



How to guide: conducting research interviews



What is this guide for?

This guide is an introductory level overview of how to conduct successful research interviews. It includes hints, tips and key considerations at each stage of the process. At the end of each section, you'll find a checklist of essential points.

The guide aims to be short and accessible for busy practitioners and researchers. A suggested reading list is available at the end of the guide, should you wish to know more.

Who is this guide for?

Anyone considering using interviews for a research project (who has not conducted any before), or those who would like a refresher.

When should you use interviews in research?

- Interviews are best used to explore the attitudes, opinions, self-reported behaviours or experiences of individuals relating to a specific topic.
- Interviews are particularly useful to develop understanding of a topic that may be complex, or require a discussion to clarify the meaning of participants' answers, something you are unable to do with other methods (such as online questionnaires). For example, understanding how officers and staff use coping strategies to manage the impact of work related stress.

- Interviews are also useful when researching a topic that may be particularly personal or sensitive. For example, understanding how domestic abuse survivors perceive police responses to domestic abuse. Interviews allow the interviewer to build rapport with the participant (unlike more passive methods such as surveys) and helps participants be more open. This is because the discussion is on a one to one basis (unlike a focus group).

Are research interviews the best method for you?

It's important to use the best method for your research aims. Other methods you may want to consider are:

- **Focus groups** to explore differences in attitudes, opinions, self-reported behaviours, or experiences of a particular group on a specific topic.
- A **survey** to generalise the views you collect to the wider population, or to understand views of a large number of individuals.
- Observational research to gain a deeper understanding of a certain group's behaviours and culture or understand how a process or system works. Interviews can only ever tell you participants' perceptions of what they do and what happens in certain situations, not what actually happens.

Types of research interview

Research interviews vary in how structured they are. The different types of interview formats are summarised in **Table 1**. This guide will focus on semi-structured interviews. You can learn more about the other types of interviewing from the reading list provided at the end of this guide.

Still not sure?

You can contact the research team for advice on the best type of research methods by emailing research@college.pnn.police.uk

Table 1: Types of research interview

Structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Unstructured interviews
The interviewer keeps to a rigid format. They ask questions in a standardised order and do not deviate from the pre-determined format.	More flexible than structured interviews. The interviewer will still use pre-set questions in a specific order, but they ask extra questions to probe the participant on interesting points.	These interviews are largely guided by the participant. The interviewer will have a plan of what they want to cover in mind, but will develop only a few broad questions in advance.
Focuses on standardisation to allow reliable comparisons between a participant's answers. This is helpful when you have a very clear idea of what you want to discuss in advance.	Aims to give the participant more influence over the interview, but retains some interviewer control to ensure certain topics are discussed. This is helpful when you need to discuss certain topics but don't know how important each topic will be to your research.	Focuses on reducing the influence of the interviewer and is helpful when your research is purely exploratory (eg you have no prior knowledge of the topic).
Relatively easy to conduct, as the interviewer has a prescribed set of questions to follow.	Requires a higher level of interviewing skills as you need to react to answers with carefully worded yet spontaneous follow-up questions to probe the participant.	Best used by experienced research interviewers. Due to the flexible format it can be challenging for inexperienced interviewers to extract useful information from the participant.
Relatively low cost. Interviews tend to be quicker. Analysis of your data is easier and quicker compared to less structured interviews.	Allows you to balance cost and time with flexibility according to your needs.	Costly and time consuming due to the data being highly unstructured and interviews likely to take longer.
Limited opportunity to capture rich information from participants.	Some opportunity to explore themes of interest in greater detail but may be constrained by time if there are other topics to cover.	Allow exploration of themes in great depth.
Interview format is strictly replicated, so it benefits from being able to reliably compare participants' answers.	Comparison of participants' answers is relatively easy but there may be some topics that were not covered in all interviews.	Comparison between participants' interviews should be done cautiously, as the interview structure and question wording are likely to differ between interviews.

