

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Informant

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The informant is a special category of research participant because of a particular expertise or knowledge that is brought to qualitative research. Informants know and understand the kind of information that is of interest to researchers. They offer an insider's perspective and in-depth information that can represent the views of a group or even a community. It is the capacity to represent the knowledge of a larger group that distinguishes informants from other types of participants such as respondents to a questionnaire and people who are the subject of observation.

Qualitative researchers use informants in many research contexts, particularly ethnographies, needs assessments, focus groups, policy evaluations, and action research. An informant's contribution to research may be a single interview or continual involvement. An informant will usually provide data through in-depth interviews, often face to face or by telephone. Sometimes an informant will assist during all stages of the research cycle, from identification of research questions to reviewing drafts of research findings.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using informants. Informants are advantageous because they can assist researchers in gaining trust and credibility [p. 431 ↓] within a community, they allow the collection of in-depth information and continuing clarification of data, they may represent a diversity of people's views (including those of silent minorities), they may save researchers time and resources, and they are important gatekeepers for gaining access to additional participants. Disadvantages include the possibility that informants will pass on their own biases and political agendas, thereby influencing the reliability and validity of information obtained. The informant technique can easily be combined with other methods, and triangulation of informant data by using other techniques of data collection is recommended.

Good informants are more than just experts in the area of inquiry; they also reflect on it. This means that they can express a range of informed thoughts, feelings, insights, opinions, and facts about a topic. Researchers will often choose informants by asking members of a community to identify individuals who are both knowledgeable and respected for their expertise in the subject of inquiry. For example, to gain an understanding of popular culture in a high school, informants might include leaders

from the student “in-groups” as well as teachers who are respected by students. These informants may suggest additional informants.

An informant is unique by virtue of particular status, experience, or knowledge. An informant is “in the know” for whatever a researcher is investigating. During the initial stages of research, an informant may give new information to a researcher. During the later stages, the information should serve to clarify and validate what the researcher has learned.

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See also

Further Readings

Shenton, A., & Hayter, S. Strategies for gaining access to organizations and informants in qualitative studies. *Education for Information* (2004), vol. 22. pp. 223–231.

Tremblay, M. The key informant technique: A nonethnographic application. *American Anthropologist* (1957), vol. 59. pp. 688–701.