



Methods for Change

# Participatory Qualitative Interviews

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# Participatory Qualitative Interviews

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*This method offers a creative alternative to qualitative interviews - often understood as a 'conversation with a purpose'- by asking participants to take part in an activity whilst engaged in conversation. Introducing a fun, interactive, participatory dimension can make interviews feel less intimidating for both the interviewer and respondent, and can disrupt established power relations. Participatory Qualitative Interviews are less formulaic than standard semi-structured interviews, and can be carried out with individuals or groups.*

Rather than following a predetermined interview schedule, conversations unfold in a more fluid way. The researcher may have a list of prompts or themes, but it is the activity that structures the research encounter. As participants become immersed in the activity, they may feel more comfortable and open to talking about topics that might be sensitive or less easy to discuss in a formal interview. This approach could involve, for example, asking participants to produce or comment on something such as an artwork, a piece of music, or a video. Or, it might involve taking part in a shared activity such as dancing, knitting, singing, or storytelling, which may be related to the research topic. This method can therefore produce interesting data drawn from the conversations that take place around activities, as well as valuable alternative data and outputs in the form of images, film, song or collage.



## How do Participatory Qualitative Interviews create or contribute to change?

The method emphasises flexibility and allows participants to shape and change the research as it is carried out. Different possibilities are explored together with participants, and as such, the intentions, questions and direction of the research can shift and evolve. By giving participants the power to explore what they find interesting, it can increase confidence, and can create a shift in perspectives for individuals involved in the research as well as for researchers themselves. Power dynamics and relationships within a group can also change where research activities are carried out over an extended time period. Research drawing on Participatory Qualitative Interviews does not necessarily set out to produce change, which is understood here as something that is unpredictable that cannot be controlled by the researcher. However, in a modest way it is a method that aims to make research more humane and down to earth.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Participatory Qualitative Interviews are informed by feminist and activist approaches in geography and the wider social sciences that centre understandings of the lived experiences of social difference and spaces of resistance. To be carried out successfully, this method asks the researcher to be open, and to share themselves in the process of conducting the research. Reflexivity is therefore an important dimension of this approach, and it requires the researcher to examine their own practices, beliefs and judgements and how these impact on the research. It may also involve elements of ethnography (observing of social interactions and phenomena in a time/place) and auto ethnography (self-reflection about experiences at certain times/places), given that in addition to organising activities to be carried out with participants, the researcher may spend time going along with the day-to-day activities of groups or individuals in various different environments.

Participatory Qualitative Interviews introduce creativity and playfulness into traditional interview methods, which can lead to new opportunities and possibilities that the researcher may not have previously considered. Research drawing on this approach is not viewed as a linear process, but is understood as constantly evolving and dynamic. Rather than imposing a rigid structure on data collection, researchers are encouraged to embrace the messiness and often chaotic nature of research encounters.



## Why might I want to use Participatory Qualitative Interviews?

- Participatory Qualitative Interviews enable the researcher to develop rich insights by ‘talking whilst doing’ with participants, as well as generating a range of creative, alternative data that can give a different dimension to the research and can provide more depth than the written or spoken word alone.
- Both researcher and participants are learning new things as they work through the activities together, which can disrupt the power dynamics of more formal research methods. This approach can therefore be useful in researching sensitive topics, or in research with children, for example.
- It can be used in one-to-one research encounters with individuals, as well as with larger groups, where it can help build networks and relationships between group members taking part in an activity together.
- This method can be quite chaotic and unpredictable, but this is what makes it interesting! Avoiding predetermined ideas about what the research will discover, and being prepared to go with the flow can result in exciting new findings that had not previously been imagined. It requires the researcher to be flexible, open to trying different methods and tools, and to react as the research activity unfolds.
- You have to be ready to make yourself vulnerable as a researcher, and to be honest about what you are doing in order to create a space where people feel involved and open. You cannot be opposed to doing things yourself that you want participants to do – if the activity involves singing, you will have to sing too!



*The image depicts a ‘show of hands’ in support for the organisation HOME (Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics). The picture was created on an open house day to celebrate the organisation’s activities and the identities of the women it helped. The handprint tree symbolises growth and beauty in nature with the handprints acting in place of leaves to build the tree.*



## Step by step guide to using Participatory Qualitative Interviews:

### 1. Start with the research questions.

Identify what are you interested in understanding, and then think about how you can make your research more explorative before thinking about specific activities. It is important to embrace openness from the start. Be prepared for research questions to shift as the research evolves.