Move on if you understand

What this guide is for.



When interviews are an appropriate method to use.



The different types of interviews.

Design and sampling

First, you need to determine your research aims, select your participants, and decide what questions you'll ask them to achieve your aims.

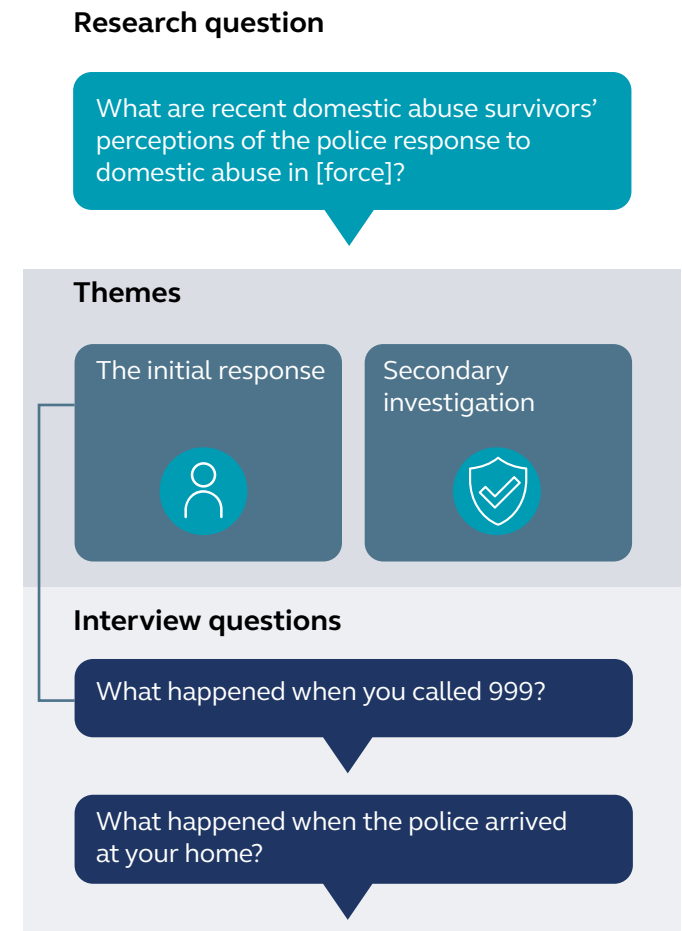
In research, your aims are determined by forming research questions. These are the overarching questions your research will answer.

It helps if your research question is as specific as possible. For example, if you're interested in the perceptions of domestic abuse survivors on how domestic abuse is dealt with after a series of force policy changes, your research question might be:

'What are recent domestic abuse survivors' perceptions of the police response to domestic abuse in [force]?'

Once you've defined your research questions, think about what key themes you need to explore to answer them, and map out specific questions you will ask to gather information on each theme (see Figure 1). You will then need to arrange these themes and questions into a topic guide.

Figure 1: Example of a research question, themes and interview questions



Topic guide

Your topic guide is a series of questions and prompts to structure your interview and is your most important tool in running a successful interview. You should refer to it throughout the interview to make sure you're collecting the information you need.

Developing your topic guide

Topic guides for semi-structured interviews should include as a minimum:

- Key themes you want to explore.
- Questions and/or prompts to encourage your interviewees to provide elaborate answers.
- Space to take notes.

Structure your topic guide so it flows but can be flexible if necessary. You should group questions into themes and try to link the themes to mimic a natural conversation. However, interviewees may naturally move on to another topic in their answers, so be prepared to jump between topics. If you do have to significantly change topic, make sure you take time to introduce the new topic to avoid confusing your participant.

Use open questions (**see Figure 2**) throughout to encourage interviewees to give extensive answers. This helps ensure the conversation is led by the interviewee and reduces the influence you have on their answers. Too many closed questions tend to limit people to one or two word answers. This means you may find you are leading the conversation instead of the participant. This can bias your findings towards your own opinion.

