mimic ‘real life’, with people talking to each other rather than to a researcher, they encourage the use of participants’ real vocabularies and ways of talking about the topic (Kitzinger, 1994b; Wilkinson, 1998a) – participants might not feel the need to use the ‘correct’ terms.

FGs are an excellent method if you want to elicit a wide range of views, perspectives, or understandings of an issue (Underhill & Olmsted, 2003; Wilkinson, 1998a). They can be a useful exploratory tool to start looking at under-researched areas, because they don’t require any prior empirical knowledge about the issue (Frith, 2000). They can also be good for accessing the views of underrepresented or marginalised social groups (Wilkinson, 1999), not least because speaking with others ‘like you’ may be less intimidating than speaking just to a researcher (see Liamputtong, 2007).



If you have some kind of social change or activist intent to your research, then FGs also offer a potentially useful method. Taking part in a group discussion about a topic can have a 'consciousness-raising' effect on individuals, and lead to some kind of individual (and perhaps ultimately social or political) change (Morgan, 1997; Wilkinson, 1999). Being part of research, in a group context, thus potentially results in a different consciousness among participants, and so research can become a tool to foster social change. FGs can also be experienced as empowering – with the sharing of views meaning that people can realise they're not so isolated in their experience or perspective. For these reasons, among others, they have been noted as a particularly suitable method for conducting research with people from less privileged and more marginalised communities (Liamputtong, 2007; Wilkinson, 1999); they have been employed within participatory action research frameworks, to produce change (e.g. Chiu, 2003; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

*Self-moderated* FGs can be particularly useful for generating socially undesirable responses, as the absence of the researcher decreases concerns about social desirability. For example, we can compare Victoria's (Clarke, 2005) and British-based LGBTQ psychologist Sonja Ellis's (2001) results from their researcher-moderated FGs with

British university students talking about lesbian and gay rights, with US communication researchers Laura O'Hara and Marcy Meyer's (2004) self-moderated FGs. Whereas Victoria's and Sonja Ellis's participants' accounts were firmly underpinned by liberal discourse, O'Hara and Meyer's participants often articulated more overtly anti-gay views. Although context of data production must be considered (the US vs. the UK), it is worth considering using self-moderated groups for topics where social desirability may be of concern. Depending on the nature of your research topic, it may also be appropriate to consider some sort of participant-moderator matching, such as getting a man to run FGs with men if you are a female researcher.

Although you might imagine that sensitive topics – such as sex (Frith, 2000) or drug-addiction (Toner, 2009) – might not be suited to face-to-face FG research, because people would be uncomfortable talking about these things in a public forum, FGs can actually be *good* for collecting data on sensitive or personal topics, perhaps even better than methods like interviews (Frith, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994b; Liamputtong, 2007; Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Wellings et al., 2000). Some researchers have found them good for talking to children and young people about sensitive and personal topics (Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007; Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore, & Wilsdon, 1995). People can feel less uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics in a collective rather than individual context – though in larger studies, the opportunity to participate in either an FG or an individual interview may be appropriate (e.g. Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Braun & Wilkinson, 2003, 2005).

Topics generally don't preclude the use of FGs, although in some cases they could – for instance, it would be hard to imagine that face-to-face FGs would be suitable for research about people's experiences of shyness; individual interviews might be better (Morgan, 1997). Topics where there are likely to be strongly (emotive) conflicting views might not suit FGs in any form (Hughes & Lang, 2004), for very different reasons – they could just descend into a bitter argument that leaves everyone upset. It's really important that you judge this latter possibility on the basis of topic and the context that your research is being conducted in. Take, for instance, the topic of abortion, which in some countries is not *particularly* controversial and in others, *highly* controversial. Say your research question was 'What are late adolescents' understandings of abortion?' Without taking the context into account, the question appears well suited to the FG method. But in many places, participants may have strong pro- or anti- views, and be very invested in those views. Given that, it might be unwise to run a group on the topic unless you are an experienced researcher with a lot of FG experience and think through the issues very carefully. For topics where there are conflicting views one solution could be to organise your groups around a particular viewpoint, which would eliminate the likelihood of (high-level) conflict.

