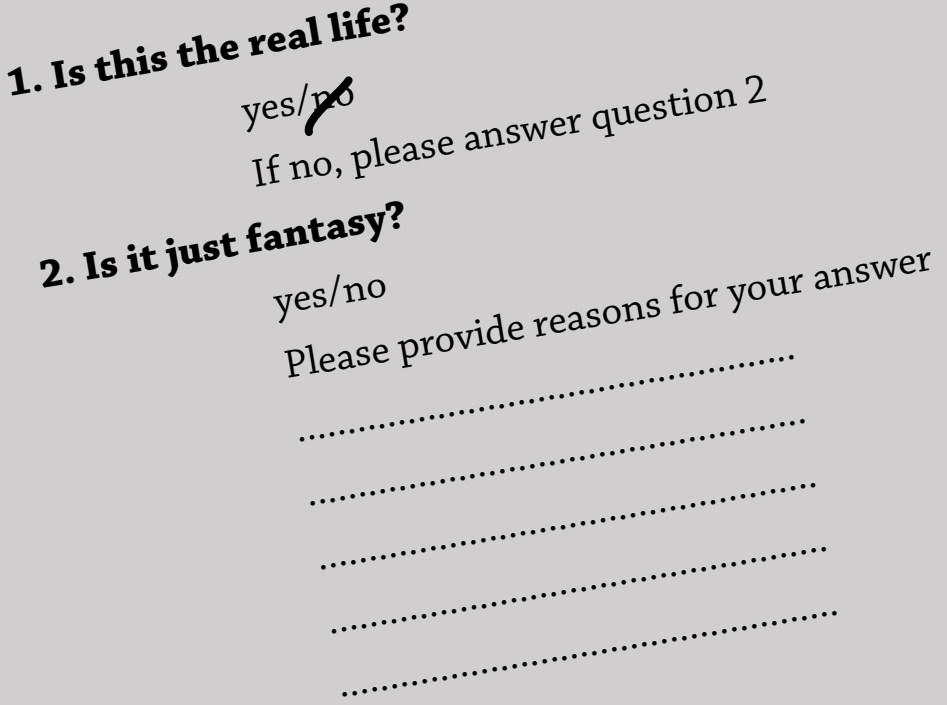

Qualitative methods are generally associated with the evaluation of social dimensions. Qualitative methods provide results that are usually rich and detailed, offering ideas and concepts to inform your research. Qualitative methods can tell you how people feel and what they think, but cannot tell you how many of the target population feel or think that way as quantitative methods can.

Social survey/questionnaire

What is the method?

Social surveys are a questionnaire-based method of research that can produce both qualitative and quantitative information depending on how they are structured and analysed. This section focuses on the use of surveys to collect and analyse qualitative data. Many of the issues and considerations are the same as for the quantitative use of surveys, and more detail can be found in the earlier section of this handbook.

When should it be used?

Questionnaire surveys can be used in a wide range of settings and to gather a variety of different types of information. You may be evaluating a programme in which a wide range of projects have been commissioned, and want to gather the views of a wide range of project managers, or you may be measuring the impact of an initiative on the business community in a specific geographical area. A small-scale qualitative survey may be conducted to explore in more detail the findings of qualitative research.

What do I need to consider?

Many of the considerations for a social survey are the same as for a quantitative survey, however we define a social survey as one where less statistical rigour is required, where sample sizes are not as large, and with results not expected to be significant of the wider population. A social survey may have a greater focus on collecting rich and detailed qualitative data.

Population

A number of questions about the proposed population for a social survey need to be considered. Such as are there language issues? And

what are the geographic restrictions? These are the same issues as for quantitative surveys.

Sampling
The sample is the section of the wider population that will be engaged in the survey. Detailed consideration of sampling still needs to be made even when not striving for statistical significance. It is still important to understand who the respondent is and what your sampling frame is going to be.

