



Qualitative research guidelines

Including observational and ethnographic research

October 2006

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1: Recruitment	
A: Planning recruitment	4
B: Client Databases	7
2: During the Group	
A: Ensure Emotional Well-Being	9
B: Observation of Interviews and Group Discussions	12
C: Introducing the Observer	15
D: Primary Data and Recording of Interviews and Group Discussions	16
3: Other Types of Research	
A: Observational Research	19
B: Ethnographic Research	21

Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2005) and provide additional best practice guidance. Unless otherwise stated, Guidelines are not binding. Their aim is to promote professionalism in the conduct of research.

Research is founded upon the willing co-operation of the public and of business organisations. It relies on the confidence of those involved that it is conducted honestly, objectively, without unwelcome intrusion and without harm to respondents. Its purpose is to collect and analyse information and not to create sales or to influence the opinions of anyone participating.

Every respondent must be assured that research projects are carried out in strict accordance with the Code of Conduct and that their rights of privacy are respected.

Rules from the Code of Conduct applicable in each section of this document are stated in the shaded boxes. These rules are binding on MRS members and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice. Members are reminded that this document is designed to complement the MRS Code of Conduct and should not be consulted in isolation.

As specified in the Code, it is the responsibility of the researcher to keep abreast of any legislation which could affect research and to ensure that all those involved in a project are aware of and agree to abide by the MRS Code of Conduct.

This material is provided for information only. It is not legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. Specific legal advice should be taken in relation to specific issues.

Definitions

Qualitative research is defined as marketing and social research conducted whereby:

- the basic methodology involves techniques which seek to reach understanding through observation, dialogue and evocation, rather than measurement, and
- where the data collection process involves open-ended, non-directive techniques (not structured questionnaires), and
- where the data analysis output is descriptive and not statistical

1: Recruitment

A: Planning Recruitment

The Rules

- A1 Research must conform to the national and international legislation relevant to a given project including in particular the Data Protection Act 1998 or other comparable legislation applicable outside the UK.
- A3 Members must act honestly in dealings with Respondents, Clients (actual or potential), employers, employees, sub-contractors and the general public.
- B2 All written or oral assurances made by any Member involved in commissioning or conducting projects must be factually correct and honoured by the Member.
- B11 A follow up interview with a Respondent can be carried out only if the Respondent's permission has been obtained at the previous interview.
- The only exception to this is re-contact for quality control purposes.
- B12 Any re-contact must match the assurances given to Respondents at the time that permission was gained e.g. when re- contact was to occur, the purpose and by whom.
- B13 Respondent details must not be passed on to another third party for research or any other purposes without the prior consent of the Respondent. The only exception to this is if the Client is the Data Controller of the Respondent data.
- B17 Respondents must not be misled when being asked for cooperation to participate in a research project

B21	<p>Members must ensure that all of the following are clearly communicated to the Respondent :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the name of the interviewer (an Interviewer’s Identity Card must be shown if face to face); • an assurance that the interview will be carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct; • the general subject of the interview; • the purpose of the interview; • if asked, the likely length of the interview; • any costs likely to be incurred by the Respondent.
B34	<p>At the time of recruitment (or before the research takes place if details change after recruitment), Members must ensure that Respondents are told all relevant information as per rule B21 and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the location of the discussion and if it is to take place in a viewing facility; and • whether observers are likely to be present; and • when and how the discussion is to be recorded; and • the likely length of the discussion including the start and finish time; and • the Member, moderator and/or research agency that will be conducting the research
B35	<p>Members must ensure that completed recruitment questionnaires, incentive and attendance lists, or any other research information which identifies Respondents are not passed to Clients without the explicit permission of the Respondents; and Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that the documents are used only for the purpose agreed at the time of data collection.</p>

B62 Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that all hard copy and electronic lists containing personal data are held securely in accordance with the relevant data retention policies and/or contractual obligations.