However, FGs are not the ultimate method (see Table 5.1), and any method is only as 'good' as it is for the purpose and fit of the research project overall (see Tables 3.1–3.3 in Chapter 3). FGs are suitable to almost all types of qualitative research question, with the exception of representation and, generally, experience questions. FGs are not the *best* method if you want to elicit detailed personal narratives, due to the

collective nature of the discussion and the fact that individual narratives can get lost in the cut and thrust of dialogue between participants, or for researching sensitive topics when you are asking in *detail* about personal experiences rather than broader socio-cultural or personal meanings (Liamputtong, 2011). And for getting data from busy professionals, they might prove logistically challenging. In such cases, individual interviews are likely better. The key is to choose your data collection tools to get the information you want, for the question and topic, from the particular sample.



**Table 5.1** Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Advantages	Disadvantages
Flexibility in exploring unanticipated issues	Do not allow in depth follow-up of individuals' views or experiences
Good for gathering new knowledge about issues little is known about	Can be difficult to manage
Access to everyday ways of talking about topics (high ecological validity)	Can easily get 'off topic' and be hard to bring back on topic
Access to interaction and meaning-making processes	Logistically difficult – difficult to recruit for and organise
Can facilitate disclosure (even or especially around sensitive topics)	Not a good method to use with busy people
Can lead to some level of empowerment of participants, or social change	Not good for people who are geographically dispersed
Reduce the power and control of the researcher, data potentially less influenced by the moderator	More inconvenient for participants if they have to travel to you, at a particular time
Good for groups for whom research participation might be daunting	Focus groups are generally longer than interviews so more time consuming for participants
	May need an assistant to manage practical matters
	Transcription of FG data is very time-consuming

## ISSUES TO THINK ABOUT IN RELATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Because of their collective nature, the composition of FGs – who is, and who is not, part of any particular group – is a really important issue. However, how much composition matters also depends in part on the topic and the context (consider the abortion example, above), so these sorts of choices should not be made in isolation. Two key dimensions to consider in relation to participants are how similar they are, and whether they know each other. In each case, there's no right or wrong position; you just need to explain what you did, and why.

### 3. WHEN TO USE QUALITATIVE SURVEYS (Braun and Clarke 2013, 136 -137)

#### WHEN AND WHY WOULD I USE QUALITATIVE SURVEYS?

Qualitative surveys are not as widely used as quantitative ones, and are often excluded from discussions of qualitative methods (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), although a mixture of closed and open-ended questions is relatively common in survey research (for a good example, see Fish, 2006; Fish & Wilkinson, 2003a, 2003b). We have included them here because they can generate great data, can be less daunting than

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doing interviews or FGs, and can be a very quick and cheap way to collect (lots of) data. Surveys are also ideally suited to *sensitive* topics, partly because they offer privacy and anonymity to the participants, and partly because they require less 'skill' and experience on the part of the researcher to collect good data. They also raise fewer ethical concerns related to inexperienced researchers researching sensitive topics (see Chapter 3). This all means they're *ideally* suited to student and other resource-lite projects. Qualitative surveys can be used across a range of types of research questions, but they are particularly well suited to experience, understandings and perceptions, and practice type questions (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3; see the *companion website* for examples of surveys addressing these types of questions).

Because qualitative surveys are a quick and inexpensive way to collect data from lots of people in a short period of time, you can access a wider range of views than is typical or practical using interactive qualitative methods. For example, British feminist psychologists Merran Toerien and Sue Wilkinson (2004) used qualitative surveys to research women's body hair removal in order to obtain a 'wide-angle' picture of women's experiences, perspectives and practices. Using surveys allowed them to collect a very large sample: 678 women completed a hard copy survey (it could take two researchers *years* to interview that many people!). In addition, compared to interactive data, survey data tends to be more focused on the topic, and the method produces greater standardisation of responses, as all participants are asked the same questions in the same way. This can be useful for pattern-based analysis. However, participants still provide their own answers, in their own words, so their frameworks are still prioritised, which is important for qualitative research.