Format
A social survey will usually be a cross-sectional survey used to gather information on a small sample population at a single point in time. An example of a cross-sectional survey would be a questionnaire that collects data on peoples' experiences of a particular initiative. However, a qualitative survey could equally be used in a longitudinal study, perhaps returning to particular individuals over time to measure the impact of an intervention on the direction of someone's life.

Questions
There are a whole range of questions to be asked in relation to survey design, such as: What types of questions can be asked? How complex will the questions be? Will screening questions be needed? Can question sequence be controlled? Will lengthy questions be asked? Will long response scales be used? A social survey will be more interested in qualitative findings, in recording peoples' opinions and perceptions, and therefore will make more use of open questions where respondents can give their own responses to a set question. Open questions will begin with what, why, how, or describe, to elicit rich qualitative information.

Open questions can be used in a variety of ways:

Usage	Example
As a follow-on from closed questions, to develop a more detailed response.	'If answering yes to question 7, please provide the reasons for this'
To find out more about a person, their thoughts, needs, problems, etc.	Why is that so important to you?
To get people to realise the extent of their problems.	What effect does this have on your family life?
To get people to reflect on the impact of something or some change.	How has this made a difference to you?

Administration
The costs, required facilities, time, and personnel needed to conduct an effective survey are often underestimated, even when it is not on a large scale. There should be an administrative system in place to deal with the questionnaires for when they are returned/completed. This may include numbering the questionnaires, recording what action has been taken with them, entering the results into a spreadsheet/database etc.

How should it be used?

Surveys can be carried out by phone, post, email, website or face-to-face, for detailed pros and cons of these delivery methods see the earlier section on qualitative surveys. In collecting rich qualitative survey data, the most effective method would be via face to face, administered surveys, as the researcher would be able to use prompts to encourage people to give more detailed answers. This does however introduce a bias, which needs to be understood and controlled as much as possible, i.e. by using standard prompts. In qualitative surveys, it is necessary that the interviewer conduct the interview with total objectivity, so that respondents are not influenced by any outside source in their responses. For this reason, interviews should be conducted by well-trained and qualified interviewers.

What is the output?

The data that a social survey can produce is very much dependent on how the questionnaire is constructed. However, the data can be very useful for providing an overall picture of the way in which a project or programme is being implemented and how effectively it is impacting upon its target audience. Qualitative data output will be in a text, audio or picture format, and each answer may be very different from another. This can make collection of data more difficult, and a way of collating data needs to be considered early in the process.

How should it be analysed?

The Quantification of Qualitative Survey Data
Surveys can be analysed by collating the frequency of responses to each of the questions on the survey form. This can be done manually using a

"frequency table", which can be easily set up on an Excel spreadsheet to analyse descriptive statistics.

QSR NUD*IST and NVIVO are qualitative data analysis packages, which enable non-statistical information from interviews, group work, observations, audio, video, pictures or documents to be analysed according to chosen criteria. For example, it is possible to use the package to 'pull out' all material relating to key words or phrases (e.g. neighbourhood renewal) and then sub-divide the data into more specific areas of analysis (e.g. statement of use, problems, projects). This is a powerful piece of software that can provide clarity to wide range of often complicated written or media materials.

Case study: Using surveys to evaluate a project

A programme targeted on helping young people back into work through training wants to evaluate how well it is achieving its objectives. It uses a survey to canvas the views of young people who have been on the programme to date. The survey asks them closed questions about what training they have attended and how useful they have found the training (on a scale of 1:4). The survey also uses open questions to ask young people about what their plans are for the future as a result of the training (i.e. has it helped them to consider applying for full time work? Or further education opportunities?). The qualitative data is analysed and this shows that the young people have gained in confidence, are looking to go into further education or training or have already secured job interviews in a range of occupational fields, however there is a distinct focus on work in the field of construction.

The results of the survey are analysed and this provides conclusions about overall success of the programme, which allows the programme manager to draw conclusions and consider design issues for making the programme more effective in the future.