Guidance

1. In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and to ensure adherence to Rule A1, most recruiters and agencies that recruit respondents must notify with the Office of the Information Commissioner, unless they only recruit on behalf of other agencies and do not hold respondent databases.

B: Client databases

The Rules

B7 Where lists of named individuals are used e.g. Client databases, the list source must be revealed at an appropriate point in the interview, if requested. This overrides the right to Client anonymity.

Guidance

1. Before agreeing to the receipt of client databases, the researcher or recruitment agency should ask the client (the data controller) to confirm that they are notified for 'research purposes' and thus that they have the right to pass customer information to a third party for research purposes.
2. If they ask, respondents must be told the primary source of the list, as stated in B7. This means telling them the name of the client company whose list it is, though this can be revealed at the end of the interview/group discussion rather than the beginning. This instruction must be contained within the recruitment instructions. If the client needs to remain anonymous at recruitment stage, then the respondent should be told and be given the choice not to proceed.
3. If a supplied list contains addresses that are incorrect or if an individual on the list has died, then that information may be passed back to the data controller, e.g., the client. Corrected data such as new addresses can not be passed back. In such circumstances the data controller should conduct a separate data cleansing exercise. Other incorrect information, for example about brand usership, cannot be passed back to the client.
4. Researchers and clients should agree the definitions of customers to be included on the lists. It is recommended that the researcher or recruitment agency checks if the client includes ex-directory telephone numbers and numbers that have been excluded by the Telephone Preference Service (to anticipate respondents' concerns). Researchers should also ask if the client is aware of any problems with the lists and advises the client not to provide any personal customer information that is not relevant to the study.

5. Clients should send 'comfort' letters on their own letterhead to all customers likely to be contacted before recruitment starts. This is particularly important when the customer information could be regarded as sensitive or private. It is also good practice for respondents to be able to ring a freephone telephone number if they want to opt out of the study.
6. Researchers/recruitment agencies should build sufficient time into the setting up of recruitment, to allow for lists to be produced, telephone searches to be done and recruitment to be completed satisfactorily.

2: During the Group

A: Ensuring Emotional Well-Being

The Rules

- A10 Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.
- B2 All written or oral assurances made by any Member involved in commissioning or conducting projects must be factually correct and honoured by the Member.
- B15 If there is to be any recording, monitoring or observation during an interview, Respondents must be informed about this both at recruitment and at the beginning of the interview.
- B17 Respondents must not be misled when being asked for cooperation to participate in a research project.
- B18 A Respondent's right to withdraw from a research project at any stage must be respected.
- B19 Members must ensure that Respondents are able to check without difficulty the identity and bona fides of any individual and/or their employer conducting a research project (including any sub-contractors).
- B21 Members must ensure that all of the following are clearly communicated to the Respondent :
- the name of the interviewer (an Interviewer's Identity Card must be shown if face to face);
 - an assurance that the interview will be carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct;
 - the general subject of the interview;

- the purpose of the interview;
- if asked, the likely length of the interview;
- any costs likely to be incurred by the Respondent.

B34

At the time of recruitment (or before the research takes place if details change after recruitment), Members must ensure that Respondents are told all relevant information as per rule B21 and:

- the location of the discussion and if it is to take place in a viewing facility; and
- whether observers are likely to be present; and
- when and how the discussion is to be recorded; and
- the likely length of the discussion including the start and finish time; and
- the Member, moderator and/or research agency that will be conducting the research.