Table 6.1 The pros and cons of different qualitative survey formats

	Pros	Cons
<b>Hard copy</b>	<p>Data can be collected in a structured way (e.g. student participants complete surveys during a teaching session), which can increase sample size</p> <p>Easiest for participants to do drawing tasks</p> <p>If using postal distribution, can send reminders to increase participation</p>	<p>Potentially limited anonymity</p> <p>Data entry required</p> <p>Costs associated with postal distribution (e.g. to post 60 surveys in the UK, and include SAEs for returning the survey, would cost around £90 based on 2012 prices; further costs associated with sending reminders)</p> <p>Excludes participants with limited literacy skills</p>
<b>Email</b>	<p>Hand-writing or electronic completion options</p> <p>Good for geographically dispersed participants</p> <p>Potential for follow-up data collection (depending on research design)</p> <p>Can send reminders to increase participation</p>	<p>Potentially limited anonymity</p> <p>Participants need computer access and skills</p> <p>Risks excluding marginalised groups (those not online or with limited literacy skills)</p> <p>Data collation required</p> <p>If electronic completion, difficult for anything other than textual responses</p>
<b>Online</b>	<p>Quick and easy distribution</p> <p>Highest level of anonymity</p> <p>Good for geographically dispersed participants</p> <p>Great for using with (colour) images and audio and video clips</p> <p>Potentially very quick data collection</p> <p>No need for data entry or collation</p> <p>Potential to start data coding in the programme</p>	<p>Needs computer access and skills</p> <p>Risks excluding marginalised groups</p> <p>Follow-up data collection and sending reminders less possible</p> <p>Difficult for anything other than textual responses</p> <p>Data output formats may be restrictive, especially if working with large samples</p>



## 4. WHEN TO USE STORY COMPLETION TASKS

(Braun and Clarke 2013, 142-145)

### STORY-COMPLETION TASKS

Story-completion tasks are a completely different method. They require participants to either complete, or write, a story. In the 'complete a story' approach, participants are provided with a **story stem**: the start of a story involving a hypothetical scenario and characters. They are then typically asked to write 'what happens next' (Material Example 6.1 provides an example of a story stem from our research on people's perceptions of trans parenting). In the 'write a story' approach, participants are provided with a **story cue**, a 'bare bones' scenario for a story, and asked to write a story about that scenario (e.g. 'a white couple adopt a black child – tell the story of how people react'). While a story stem can provide more 'direction' than a story cue, it's important to leave some ambiguity, as getting at participants' assumptions is one of the key elements of this method. In British feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Debra Powell's (1995) research on infidelity in heterosexual relationships (see Illustrative Research Example 6.2), for example, their story stem described the main characters as 'going out', and one character realising the other is 'seeing someone else'. As "seeing" leaves the precise nature of the relationship ambiguous and "someone else" leaves the sex of the other person unspecified" (p. 352), Kitzinger and Powell could explore participants' assumptions about what 'seeing someone else' meant, as well as about the gender of the 'someone else'.

### WHEN AND WHY WOULD I USE STORY-COMPLETION TASKS?

Quantitative researchers typically treat story completion as a 'projective technique' (like the Rorschach inkblot test and the Thematic Apperception Test) through which to *indirectly* access people's psychological worlds. Participants' (unconscious) thoughts and feelings are assumed to shape what they write in response to the ambiguous stimulus material provided; the researcher 'reads off' the participant's underlying anxieties and motivations from their story (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). Qualitative story-completion research typically has a quite different aim: to understand something about the



meanings participants draw on in writing their stories. A few groundbreaking qualitative researchers have used story-completion tasks in this way (e.g. Livingston & Testa, 2000; Walsh & Malson, 2010; Whitty, 2005) to great effect.

Story-completion tasks are best suited to understandings and perceptions, and constructions-type research questions (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3). Instead of asking participants to report their own experiences, understandings or perceptions, story-completion tasks ask participants to provide their imagined outcome from a plausible but hypothetical scenario. This means they are particularly useful for exploring participants' assumptions about a topic, because the topic is addressed indirectly and because stories stems are deliberately ambiguous and require participants to 'fill in' the detail. For the same reason, they provide an ideal tool for researching topics

where clear norms dictate socially desirable viewpoints. For example, the use of homophobia scales in cultures where there is a pro-equality climate tends to produce a 'floor effect' (with most participants scoring as 'not homophobic'), because participants can relatively easily deduce from items like 'lesbians are sick' and 'male homosexuality is a perversion' (Herek, 1984) the socially desirable (pro-equality) response to each item (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010). Story-completion tasks, by contrast, can permit access to a range of meanings surrounding a topic, not just socially desirable ones, because they provide participants with less overt cues about socially desirable responses and because participants are not asked directly for *their* view. This is one reason we chose story-completion tasks for examining people's perceptions of trans parenting (see the versions on the *companion website*). However, whether you then see this as a way of getting at the 'real truth' from participants, or something else, depends on your theoretical framework (see Chapter 2). Because the topic is addressed *indirectly* through storytelling, story-completion tasks are also useful for sensitive topics, and they avoid some of the ethical concerns associated with (inexperienced) use of interactive methods, such as managing participant distress.