Further Reading

See **Question Bank** for details of question design - http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) – http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/ - provides practical support, training and information in the use of a range of software programs designed to assist qualitative data analysis. Also provides various platforms for debate concerning the methodological and epistemological issues arising from the use of such software packages.

Research Observatory, University of the West of England - http://ro.uwe.ac.uk/RenderPages/RenderHomePage.aspx - the site is divided into topic areas with each topic area containing a number of learning units and a collection of resources about a particular subject related to research.

Interviews

What is the method?

One of the most popular and frequently used methods of gathering information from people about anything is by interviewing them. It is also the most popular method used within the social sciences. There is a continuum of formality around interviewing and it covers a multitude of techniques, from informal "chats" maybe arranged as "vox-pops" right through to highly structured, formal interviews, taped and transcribed.

The different types and styles of interview elicit very different types of information. Conducting interviews is an interpersonal process and as an investigator you must be very aware of your own behaviours and assumptions in the context. Interviews are not "neutral" social spaces and you must be respectful and maintain appropriate boundaries at all times.

What do I need to consider?

Interviews are a qualitative method of research often used to obtain the interviewees' perceptions and attitudes to the issues. The key issue

with interviewing is making decisions about who are the key people to talk to and what type of interview are you going to use.

Interview Style
There are three clearly identifiable styles of interview- structured, semi-structured and unstructured:

Structured - Follows a set of specific questions, which are worked through systematically. This type of interview is used when the researcher wishes to acquire information where the responses are directly comparable.

Semi-structured - This is a more commonly used interview technique that follows a framework in order to address key themes rather than specific questions. At the same time it allows a certain degree of flexibility for the researcher to respond to the answers of the interviewee and therefore develop the themes and issues as they arise.

Unstructured - This method of interview does not follow any predetermined pattern of questions or themes. Rather, the interviewer will address the issues as they emerge in the interview. The method is useful when the researcher wishes to explore the full breadth of a topic.

Interview Type
These are some of the types of interviews:

Fact finder - This type of interview is used to obtain specific information from an interviewee and usually includes structured or standardised interview questions (the wording of the questions and the order in which they are asked is the same). It is used when some information is already known and there is a need to gain a more in-depth insight. An example of when a fact finder interview would be appropriate is when interviewing a project officer as part of an evaluation of their project. Quantitative (or 'hard') information is usually already known (such as outputs and funding data), therefore the interview could be used to discover qualitative information that the hard data cannot portray, such as the 'softer' outcomes of the project.

Idea generator - In many respects, this type of interview is the opposite of the fact finder interview. It is used when the interviewer has no preconceptions about what might be discovered over the course of the interview and results can be used to set the parameters or framework for the study. Interview questions are loosely structured allowing maximum flexibility to explore a range of issues. Idea generator interviews are usually applied at the start of a research project in order to discover and explore issues from a particular group or community. For example, in order to develop a community cohesion strategy, idea generator interviews may be used to find out what community cohesion means to different groups in the community.

Exploratory - These are the most frequently used type of interview as they are relevant to most types of research project. They are usually conducted with representatives that have a strategic role to play in the research. These types of interview require some degree of prior knowledge about the research subject as they are about testing hypotheses, making connections between other elements of the research, ensuring the strategic fit and progressing the findings of the research forward (e.g. senior officials from a local authority may be interviewed using this method in order to find out future plans and priorities and how they fit in with others' plans and priorities).

Experiential - This type of interview aims to draw out people's feelings, perceptions and experiences over a specific period of time (e.g. the duration of a regeneration programme or project). This provides rich, in-depth material about how the subject under investigation has affected an individual's life on a personal level. Experiential interviews may be used to elicit information from people who have benefited from a community project or who live in an area that has received regeneration monies. Therefore these interviews can map the feelings and impressions that any changes have made and add a 'story' to the quantitative or 'hard' data.