Guidance

1. The potentially intrusive nature of qualitative research means that emotional well-being is an area of particular concern. The objectives of any study do not give the researcher a special right to intrude on a respondent's privacy nor to abandon normal respect for an individual's values.
2. In terms of sensitivity, topic areas can be divided into:
 - those topics that are judged sensitive to everyone, because of the nature of that subject;
 - those topics that may be sensitive to a group for cultural, religious or political reasons; and

- those topics that may be sensitive to a particular individual, because of that individual's past history, behaviour and attitudes.
3. In the case of the latter, researchers cannot take precautions in advance of the interviews, but can treat each case sensitively and individually, giving respondents a genuine opportunity to withdraw. Any topic can potentially be sensitive to an individual. Respondents who feel their privacy and personal sensitivities are not being recognised or respected may be less forthcoming. Equally, respondents who feel they have not been treated with honesty and openness may feel patronised. In both cases, the nature of their responses may be affected. In addition, these respondents may feel less willing to participate in further research.
 4. In accordance with Rules A10 and B21, where the topic is judged to be sensitive to most people, respondents must be told explicitly the subject and content of the discussion.
 5. In accordance with Rules B18 and B34, invitations should always make reference to respondents' rights to withdraw and withhold information and must state when audio or video recording is to be used and whether observers are likely to be present.
 6. Researchers should not ask respondents to reveal unnecessary personal identifiable information during the interview or discussion.
 7. At the beginning of a qualitative research session researchers should include a reminder that respondents need not answer all questions and are free to leave before the end of the session. Moderators must respect respondents' rights not to answer questions and not participate in discussions should they wish to do so.
 8. Respondents should feel they have a choice whether to participate in exercises where they may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, e.g. role playing exercises.
 9. In accordance with Rules B17 and B34, assurances as to the length of the interview must be honoured and, in the event of the discussion or interview running over time, respondents should feel they have the opportunity to leave.
 10. If the respondent asks who the client is, the Researcher must not lie. If there is a concern that giving respondents information about the client company may affect responses, then the respondents need not be told at the beginning of the group/interview but should be told at the end.

B: Observation of Interviews and Group Discussions

The Rules

- B34 At the time of recruitment (or before the research takes place if details change after recruitment), Members must ensure that Respondents are told all relevant information as per rule B21 and:
- the location of the discussion and if it is to take place in a viewing facility; and
 - whether observers are likely to be present; and
 - when and how the discussion is to be recorded; and
 - the likely length of the discussion including the start and finish time; and
 - the Member, moderator and/or research agency that will be conducting the research;
- B36 If Members have agreed with Clients that observers are to be present, Members must inform all observers fully about their legal and ethical responsibilities.
- B37 Members must make clear to Respondents the capacity in which observers are present; Clients must be presented as such, even if they are also Researchers and/or Members of MRS.
- B38 There are some situations where observers could adversely affect Respondents' interests and/or wellbeing, and in such instances, Members must ensure that Respondents are told at an appropriate stage the identity of any observer who might be present at the discussion or interview.
- B39 Members must ensure that, in instances where observers may know Respondents (as may occur in business-to-business research), Respondents are informed before the start that their interviews are to be observed, with a warning that the observer may include Clients who already know them.

B40	The issue of anonymity and recognition is a particular problem in business and employee research. If guarantees cannot be given then Members must ensure that observers are fully introduced before the group/interview begins and Respondents given a chance to withdraw.
B41	Members must ensure that Respondents on attendance at a venue are informed about the nature of any observation, monitoring or recording and Respondents are given the option of withdrawing from the group/interview.

Guidelines

1. The researcher and the client company should consider carefully whether the benefits of observation outweigh the disadvantages.
2. If the client wishes to observe interviews or groups for quality control or training reasons, then consideration should be given to the other options such as listening to audio-recordings (following the Guidelines on Primary Data in this document), or setting up dummy interviews/groups.
3. So that the researcher can assess the observer effect and interpret the group/interview responses with more confidence, only some of the groups/interviews on a project – ideally no more than half – should be observed. Where this is difficult to achieve, e.g. in small samples, then researcher and client should be mindful of the observer effect when interpreting the data.
4. Observation of interviews with two or three people can be particularly intrusive and therefore researchers should only consider such observation as acceptable in exceptional circumstances and ideally only for some of the interviews on that project.
5. In accordance with Rule A1, observers must not to note down respondents' personal data without their consent.
6. Researchers should apply their professional judgement when the combination of gender or age of respondents and/or subject matter could be considered sensitive.
7. There should ideally only be one observer per group/interview.

