

# It Is Not Just Touchy-Feely: Understanding How Rigorous Qualitative Methodology Can Lead to Effective Implementation of Community Interventions

*Answers to the May 2015 Annals of Emergency Medicine Journal Club*

## Guest Contributor

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**Editor's Note:** You are reading the 45th installment of *Annals of Emergency Medicine* Journal Club. This Journal Club refers to the article by Sasson et al<sup>1</sup> published in the May 2015 edition of *Annals*. Information about Journal Club can be found at <http://www.annemergmed.com/content/journalclub>. Readers should recognize that these are suggested answers. We hope they are accurate; we know that they are not comprehensive. There are many other points that could be made about these questions or about the article in general. Questions are rated “novice,” (NOV) “intermediate,” (INT), and “advanced” (ADV) so that individuals planning a journal club can assign the right question to the right student. The “novice” rating does not imply that a novice should be able to spontaneously answer the question. “Novice” means we expect that someone with little background should be able to do a bit of reading, formulate an answer, and teach the material to others. Intermediate and advanced questions also will likely require some reading and research, and that reading will be sufficiently difficult that some background in clinical epidemiology will be helpful in understanding the reading and concepts. We are interested in receiving feedback about this feature. Please e-mail [journalclub@acep.org](mailto:journalclub@acep.org) with your comments.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

1. This study used focus groups and structured interviews, which are both techniques of grounded theory.
  - (INT) A. Is this study design appropriate, given the authors' goals? Why or why not? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these techniques?
  - (NOV) B. What is grounded theory? Describe 3 other general qualitative study designs.
2.
  - (INT) A. Has this study made you think about community planning differently? Elaborate.
  - (INT) B. If you were to replicate this study in your community, what factors do you think would influence rates of bystander cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)?
  - (INT) C. What community groups and stakeholders would you need to engage? Would this call for any policy, law, or service changes in your community?
3. This study used purposeful and snowball sampling techniques.
  - (INT) A. How are these sampling techniques defined? Given the study design and target population, what other sampling methods might be used here? Discuss the limitations of the sampling techniques used versus other choices.
  - (ADV) B. How is an appropriate sample size determined in qualitative methodology? Was the sample size adequate here? Elaborate.
4. Examine the interview guide.
  - (NOV) A. What are key factors in designing questions for semistructured interviews?
  - (ADV) B. How might you validate the guide? Given the target population, what factors would be important in determining its adequacy? What options would be available to address potential concerns?
  - (INT) C. What techniques used by the interviewers or moderators are necessary to ensure the success of the study? What is the purpose of pre-focus group questions?
  - (NOV) D. What other questions might you like to ask?
5. This study stratified the focus groups by neighborhood and language preference. What is the purpose of stratification? What other stratifications or matching may be important in this study, and how might these choices impose limitations on the results?
  - (ADV) A. Are the conclusions that the authors drew valid?
6.
  - (INT) A. Are the conclusions that the authors drew valid?

- (ADV) B. How would you go about verifying the themes elicited from this study and determine whether they are applicable to a wider population?
- (ADV) C. What are some next-step appropriate studies?

### ANSWER 1

*Q1. This study used focus groups and structured interviews, which are both techniques of grounded theory.*

*Q1.a Is this study design appropriate, given the authors' goals? Why or why not? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these techniques?*

The goal of the authors was to identify barriers to performing bystander CPR in low-income, diverse populations.<sup>1</sup> Given the limited previous research in this area and the potential complexity of factors involved, a qualitative approach as a first step is likely ideal. A qualitative as opposed to a quantitative design is best used when a researcher is attempting to understand the point of view of participants, along with the context in which an event may occur and what that means.<sup>2</sup> These approaches allow generation of a narrative, which can lead to a more meaningful and better-informed quantitative study. In addition, the qualitative process generally empowers the individuals involved in the study, leading to more effective interventions in a subsequently invested community.

The use of a combination of focus groups and semistructured interviews is an elegant approach that mitigates some of the inherent weaknesses of either technique alone. An advantage of focus groups is that they allow individuals to generate, validate, and reject ideas from one another, leading to both consensus themes for the group and divergent themes. Disadvantages of focus groups are due to restrictions that a group setting may place on an individual's responses, such as the presence of one or more dominant participants, people being afraid to speak up, and the quality and influence of the facilitator. In contrast, semistructured interviews give more time to the individual, allowing a potentially more detailed analysis of particular questions by each person without the influence of a group. The success of the interview largely depends on the interviewer and the questions being asked. The researcher must take into account that the responses of the individual will be influenced and framed by the questions.<sup>2,3</sup>

*Q1.b What is grounded theory? Describe 3 other general qualitative study designs.*

Grounded theory is a qualitative study approach that focuses on identifying and verifying a theory or theories that are grounded in the actual social world of the study subjects.<sup>2</sup> Examples of grounded theory techniques include

participant observation, focus groups, and semistructured or structured interviews.<sup>2</sup>

Three other general qualitative study designs are ethnography, phenomenology, and participatory action research. Ethnographic research focuses on telling the entire story of a group, including daily life, cultural beliefs, and the meaning behind the full array of activities, behaviors, events, and lifestyle. Ethnography is commonly used in anthropology. Techniques include unstructured interviews, participant observation, and studying artifacts. Note that the use of the word *culture* does not limit the use of this technique to the study of an ethnic group. It can also be used to study organizations, programs, or other groups of people with a common social problem. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of a particular lived experience. It is commonly used to study depression, substance abuse, or physical abuse. Techniques used include detailed interviews, writing, and art. In participatory action research, the researcher partners with the participants, who in turn research themselves and their sociocultural experiences and settings. This type of research is particularly empowering to the subjects.<sup>2</sup>

### ANSWER 2

*Q2.a Has this study made you think about community planning differently? Elaborate.*

Yes. It is hoped that this study has expanded your appreciation for the value of qualitative research in community planning. Generally, qualitative techniques are effective at empowering the community that a health care professional wishes to assist or influence by engaging community members and allowing them to take ownership of the problem(s) and solutions(s) they are facing. It typically leads to valuable partnerships both within and without the community. A universal theme for qualitative researchers is that they are always surprised by at least a few of the findings that the study participants identify. Based on overall differences in perspective and value between participants and researcher, factors are brought to light that the researcher would never have identified through other techniques. This helps to shape shared priorities that lead to more effective community interventions.

*Q2.b If you were to replicate this study in your community, what factors do you think would influence rates of bystander cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)?*

Large inner-city communities throughout the country likely encounter barriers to learning and performing bystander CPR similar to those identified in this study. Distrust of law enforcement and financial concerns are likely important in many low-income communities throughout

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