	Pros	Cons
Face to Face	People can be very generous with their time and expertise	Appropriateness of setting
	Interpersonal dynamics and establishing trust may yield insights	Balance responsibility to your interviewees and needs of investigation
Telephone	In-depth examination of topic possible	Can be time intensive
	Can do more without travel-time, from your desk	Less opportunity to establish rapport

When should I use this method?

Interviews are typically used when seeking the views and opinions of people with a specific perspective. They can be conducted by phone or face to face. They offer particular advantages in terms of acquiring information, which might not otherwise be shared in a group setting.

What type of data is produced?

The nature of the data will vary depending on the specific type of interview undertaken by the researcher. Some people prefer to take their own notes, others prefer to tape and transcribe verbatim, a lot depends on the preference of the interviewer.

How can I analyse and use the data?

The information obtained from interviews can be used in two key ways:

Thematic generation - identifying and drawing upon common themes across the interviews;

Citation - directly quoting parts of the interview in the main body of the report.

Quotes have to be referenced properly. For example, you may wish to refer to the title of the interviewee in identifying who made the quote (eg project manager). Remember that some information provided during interviews may be confidential. In such cases, you should only refer to the broad theme or argument being made rather than identifying who said it.

Further reading

Top tips for interviewing – Research Observatory, University of the West of England
http://ro.uwe.ac.uk/RenderPages/RenderLearningObject.aspx?Context=7&Area=1&Room=3&Constellation=25&LearningObject=124

Discussion groups

What is the method?

Discussion groups (also known as 'focus' groups) are an example of a technique imported into social research from market research. They have been widely used in political circles to "road test" policies. A discussion groups consists of a number of individuals you invite to discuss their views on a particular topic, typically involving between 6 and 12 people, which is conducted specifically to get a group of people's views on a subject. Groups can be constructed in order to attempt to recreate demographics.

When should it be used?

Discussion groups are best applied when rich, in-depth material from a number of people is required. Being part of a group often creates a more relaxed atmosphere than a one-to-one interview. Therefore, information gathered from discussion groups is often more varied than if participants had been interviewed on a one-to-one basis. Another advantage of using discussion groups, as opposed to one-to-one interviews, is that they provide in-depth information from a number of individuals simultaneously, making it a time effective method of gathering data.

What do I need to consider?

Practical issues

Discussion groups usually last one hour or so and include between six to twelve participants. Participant recruitment is very important and can be done through a range of methods, including client contact lists, existing networks and databases, advertising in appropriate public places and via the media, and 'hanging around' places asking people to join in. These varied methods of recruitment mean that discussion groups can be targeted at different participants, including groups traditionally considered 'hard to reach', such as young people and people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. Incentivising participants for their time requires some ethical consideration. However, expenses for travel should always be provided, as well as food and sometimes vouchers or cash payment.

Decide on the make up of the groups - identify the key groups and individuals that you need to speak to depending on what you need to find out. Identify the individuals you need to contact. You may know of people directly or you may require the assistance of others to provide you with a 'route in' to finding participants (eg project staff, community champions). If this is the case, simply outline what you intend to do and enquire as to who they think the best people to involve in the focus group would be. However, be aware that you should try to attract a range of participants with different views and experiences and that relying on one person to find all of your participants may limit this taking place.

Arrange a location - ideally the discussion group should be held in a location that is familiar to the participants, as this familiarity reduces the anxiety of the participant. The next step is to contact all potential participants to invite them to the group, tell them what it is about, and inform them of the time, location etc. Ensure that you have more contact names than you need for the discussion group as some people may not wish to be involved.

Questions

The types of questions that could be asked during a discussion group can be similar to interview questions, such as fact-finding, idea generating, exploratory and experiential. The main rationale for choosing to undertake group discussions as opposed to interviews should not be the type of questions you are asking, rather to whom you are asking the questions. Within group discussions having things to show or to demonstrate can really help the discussion as people interact with each other and the stimulus provided.