## 5. WHEN TO USE RESEARCHER-DIRECTED DIARIES

(Braun and Clarke 2013, 147-149)

### RESEARCHER-DIRECTED DIARIES

Researcher-directed (or solicited) diaries are diaries produced for the purpose of research. They require participants to record their thoughts, feelings, experiences and/or practices over a specified period of time. They differ from *personal* diaries, which are generated for purposes other than research (personal diaries are a type of secondary source). Researcher-directed diaries can take many formats: hard copy, handwritten diary; typed online or emailed electronic diary; audio-recorded diary; 'performed' video diary; or a (creative) 'scrapbook' diary in which participants write, draw, and cut and paste in mementos, pictures from magazines, postcards, etc. (Thompson & Holland, 2005). Video (and email, online and audio) diaries are thought to be particularly 'empowering' for participants because they can edit their entries before submitting their diaries, giving them control over what they submit as data (Holliday, 1999).

Diaries require regular entries over a period of time. Participants can be asked to make entries once (or more) a day, a week or a month, for periods as short as a week and as long as several months. Diaries range from very structured, which specify exactly what information participants should record, and when, to very unstructured, which specify little more than the topic (e.g. Holliday, 1999). The *companion website* provides an example of a relatively structured diary (hard copy or email) from our research on how people define and experience prejudice and social privilege on a day-to-day basis (our design was strongly influenced by Meth's, 2003, diary research on black women's fear and experiences of crime and violence in South Africa). We structured our *prejudice and privilege* diary to encourage participants to make an entry (related to 'prejudice' and to 'privilege', separately) on each of 14 consecutive days. We suggested *when* participants should make their daily entry, and provided detailed guidance on *what* information they should record. We provided some sample diary entries to guide and help sensitise participants to the sorts of issues they should consider in their entries.

6.



## WHEN AND WHY WOULD I USE RESEARCHER-DIRECTED DIARIES?

Diaries can be used to answer a wide range of qualitative research questions: about experiences, understandings and perceptions, accounts of practice, influencing factors and construction (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3). They are generally used to access the details

of mundane, everyday, routine, taken-for-granted phenomena that other methods cannot reach. This is partly because diaries require participants to record the details of their experiences and perspectives 'in situ', temporally (and even spatially) close to when they happen. British sociologist Jenny Hislop and colleagues (2005), for instance, used audio diaries to research sleep, collecting daily records of how participants had slept the night before (participants had to record their diaries within 20 minutes of waking). Such information would be more difficult to access using methods that rely on (distant) recall (e.g. interviews, surveys) because micro-detail is likely to be forgotten over time. So a particular strength of diaries is that they are 'less subject to the vagaries of memory, retrospective censorship or reframing' (Milligan et al., 2005: 1883) than other experiential methods. However, this view of diaries (as a more accurate way of recording the micro detail of the mundane) only makes sense within a realist framework; within a more constructionist framework, diaries provide a *different*, rather than a (necessarily) more accurate, view. Diaries have been widely used as a mostly quantitative method in health (Elliott, 1997) and sex (Coxon, 1994) research to log people's practices, but are now increasingly used as a *qualitative* method to explore a wide-range of topics, such as stress in trampolinists over a competitive season (Day & Thatcher, 2009), the health and well-being of older people (Milligan et al., 2005), and the transition to adulthood of young people with visual impairments (Worth, 2009).

Diaries are also a longitudinal method, meaning we can track experiences and events over continuous time and space (Milligan et al., 2005), and explore how practices evolve over time (such as patterns in intravenous drug use; Stopka, Springer, Khoshnood, Shaw, & Singer, 2004). Furthermore, because diaries consist of multiple entries over time (e.g. describing 'how I slept last night' every morning for a fortnight), they can help us to understand the *contexts* surrounding particular experiences and activities. For example, by collecting sleep diaries from both partners in heterosexual couples, Hislop et al. (2005) could identify the social environment that shaped sleeping experiences, as well as differences in men's and women's sleep.