8. Researchers should advise observers prior to attending qualitative research sessions how best to ensure respondents' well-being and minimise the observer effect. Consideration should be given to aspects such as style of clothes, promptness, where the observer sits, whether the observer has a role on the group/interview, paying attention to all comments equally, note-taking and when questions may be asked.
9. When observing in a viewing facility, Researchers should advise observers of the potential damage to the group/interview dynamics from any form of interruption such as noise or light from behind the mirror, entering the interviewing room during the group/interview or sending in notes or slipping them under the door.
10. Researchers must advise observers of their responsibilities:
 - if any observer recognises any respondent, they must leave the observation room, and
 - audio and video recordings taken away afterwards by clients (with all of the respondents' consent) must only be used for the purposes to which respondents agreed that the recordings could be used.

C: Introducing the Observer

The Rules

B37 Members must make clear to Respondents the capacity in which observers are present; Clients must be presented as such, even if they are also Researchers and/or Members of MRS.

Guidance

1. Researchers should give a general explanation of why observers are present and what they will do (e.g. take notes).
2. Researchers must reassure respondents about the confidentiality of their responses and their personal details.
3. Clients should respect Researchers' recommendations that there are no observers on a particular project if there is a strong concern that introducing the client openly and honestly will affect the nature of the response.

D: Primary Data and Recording of Interviews and Group Discussions

The Rules

A1 Research must conform to the national and international legislation relevant to a given project including in particular the Data Protection Act 1998 or other comparable legislation applicable outside the UK.

B8 The anonymity of Respondents must be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.

Comment: Members must be particularly careful if sample sizes are very small (such as in business and employee research) that they do not inadvertently identify organisations or departments and therefore individuals.

B9 If Respondents have given consent for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, Members must:

- demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that it will only be used for the purpose for which it was collected and
- fully inform Respondents as to what will be revealed, to whom and for what purpose.

B34 At the time of recruitment (or before the research takes place if details change after recruitment), Members must ensure that Respondents are told all relevant information as per rule B21 and: the location of the discussion and if it is to take place in a viewing facility; and

- whether observers are likely to be present; and
- when and how the discussion is to be recorded; and
- the likely length of the discussion including the start and finish time; and
- the Member, moderator and/or research agency that will be conducting the research.

B35	Members must ensure that completed recruitment questionnaires, incentive and attendance lists, or any other research information which identifies Respondents are not passed to Clients without the explicit permission of the Respondents; and Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that the documents are used only for the purpose agreed at the time of data collection.
B42	Members must ensure that any material handed to Clients or included in reports, without consent from Respondents, is anonymised e.g. transcripts containing verbatim comments and projective material.
	<i>Comment: Special care must be taken when the universe is small, as in the case of some business to business research studies.</i>

Guidelines

1. The Data Protection Act 1998 stipulates that respondents have a right to know how their personal data (which includes audio recordings of their voice and video recordings of their voice and appearance) will be used. In accordance with the legislation and Rule A1, Researchers have a responsibility to inform respondents accordingly and ensure that the data will only be used in the way that respondents have been told it will be used.
2. In accordance with Rule B8, the anonymity of respondents must be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on. Researchers should take responsibility for all primary data. Materials resulting from projective techniques and produced in groups or depths are considered to be primary data.
3. In accordance with Rule B8, Researchers must ensure that qualitative data labelled as anonymised does not contain any identifiable data. Qualitative primary data is difficult to anonymise because an individual’s identity rests in their appearance, their voice, and in some cases, their turn of phrase.