Facilitation

Focus group facilitation is a very specific skill, groups are notoriously susceptible to dynamics and can be quite difficult to "control", consequently if your requirements or parameters are very tightly defined then a focus group may be inappropriate. Some people find such situations intimidating and do not contribute as much as they would in a one-to-one situation whilst some people may affect the dynamics by dominating proceedings.

- In preparing for the discussion, it is worthwhile having a shortlist of questions, ideas and thoughts on the topic. The list could be useful in starting the discussion and ensuring it flows continuously.
- Ask relevant and open questions so that the discussion has breadth. It is important that the group has a discussion rather than a question and answer session. Therefore try to steer clear of questions that are narrow and can be answered easily without discussion.
- Encourage group interaction and participation. All members of the group should make a contribution to the discussion. Try to avoid just one or two people dominating.
- Pursue, capture and develop emerging issues. A good facilitator should spot issues that are emerging in the discussion and try to get the group to discuss them in more detail.
- Try to ensure that the discussion remains focused on the key themes or issues.

Recording the discussion

This can be done either through the use of a tape recorder or by taking notes. Tape recording the discussion is useful in ensuring that no important points are missed and enables the facilitator to focus on

guiding the discussion rather than taking notes. However, you will need to make sure that you have a good quality tape recorder in order to pick-up the group discussion. A good alternative is to have a note-taker sit in on the discussion.

How should it be used?

Discussion groups are used when seeking the views, perceptions and opinions of people in an open forum. They are often used when more in-depth information is required than that which can be gained from a questionnaire. Compared with interviews, they can be used when confidentiality is not an issue and where it is felt that participants are more likely to contribute within a group setting rather than on a one-to-one basis. They can often be used to explore issues emerging from other types of research (eg interviews, surveys) in more depth.

What is the output?

The discussion group produces qualitative data about thoughts, views, experiences etc.

How should it be analysed?

Use the information from interviews to identify the relevant themes that emerge from the discussions to put into your evaluation report. There are also statistical packages that you can use to analyse this type of data including:

NUD*IST: a qualitative data analysis package which enables non statistical information from interviews, group work, observation etc to be analysed according to chosen criteria. For example, it is possible to use the package to pull out all material relating to key words or phrases (eg neighbourhood renewal). If recorded, you may not need to transcribe the whole discussion but just make relevant notes from the tape. This will enable you to quote directly from the discussion within your evaluation report, remembering to adhere to any issues of confidentiality.

Pros	Cons
You select and recruit group members	Lack of interest in group could make recruitment difficult
You can control the topic	Participants do not have much to say or some participants dominate discussion
Interaction between participants may prompt new insights	May be unsuitable for researching sensitive issues

Further reading

Moderating focus groups – The national centre for social research provides training courses in moderating or facilitating discussion groups - http://www.natcen.ac.uk

Facilitating Workshops - Practical Tips for Workshop Facilitators, Seeds for Change
http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/facilwsh.pdf

Workshops

What is the method?

Workshops are a group-based method of research in which there is an emphasis on activity-based, interactive working. The focus is on everyone participating and undertaking the work. Therefore, when using this type of research technique, the researcher acts as a facilitator, rather than leading the discussion or activity.

When should it be used?

There are a variety of reasons why it would be appropriate to hold workshop sessions, including:

- **Raising awareness** (e.g. about a new funding stream and how to apply);
- **Capturing views and information** (e.g. about local service provision);

Building consensus (e.g. to take forward a draft strategy or action plan);
Developing skills and capacity (e.g. on how to implement emerging government policy).

What do I need to consider?

Planning
Workshops need to be well planned, this will often involve establishing the date/time/location of the workshop as early as possible; inviting potential participants to the workshop by letter/email and requesting confirmation of their attendance; distributing background papers and the objectives/required outcomes of the workshop in advance; and preparing practical aids for use in the workshop itself (e.g. photos, maps, flipcharts, presentations, models).