As well as a stand-alone tool, diaries can be used with other methods. US ethnographers Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) pioneered the 'diary-interview method', where participants keep a diary for a particular period of time and then discuss and elaborate on their entries in an interview. Diaries are used either to stimulate and/or enrich the interview method (they work as an elicitation tool; the words from the interviews form the data analysed), or as an additional form of data.

It's important to recognise the time and energy commitment diaries require from participants. For instance, in our diary study, participants had to find the time (and remember) to complete an entry every day for a fortnight – that may have been 20 minutes a day, or more. Completing the diary required participants to focus on a particular aspect of their daily experience that they might not have otherwise paid much attention to, which can itself be demanding. These reasons mean that compared to other qualitative data collection methods, participant recruitment can be difficult, and there can be a high drop-out rate, especially when diary data collection spans several months (Breakwell

& Wood, 1995). Experienced diary researchers have developed techniques to engage participants in diary research and maintain interest, including:

- Having an initial meeting with participants (individually or as a group) to explain the task of diary-keeping and hand over the diary and/or any necessary materials (e.g. audio recorders). We met our participants as a group for an initial briefing, to collect demographic data and complete consent forms, and to hand out hard copies of the diary.
- If participants are asked to keep a diary for several weeks, arranging to meet the participants to collect their diaries at the end of every week (we did this with our diary study). This can help maintain motivation and provide participants with an opportunity to ask questions and clarify any areas of confusion. Some researchers require diaries to be returned at regular intervals, because they engage in on-going analysis of the diary entries in preparation for an eventual 'diary interview'.
- Regularly contacting participants via email, telephone, text message or post to aid memory and motivation (e.g. Thompson & Holland, 2005).



## PARTICIPANT-GENERATED TEXTUAL DATA: A BRIEF SUMMARY

Diaries, qualitative surveys, story-completion tasks (and vignettes) are far less common in qualitative research than interactive methods such as interviews and FGs, and yet, as we hope we have conveyed, they hold exciting possibilities for qualitative research. Table 6.2 provides an overview of the pros and cons of participant-generated textual data.

**Table 6.2** Pros and cons of participant-generated textual data

Pros of participant-generated textual data collection	Cons of participant-generated textual data collection
Can be a relatively quick way to generate data (from large samples)	Some forms have less depth than interactive data
Can be an easy way to access samples of geographically dispersed participants	There is limited scope for flexibility with data collection – you can't probe participants or ask unanticipated questions
Quick to get from data collection to analysis, with often no need for transcription. If data are collected online, no need to type up and/or compile responses	Some groups (e.g. people with limited literacy skills, learning disabilities or visual impairments) may find participation difficult
Can be a quick and easy experience for participants: 'harder to engage' participants might be more willing to participate	Some forms (e.g. diaries) can require a big commitment of time/energy from participants
People with concerns about anonymity may be more willing to complete an anonymous online survey than a face-to-face interview. If you are researching a sensitive topic, some people might be more willing to write about it in a survey than discuss it face-to-face	A skilled interviewer can get people to talk and some people might feel more comfortable discussing a sensitive issue with a stranger or in a group with other people who have similar experiences
It can avoid some of the ethical issues associated with interactive data collection – so is a suitable way for less experienced researchers to explore more sensitive topics	Arguably, participants have to be highly motivated to complete a survey or, especially, a diary in their own time and space without the structure of a planned time for collecting data as with interactive data collection
People can participate in their own time and space	Some data are more variable and less transparent (e.g. stories) than interactive data, and therefore can be harder to analyse
Some types (e.g. surveys, more structured diaries) are more standardised and therefore can be easier to analyse for patterns than interactive data	The researcher has less control over the data produced
The participants have more control over the data produced	