4. In accordance with Rule B15, Researchers must ensure that qualitative groups are only recorded with the consent of the respondents. Viewing facilities must be reminded of this requirement.
5. In accordance with B35, audio and video recordings must not be released by the Researchers unless explicit permission has previously been obtained the respondents involved.
6. In accordance with Rule B9, researchers must ensure that respondents are given as much relevant information as possible about the future use of primary data in particular
 - to whom they are to be given
 - to whom they are to be shown
 - for what purposes they are to be used
7. In accordance with Rule 48, researchers must ensure that data collected for research purposes is not used for non-research purposes, for example, training or selling without the explicit and prior permission of respondents.
8. Researchers should inform clients of restrictions on the use of primary data at the start of the project where there is any possibility that the client may later ask to see copies of these.
9. Researchers should ensure that sufficient contracts are in place to allow recompense from the client for any costs arising from a request to obtain permission from respondents for release of primary data.

3: Other Types of Research

A: CCTV Observational Research

The Rules

- A1 Research must conform to the national and international legislation relevant to a given project including in particular the Data Protection Act 1998 or other comparable legislation applicable outside the UK.
- B47 Members must ensure that all of the following are undertaken when observation equipment is being used:
- Clear and legible signs must be placed in areas where surveillance is taking place.
 - Cameras must be sited so that they monitor only the areas intended for surveillance.
 - Signs must state the individual/organisation responsible for the surveillance, including contact information and the purpose of the observation.

Guidance

There are two types of observation: participant, where the individual is interviewed as well as observed and non-participant, where the individual is not interviewed. Audio and Visual recordings in any format of individuals are defined as personal data under the Data Protection Act 1998.

When it comes to participant observation, all the normal rules and practices apply (as detailed in sections 1 and 2 of this guidance).

For non-participant observation, such as using CCTV cameras for research observation, in addition to the rules above:

1. The quality of the recorded image should be appropriate to meet the purpose of the surveillance.
2. Images must be retained no longer than is necessary.
3. Disclosure of recorded images to third parties must only be made in limited and prescribed circumstances and with the individual's consent.
4. Adequate security measures must be in place to ensure against any unauthorised processing, loss, destruction or damage to the data.
5. In accordance with Rule A1, Researchers that use CCTV must follow Security Industry Authority licencing requirements where applicable. For more information please see www.sia.gov.uk .

8: Ethnographic research

The Rules

A10 Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.

B2 All written or oral assurances made by any Member involved in commissioning or conducting projects must be factually correct and honoured by the Member.

B15 If there is to be any recording, monitoring or observation during an interview, Respondents must be informed about this both at recruitment and at the beginning of the interview.

Comment: Rule A10 of the Code requires Members to take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project. This may have particular pertinence in an ethnographic and observational setting. Issues to be considered are:

- *the need to be sensitive to the possibility that their presence may, at times, be seen as an unwarranted intrusion; here safeguards, and the ability to end the observation quickly, must be built into any ethnographic situation.*
- *the need to be sensitive to the possibility that Respondents may become over involved with them at a personal level.*
- *the need to be sensitive to the possibility of 'observation fatigue'; again there is value in having the ability to end the observation quickly within any ethnographic situation.*

Guidance

1. Researchers should provide clients and sponsors of research with a clear account of any limitations involved in specific research projects.

2. Researchers should avoid situations where they could become vulnerable to accusations of misconduct (especially when working in respondents' homes) or where they became over-involved at an emotional level with the observed
3. In accordance with the Data protection Act 1998 and Rule A1, respondents must be told what will happen to any data gathered in the process of observation.
4. Researchers should inform respondents of the extended nature of ethnographic research at the point of recruitment before agreeing to participation and should be made aware of their 'right to withdraw' at any time.
5. Researchers should inform respondents (at the point of recruitment) of any activities they will be asked to engage in or undertake.
6. Researchers should inform respondents of the purpose and rationale for observation of their behaviour.
7. Where children and young people are to be the subject of observation, for instance where the Researcher is living with a family, the MRS guidelines relating to children's research should also be consulted, in particular in relation to the need to obtain checks from the Criminal Records Bureau.