Workshops vary in size according to the nature of the subject, the specific group involved and the required outcomes of the session. Workshops can contain as few as 4 participants and as many as 25. The length of the workshop will vary depending on factors such as the planned activities, the time available and the required outcomes. Workshops can range in duration from one hour to full day sessions. However, it is important to be aware of the time pressures under which people work and to ensure that the scheduling and duration of the workshop(s) is appropriate.

Interactive
The emphasis during workshops is on participation. This can be encouraged through stimulating debate (e.g. posing questions) and encouraging collaborative working (e.g. group activities). A variety of mechanisms can be employed to encourage interaction, including:

- Brainstorming;
- Model making;
- Physical and mental mapping;
- Ranking and prioritisation;
- Drawing and photography;
- Role play.

The techniques selected need to be tailored according to the specific group of participants (e.g. strategic decision makers, project staff, young people) and the outcomes required.

Outcome focused
It is imperative that workshops have clear objectives and are grounded in the required outcomes of the session. Key to the achievement of this are the pre-workshop activities that are undertaken to design, plan and prepare for the workshop itself (see above). The emphasis on outcomes is important for all concerned – it enables a gathering of information, perceptions and responses to contribute to the overall research, whilst enabling participants to understand the focus of the session, which, in turn, allows them to play a full role. If your participants understand your aims for the workshop, then the session is likely to be more productive.

What is the output?

The output of a workshop will be dependant on the types of activities undertaken, but may include flip chart material, drawings and diagrams and lists of factors, possibly ranked. It is important that all materials and notes from the workshop are collated, analysed and fed into the research findings.

How should it be analysed?

QSR International's NUD*IST & NVIVO computer packages enable non-statistical information from group work, observations, audio, video, pictures or documents to be analysed according to chosen criteria. These are powerful pieces of software that can provide clarity to a wide range of often complicated written or media materials (see section on qualitative survey analysis).

Further Reading

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) – http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/ - provides practical support, training and information in the use of a range of software programs designed to assist qualitative data analysis. Also provides various platforms for debate concerning the methodological and epistemological issues arising from the use of such software packages.

Facilitating Workshops – Practical Tips for Workshop Facilitators, Seeds for Change
http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/facilwsh.pdf

Observation

What is observation?

Observation, sometimes referred to as "participant observation" or "ethnography" is the key method of anthropology and in itself can consist of a mix of techniques; informal interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, collective discussions, analyses of personal documents produced within the group, self-analysis, and life-histories, notes, diaries and transcripts are often kept and the observation method can generate a lot of written material which the investigator must synthesize.

Participant observation is usually undertaken over an extended period of time, ranging from several months to many years. An extended research time period means that the researcher will be able to obtain more detailed and accurate information about the people he/she is studying.

When should it be used?

Observation is more appropriate when seeking to uncover:

Observable details
Like daily time allotment. For example, the popular management consultancy technique of the "time and motion study" is a version of observation. The investigator watches the activities and actions of people involved in a process and works out the specific time allocation devoted to every single step, with the objective of improving efficiency by cutting out unnecessary or time consuming steps.

Group dynamics
If the subject of your enquiry is a collective, in this context more likely to be a partnership board or steering group rather than a tribe or sub-culture, then close attention to the dynamics of the interaction between the people involved can be very illuminating. The observation method highlights interpersonal relationships and the investigator can reflect upon social proximity and distance, observe relationships and explore body lanuage and other behaviours.

More hidden details
Like taboo behaviour. Observation can be effective in exploring or exposing secrets or the underlying realities of situations, researchers can discover discrepancies between what participants say – and often believe – should happen (the formal system) and what actually does happen, or between different aspects of the formal system; in contrast, a one-time survey of people's answers to a set of questions might be quite consistent, but is less likely to show conflicts between different aspects of the social system or between conscious representations and behavior.