- 2. Plan an activity to do together.** There is no one specific way of approaching this, the key thing is to find an activity that works for the research topic and participants, and it may involve some trial and error to get this right. Think about the issues you are interested in, and how they could lend themselves to a participatory, collaborative element. Discuss ideas together with participants before you begin.

*For inspiration in designing activities, think across the visual arts (drawing, painting, collage, video), performative arts (theatre, dance, music, song), written arts (poetry, prose), storytelling (oral traditions), sports (walking, cycling) or a combination of these. This choice depends on what you are trying to find out, but ultimately the aim is to design activities that participants can get immersed in without feeling self-conscious.*

- 3. Go out into the field.** Find a place where participants feel comfortable – a neutral space or somewhere the researcher has less power. A community centre would be more appropriate than a university seminar room, for example. It can be useful to have someone to come along to help facilitate.

*It is important to leave space for reflection when using creative methods. Keep a written record either in the form of an online diary or blog, or a hand written notebook, and do not be tempted to only review and reflect on an ad hoc basis. Designate time for reflection after events, and record your reactions and emerging thoughts at specified review points. Build it in to your timetable.*

- 4. Use icebreakers.** It might take a while for participants to warm up. Start with a brief introduction to the research, and an icebreaker activity. This should be something easy and fun - it does not have to be connected to the research questions directly, but it should give participants the space and time to engage their 'voice' in different ways before starting with the main activity.
- 5. Start the activity.** Keep it simple – people can be quite put off if they feel that what you are asking them to do requires a great deal of skill. Try to keep it light, fun and participatory, and get a conversation going. Instead of an interview schedule, the researcher can introduce prompts, themes or questions as the activity unfolds. The point of this is for people to get so immersed in something that they almost forget that they are being interviewed and it becomes a more dynamic interaction.



## Step by step guide to using Participatory Qualitative Interviews:

*Participatory Qualitative Interviews are not for the faint hearted. This method takes guts and it takes time - it is not something that you can do in a half-hour interview. It can be incredibly tiring because you need to simultaneously organise the activities, listen, interact, record and support participants. This is an approach to interviewing that is really ramped up!*

**6. Record the conversation and the activity.** How you do this will depend on the activity and the participants, and could include video recording, audio recording or asking an assistant to take notes. Participants themselves can contribute, by taking photos, for example.

**7. Think about what to do with the data.**

This method will generate interesting and varied data in the form of diagrams, photographs, collages, artefacts, or audio and film recordings that can help you tell a story with more than just words. Thematic analysis can be used to connect these varied outputs with the original research aims and questions, and analysis can be seen as a process of cutting and sticking, collaging and building a picture through the data. Creating an exhibition is one way of sharing outputs from the research with participants and the wider public. Kate Reed's [Remembering Baby](#) exhibition is a powerful example of how findings from research into sensitive topics can be communicated creatively.



## Examples of using Participatory Qualitative Interviews in social science research

**Doctoral research on citizenship, community and belonging in South Wales and Singapore**

**Researcher: Dr Lucy Jackson, The University of Sheffield**

This research, undertaken between 2009 and 2012, aimed to explore how those without formal citizenship rights practised, performed and experienced citizenship and citizenship type practices in the place in which they lived. This research demonstrated that citizenship is not only a political status but is also a way of being. It is emotional, experienced, performed and practiced in and through everyday lives, through communities, networks, a sense of belonging and in negotiations of people's identities. The research was conducted with community organisations and groups who represented predominantly migrant women. Some were collective groups of likeminded individuals, very flexible and informal in nature, whilst other groups were selected by formal organisations supporting particular migrant identities in the different case study locations. What the organisations had in common was that they provided a sense of belonging for the individuals involved, whether formally or informally.

