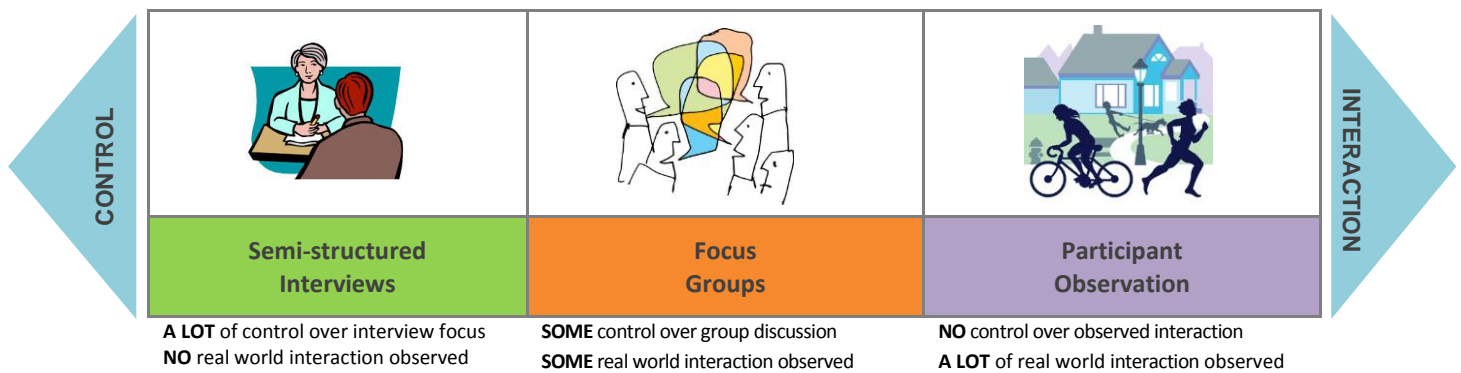


**The Qualitative Methods Control-Interaction Continuum:  
 Semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation**

Qualitative data collection methods explore experience, feelings and thinking processes. They make sense of reality in terms of the meanings people give to them. They have in common a focus on language (verbal and non-verbal) rather than numbers and measures. However, they can vary significantly on the amount of control the researcher has over the information being collected and the level of real world interaction observed during the data collection process.



Definition		
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS are <b>one-on-one encounters</b> between the researcher and the interviewee that aim to gather <b>in-depth information</b> about the interviewee's experiences. The interviewer guides the conversation with a pre-determined list of questions, while allowing the interviewee some freedom to move in different directions.	FOCUS GROUPS are group discussions that explore a <b>specific topic</b> . They are conducted by a group of participants who have at least one <b>common characteristic</b> and are <b>usually strangers</b> to each other. They provide information that would be less accessible without <b>group interaction</b> .	PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION is an observation encounter that places the investigator <b>inside the everyday life</b> of the study participants. It uses <b>direct observation</b> to gather information to understand experiences and meanings from the point of view of the participants.
Advantages		
Gathers focused, in-depth information on the topic of interest. No group coordination is required.	Balances focus/control and integration. Can gather a lot of information in a short period of time. Participants can build off each other's ideas.	Permits the observation of real-world interaction.
Disadvantages		
No interaction between participants is observed. Usually more time-consuming than focus groups.	Not as focused as semi-structured interviews. The interaction is artificially produced by the researcher. Popular group opinions/strong voices can dominate the discussion.	The participant-researcher doesn't control the events. It can be time consuming.

# CRICH Survey Research Unit – Qualitative Data Collection Methods

## Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (also called in-depth interviews) aim to capture rich nuanced stories that explore the subjective experiences of the interviewees, one-on-one with the interviewer. Most semi-structured interviews:

- Have a guide, composed by open-ended questions, which the interviewer will use to capture previously identified areas of interest.
- Will make extensive use of probing questions to get to in-depth exploration and understanding.
- Are conducted in a non-judgmental manner, to give freedom for the interviewee to express his perspective without feeling pressured or judged.
- Have a duration of 45 min to 1.5 hours.
- Will be audio-recorded for future analysis.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups are group discussions guided by a moderator (investigator). The main unit of analysis for this method is the interaction between the individuals and the group. When you analyse what each individual says, you consider the group context. When you analyse the discussion produced by the group, you consider the individuals that were part of that discussion.

Most focus groups:

- Include people who share at least one characteristic (e.g. experiences of homelessness or substance use) and generally don't know each other.
- Have high moderator/facilitator involvement.
- Rely on a relatively structured guide of open-ended questions that the moderator will use to facilitate the discussion.
- Have 6 to 10 participants per group.
- Have a duration of 1.5 to 2 hours per session.
- Have a total of 3 to 4 focus groups with each type of participant, stopping when you reach saturation (you are not finding new information).
- Will be audio-recorded for future analysis.

Focus groups can help foster free expression of ideas and are considered by some scholars as a more empowering method than semi-structured interviews since it reduces the influence (power) of the interviewer (researcher) and allows free sharing of experiences and perspectives.

## Participant Observation

Participant observation aims to generate knowledge based on day-to-day life experiences. The researcher approaches the participants in their own environment and tries to learn what life is like for them and what are the contextual factors that impact their life (e.g. social, cultural, political).

- Direct observation is the primary method of gathering information, but it can be combined with other strategies (e.g. recording, photography, gathering of artifacts or documents, interviews, sketch maps).
- Participant observations may be collected by a team or a single researcher.
- The researcher usually keeps a diary or log of activities/experiences/contextual notes.
- Researcher-participant involvement can range from marginal roles to insider/membership status.
- This method is commonly used in combination with other methods as a way to check self-reported data or generate exploratory questions/hypotheses.

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