What do I need to consider?

Observation as part of a mixed methods approach
Observation may be appropriate as a part of your research strategy but it is unlikely that it would "stand alone" in the research contexts that we have been describing. It is also worth remembering that it relies very heavily upon the judgements, assumptions and prior knowledge and experience of the observer themselves.

Reliability vs Validity
Participant observation (whether overt or covert) is not the most reliable research method. Such studies, by their very nature, are impossible to repeat and reliability can be further questioned in terms of the extent to which the presence of the observer actually changes the behaviour of those being studied. As soon as you do or say anything at all, you have slipped from the role of observer to participant, this boundary can be very hard to maintain.

Participant observers study people in their natural environment, gaining a depth of insight into behaviour that comes not simply from close, detailed, observation but also from the researcher's own experiences within the group being studied – a technique that provides first hand insights into why people behave as they do. Participant observation does not prejudge issues and events (in the way a questionnaire may, for example) and, for these reasons it is possible to argue that such a method provides data that has a high level of validity.

Skills required
Participant observation requires a great deal of skill and commitment from the researcher. The success or failure of the research will hinge

on such factors as the ability to fit-in with the people being studied and the ability to communicate with groups members on their level and terms. It will also, at different times, require tact, clear and careful observation, the ability to separate the role of participant from that of observer and so forth. In other words, before committing yourself to participant observation you need to be certain you have the time, resources and skills required to carry this type of research.

What is produced?

A key feature of participant observation is that data should be collected in ways that cause as little disruption as possible to the ordinary activities of the research context. The recording of information largely depends on the research situation. Fieldnotes are generally kept and sometimes it is possible to use tape recorders and video recorders. Whichever methods of recording information are used it is important to be detailed and to devise a system that allows easy retrieval of information.

How should the data be analysed?

Analysis and interpretation of data is undertaken in a similar way to analysing and interpreting data gathered by other qualitative research methods, as detailed in other sections of this handbook.

	Pros	Cons
Observation	Deep and nuanced picture can emerge	Relies on observer to read social reality "accurately"
	A flexible method that can react to events / ideas, follow leads, pursue avenues of research that had not been considered	Hard to maintain observer role
	Gives a researcher insights into individual and group behaviour and it may allow them to formulate hypotheses that explain such behaviour	Can need a significant time period

Further reading

Collecting data through observation, Web Centre for Social Research Methods - http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/tutorial/Brown/lauratp.htm - Understand the advantages and disadvantages of observational research compared to other research methods.

Visual techniques

What is the method?

Visual techniques in social research offer an interesting, stimulating and interactive approach to gathering information. They are appropriate in a variety of situations, as they fulfil numerous functions. Visual methods such as drawing, painting, video, photography and hypermedia offer increasingly accessible and popular resources for research.

Types of visual research that you might want to consider:

Cartoon test – presented with a picture of a cartoon depicting a specific situation, the consultees are then asked what they think the character would do, say or think in response to another character.

Completion technique – using the cartoon test above, the character is shown thinking or saying something but the sentence is left uncompleted. Participants are given the opportunity to make suggestions to complete the sentence.

Collage/concept boards – uses a range of images that can be used to represent or describe the subject for discussion (e.g. services, project, issues etc). In this way, the participants can identify the subject with a range of feelings and moods. There are two ways to approach this technique; either the participants respond to prepared boards or they construct their own collage or concept boards.

Ideas board – this board invites participants to jot down their ideas on post-it notes and add them to the board which is grouped by theme.

Mind mapping – visually representing information in an interesting format without the limits or formality of standard written text. The open flowing format appears to support the natural thinking process, which is thought to go on randomly and in a nonlinear way.

Money well – an interesting way of asking participants to prioritise future actions or developments. Participants are given a certain amount of fake money, which they can place on the options displayed.