## 7. WHEN TO USE PRE-EXISTENT DATA (Braun and Clarke 2013, 151 – 153)

### COLLECTING PRE-EXISTING TEXTUAL DATA

Using pre-existing textual data involves selecting as data something that is already (generally) publicly available in written or audiovisual form. The researcher has no

role in the production of the data; so-called *secondary* sources of data cover materials sourced in printed copy, electronic, and broadcast media formats. Examples include newspapers (Shaw & Giles, 2009), magazines (Toerien & Durrheim, 2001), public health information leaflets (Rúðólfssdóttir, 2000), textbooks (Myerson, Crawley, Anstey, Kessler, & Okopny, 2007), billboard advertisements (Adams, McCreanor, & Braun, 2007), websites (Braun, 2009), blogs (Potts & Parry, 2010), bulletin boards (Malik & Coulson, 2008), political speeches (Capdevila & Callaghan,

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2008), *Hansard* – the official report of parliamentary proceedings (Summers, 2007), television talk shows (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004), adverts (Gill, 2008), comics (Walkerdine, 1987) and documentaries (Clarke et al., 2004). Some sources are available in more than one format – for instance, many newspapers and *Hansard* are both online and printed (and newspaper articles are archived in the LexisNexis electronic database). Researchers may collect data from *one* type of secondary source (e.g. women's magazines; see Illustrative Research Example 6.3) or from a range (e.g. British LGBTQ psychologists Sonja Ellis and Celia Kitzinger, 2002, used national newspaper, gay media and *Hansard* reports to explore arguments used to oppose lowering the age of consent for sex between men in Britain). Or they may combine primary and secondary sources. For example, Victoria (Clarke, 2001) collected interview and FG data, television talk shows and documentaries, and newspaper and magazine articles for her analysis of the social construction of lesbian and gay parenting.



Secondary sources are ideal for answering representation and construction-type research questions (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3). Secondary sources like magazines and television shows can be viewed as fragments of (popular) culture, things that influence our views of the world and other people, and how we think, feel and act (Lyons, 2000; Silverman, 2006). Researchers study these 'fragments of culture' in order to understand the 'meanings that make up the social reality shared by members of a society' (Altheide, 1996: 2). Some secondary sources (e.g. online forums where people write about their experiences or perspectives) may be useful to answer experience, understandings and perceptions, accounts of practice, and influencing factors type-research questions. Such secondary sources are valuable because we can access people's experiences and perspectives without shaping their responses through our data collection questions and methods. In summary, secondary source data can be used to:

- explore people's experiences, understandings and practices (e.g. Malik & Coulson, 2008), much like you would use interview, survey or diary data (see Hookway, 2008, on blogs as an accessible alternative to diary data);
- explore the socio-cultural meanings surrounding a particular topic, either generally (e.g. Clarke, 2001) or in relation to *a particular context* (such as women's magazines; see Illustrative Research Example 6.3);
- exploring how particular 'cultural fragments' work, the effects they have and the socio-cultural ideas they incorporate, rework or resist (Silverman, 2006) (e.g. Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

These latter two can either focus on a particular cultural/historical moment, or look at change over time.

## 8. WHEN TO USE OBSERVATION (Angelika Gruber, FHWN, 2019)

### DIRECT OBSERVATION vs. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION



FACHHOCHSCHULE  
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#### NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

- "Outsider"
- Observing without interacting with objects or people under study
- Objective, because researcher is not part of the group
- Relatively easy to record data

#### PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

- "Insider"
- Captures detailed knowledge of the real-life-environment from people observed
- Can lead to a deep understanding of how people think and behave
- Can be difficult to record data and to participate at the same time

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### WHY do we observe?



FACHHOCHSCHULE  
WIENER NEUSTADT  
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- ✓ ... you can check for nonverbal expressions of feelings
- ✓ ... you can determine who interacts with whom
- ✓ ... you can find out more about how people communicate with each other
  
- ✓ ... helpful to answer descriptive research questions
- ✓ ... can be used to test hypotheses
- ✓ ... can generate new hypotheses and theories of social phenomena or/and human behaviour

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### Pros & Cons of Observation



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#### PRO

- Can provide a lot of information of how people behave and what they feel (emotions)
- Can provide a detailed picture of social phenomena
- Data collection with observation is often very rich

#### CON

- Researcher Effects (e.g. Hawthorne Effect)
- Can be difficult to stay focused on what you want to observe (*use guidelines!*)
- Can be very time-consuming
- Researchers can lose objectivity
- Researcher's Bias

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