The research used a mix of qualitative research methods including interviews, focus groups, ethnography, archival material, auto ethnography, oral histories and storytelling. What became apparent early on in the research was the emotional depth associated with stories of belonging and community which were often quite difficult to put into words. Alongside this, I was working with communities of women where English was

often not their first language which made conversations around politicised terms, such as citizenship, quite difficult. The research methods were therefore adapted to become much more playful and interactive in nature. I worked to incorporate arts-based approaches into participatory interviewing; this involved drawing and painting, singing and dancing, as well as large scale art projects led by myself and the organisations. The participants and I also embarked on a series of informal letter writing and journal keeping, reflecting on their experiences 'in country'. This meant that participants had a choice of how to get involved and how to express themselves. Instead of having formal interviews or focus groups, the sessions became much more fluid in nature, based upon conversations around the 'thing' being created, which itself was linked to the research.

Giving participants the freedom to choose how to express themselves meant that I was able to access those emotional and often quite raw experiences, digging into what it meant to live as a migrant woman in different contexts. The auto ethnographic element (that is, my own participation in the writing and drawing) also gave participants more trust in me - I demonstrated my own (terrible) artistic skills as well as getting involved in physical activities. The Participatory Qualitative Interview approach therefore opens you up as a researcher to those potentialities

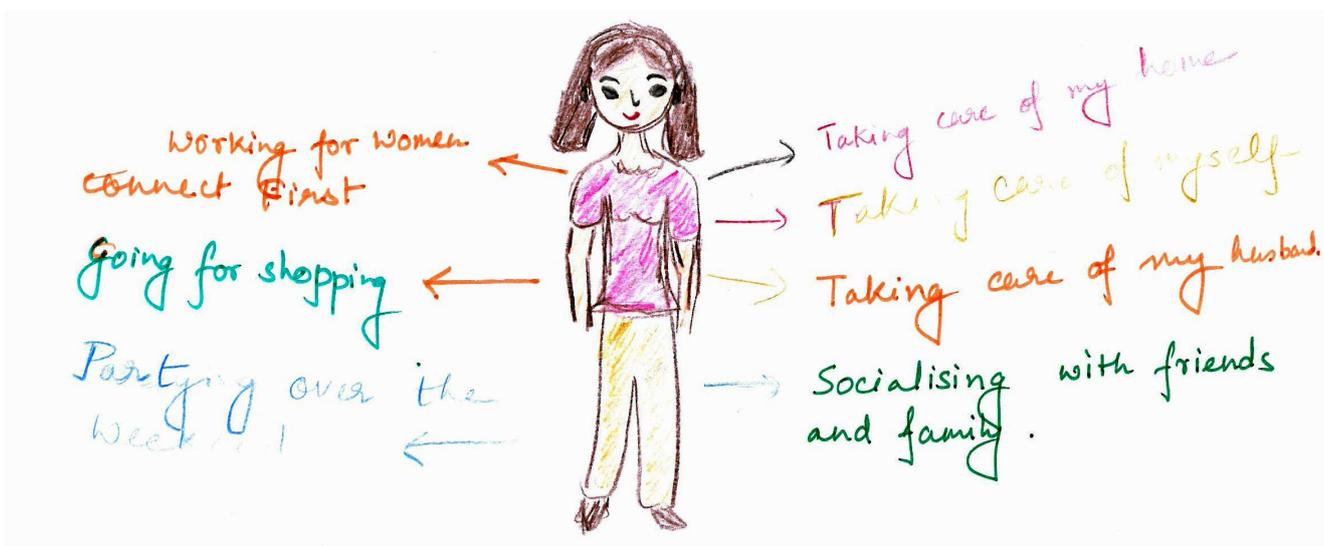
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and possibilities that you may not have imagined. You become part of the research and you therefore gain depth and experience. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the research meant that I gained participants' trust in a way I had not experienced before which

led to some wonderful insights. Included in this guide are just a couple of sketches which participants created and further examples of the creative products can be seen in my published research on this topic.