Graffiti or ideas wall – a strip of paper is hung on the wall accompanied by shapes, such as speech bubbles. The participants are able to write comments about a research topic or discussion statement.

Photographic research – consultees are either provided with a series of photographs by the researchers or given a disposable camera or mobile phone and asked to take their own. Depending on the nature of the research project, these photos might include depictions of the local physical environment and/or reflect how consultees view their community, including what they like and dislike about it. The use of photographs in research can be used to evoke feelings or trigger memories that lead to perspectives and explanations that would not have been unlocked using a more conventional research technique.

Film and video - video cameras are particularly well suited as data gathering technologies for ethnography, participant observation, oral history, life history, etc, preserving things that are not preserved in even the best researchers' field notes. Similarly, tape recordings preserve audible data not available in even the most carefully annotated transcripts.

When should it be used?

Deciding to conduct visual research will be dependant upon the type and scale of the research that you are undertaking. It may be appropriate to conduct this type of work at the start of the research process as a way of highlighting issues to be examined further during the course of the process, or it may be something that is developed as part of a blend of evaluation methodologies. Visual techniques can be used in many settings, as an alternative to more traditional methods and may be particularly useful as:

- A method for effectively engaging hard to reach groups within areas (e.g. young people). Pictures and photographs can help evoke opinions and allow the use of imagination in expanding on a scene.
- Offering an alternative to traditional discussion groups, yet still being able to draw out the rich variety of qualitative information from participants.
- For use within workshops, providing a task based activity to get members of a group working and thinking together.
- A method of producing tangible outcomes at the end of the research process (e.g. series of community generated impacts illustrating how local people view the local area).

What do I need to consider?

- Consider who should be involved in this type of visual research and that the technique is appropriate for the type of audience you are seeking ideas and opinions from.
- Ensure that research is conducted in a neutral venue where people will feel comfortable and able to share their opinion freely.
- Think about how the visual research will link into the rest of the methodology and how you will use it to inform the evaluation process.
- If generating photographic or film media as part of the research, those people photographed and filmed need to give their consent for their images to be used for the purposes of research.

How should it be analysed?

The interesting thing about data produced through visual research is that you produce visual data, which can be used to illustrate your research and provide a very immediate and real way of demonstrating how a project or programme has impacted upon local people and communities.

For a more detailed analysis of visual materials, QSR NVivo and Xsight are qualitative research software programs that help to manage, shape and make sense of unstructured information produced by visual techniques. These programmes have purpose built tools for classifying, sorting and arranging information and the software allows you to analyse visual data and discover patterns, identify themes, glean insight and develop meaningful conclusions. Transana is an alternative, inexpensive and open source software package for professional researchers who want to analyse digital video or audio data.

Pros	Cons
Easy and inexpensive (bar perhaps video)	Potentially intrusive
Interesting and engaging, combats consultation fatigue	Data protection issues need to be considered
Can help engage groups where written or verbal skills may not be advanced e.g. young people.	May build unrealistic expectations among participants

Further Reading

Building Capacity in Visual Methods, University of Leeds – Offer a range of courses from an Introduction to Visual Methods, to a Masterclass in Visual Methods.
http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/research/visual-methods/

Choosing a CAQDAS Package - A working paper by Ann Lewins & Christina Silver,
http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/choosinglewins&silverv5july06.pdf

QSR International have tutorial videos online which allow you to explore the functionality of the programs.
http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx
http://download.qsrinternational.com/Document/XSight2/XSight_Introducing_XSight.htm

Transana, http://www.transana.org/ - lets you analyse and manage visual data in very sophisticated ways. Transcribe it, identify analytically interesting clips, assign keywords to clips, arrange and rearrange clips, create complex collections of interrelated clips, explore relationships between applied keywords, and share your analysis with colleagues. Can be downloaded for $50.

Visualising Ethnography, Loughborough University – Useful website providing a series of short introductions to the use of different visual methods and media.
http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/visualising_ethnography/index.html