*Draw and write: What do you do in your community and with other people? Please draw the activities that you are involved in on a day to day basis - think about what you do in your local community, and with different people.*



*The image is a hand drawn depiction of the participant in a sort of spider diagram with links to the things that she sees as important to her and her community.*

*The image shows how a participant sees herself as connected to the local community; she sees herself in the context of the women's organisation and what she does there, as well as what she does in her personal life associated with her family and friends and as a mother.*



## Examples of using Participatory Qualitative Interviews in social science research

### Using creative methods when working with youth organisations

**Researchers: Dr Lucy Jackson, Dr Catherine Harris, Dr Lucy Mayblin, Dr Aneta Piekut (Project principal investigator Prof. Gill Valentine, The University of Sheffield).**

This research was conducted for the project [LIVEDIFFERENCE](#), a European Research Council (ERC) funded project led by Prof. Gill Valentine. This research programme involved five inter-linked projects which explored the extent and nature of everyday encounters with 'difference'. The example used here is from research that was conducted with a youth organisation which operated in a diverse area of a large UK city. The participants in the research were teenagers.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and the use of some highly emotive and politicised terms around diversity, inclusion and belonging, the research team took a creative approach. The research team worked with the organising group to set up an activity space and to arrange time where we could work with the young people. By using a community space in this way, multiple forms of engagement with the participants were

possible. This included a space for informal discussion alongside the playing of video games, a table with art materials to create images, pictures and sketches around the key themes of the research whilst talking to participants, and a 'Big Brother' diary room, where the participants interacted with 'Big Brother', answered questions and undertook participatory activities.

This approach made the research more dynamic and interesting for the participants, but it also made the research much more informal in nature. In research that covers sensitive topics such as diversity and belonging, participants might seem shy or lack confidence when discussing their own experiences. Providing multiple different ways to engage with the key themes meant that participants had considerable agency over how they told their stories and got involved.

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## Where else could Participatory Qualitative Interviews be used?

Participatory Qualitative Interviews can be used in a wide range of different sectors that deal with peoples' lived experiences (that you may or may not have yourself as a professional), and/or with people whose voices are not often heard in certain contexts or institutional processes. This method is particularly well suited to researching sensitive topics, and could be valuable, for example, in healthcare settings, with youth groups or with dementia patients. People working in these settings could think about the ways they could use Participatory Qualitative Interviews alongside other activities that are already occurring in these spaces, such as crafting (knitting, quilting, drawing) performance (dance, theatre, singing) or even sport (running, swimming, cycling). With an emphasis on encouraging participants to feel comfortable and to express themselves, Participatory Qualitative Interviews can be useful to organisations working with communities whose voices are less often heard, including non-native speakers, shy people, or those who are new to a place.

The possibility of tailoring the method and activities around the needs of different individuals and groups means that this approach could be used by charities, businesses or service providers working in a range of different contexts. In addition to generating valuable, creative data and fresh insight, Participatory Qualitative Interviews could be useful for increasing sensitivity and empathy to issues within these contexts, and for establishing better rapport with participants. Using this approach – possibly alongside activities that are already happening, or by enacting new activities - can lead to a deeper, reflexive analysis of people's experiences in these spaces. By engaging with creativity, and increasing self-awareness, it might

also assist various organisations or groups to gain a better understanding of the people that they are working with, and to proactively adapt to issues that they had not previously considered or focused on.

## Top tips

1. Be brave and bold, and do not be put off by people saying 'this is silly'. Be clear on what you want to do, and why.
2. Flexibility is key - be prepared for anything! It can help to have a big bag of tools (pens, pencils, cameras, jigsaw puzzles, craft materials, post-it notes...) that you can pull out if you need to try a fresh approach.
3. Keep a notebook with you at all times to record any observations, events or reflections during the process.
4. Because this approach is unpredictable, you are never quite sure what will come out in conversation with participants. Given that developing trusted relationships is integral to this research approach, it is inevitable that there will be some emotionally draining and upsetting situations.
5. Find a way to decompress. The activities should be fun, but you don't know what will come out and you might hear stories that you were not prepared to hear, which can be challenging.

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## Further reading

- 'Big Brother welcomes you': exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments.
- Mixed methodologies in emotive research: negotiating multiple methods and creating narratives in feminist embodied work on citizenship.
- A conversation between Kip Jones and Patricia Leavy: Arts-based research, performative social science and working on the margins.

The following are examples of research dissemination using creative and participatory approaches:

- The Virtual Patchwork Quilt: A Qualitative Feminist Research method
- Geraldine Pratt: Research on Filipino domestic workers' experience of living in Canada. Dissemination through Theatre in the play 'Nanay'
- The Remembering Baby exhibition is based on a research study about experiences of early-life loss and the impact of medical imaging on paediatric post-mortem. The project is funded by the ESRC and it is being carried out by a research team (led by Dr Kate Reed) at the University of Sheffield.

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