Start by asking basic contextual questions such as the participant's job title and responsibilities, as this will help the participant feel relaxed and ready for the following questions.

Avoid introducing sensitive or contentious topics too early. You should try to build up rapport and trust prior to introducing such topics so your participant is more comfortable with sharing their opinions and experiences.

Ensure each question in your topic guide helps answer your research questions. If it doesn't, don't include it.

Consider using alternatives to interview questions to get the information you need. For example, some interviewers will ask participants to draw a timeline on paper when they are describing a sequence of events.

Before you get started, consider testing your topic guide with individuals similar to your participants to check questions are understood to avoid any confusion during the interviews.

If different themes to those you expected emerge during interviews, consider adapting your topic guide to ensure you explore these new themes with the participants you subsequently interview.

Figure 2: Open and closed question examples

Open question	Closed question
What happened when you called 999?	Did the call handler understand what the problem was?
How did you feel about phoning the police?	Were you scared about phoning the police?

How long should your interviews be?

One hour is typical, but between 30 to 90 minutes is reasonable. It's best to overestimate and finish early, than not have enough time to cover all your topics. However, consider that some participants may be put off by long appointments. Participants may also tire if the interview is too long, so decide whether those extra questions are worth it.

Don't be too ambitious with the number of topics you want to discuss. Remember, the conversation might go off topic (you can always have some optional topics in your guide in case the interview is quicker than anticipated).

If your participants are being paid to contribute then it's reasonable to ask for more time.

If they have travelled far to participate, avoid short interviews, as they may be perceived as a waste of time.

Sampling

Next, you need to decide on your sample. Your sample is the individuals you will interview. You're very unlikely to be able to include the whole population of interest, so you need to take a sample of people from that population.

How many to sample?

Qualitative research does not need to involve large numbers of people. Your goal should be to capture rich data. You can run as many interviews as you need to achieve a diverse range of views. Nonetheless, at some point in your research you will reach **saturation point**, this is when you aren't getting any new information and is probably time to stop.

Saturation =



You won't know when you will reach saturation point when planning your project, so it's best to determine your initial sample based on practical issues (time, budget and geographical constraints) and the range of people you want to interview. If you're interested in a tightly defined, specific group (eg brand new recruits in a specific force) you will likely need less participants than if you wanted to interview people with different backgrounds (eg police constables with different length of service, supervisors and job roles).



Who to sample?

Research interviews generally use a purposive sampling approach to select participants.

Purposive sampling selects participants based on the characteristics of your population of interest and objectives of your research. You should think about what factors might affect people's attitudes and behaviours in relation to your research topic and aim to sample from a range of backgrounds to capture a variety of views (see **Figure 3**).




If your research is focused on a harder to reach group (eg trafficked victims) you might take a **snowball sampling** approach. When using snowball sampling, you start with a small number of known individuals and recruit more participants by asking your initial contact to refer you to other relevant people.

Other approaches include **convenience sampling**, where respondents are selected based on ease of access, and **quota sampling**, which includes setting goals for the number of people interviewed with particular characteristics. You can learn more about sampling methods from sources in our reading list.

Figure 3: An example of purposive sampling



Move on if you understand

-  What a topic guide is and how you should structure one.
-  What purposive sampling is and how you might use this approach to select the sample for your interviews.
-  The considerations involved in determining the number of participants you want to interview.



Planning and logistics

Now you've decided on your research questions, designed your topic guide and recruited your participants, it's time to arrange the logistics. If everything runs smoothly, you'll have a better chance of gathering the information you need.

The location

- Put your participants at ease by selecting a neutral location (eg if you're interviewing members of the public consider holding interviews away from the police station and in a more casual/familiar environment).
- Select a time and place that is as easy as possible for all participants to attend. If it's inconvenient, you're more likely to get last minute cancellations.
- The location you choose to hold interviews will affect the quality of the interview. Select a location that is comfortable and free of distractions and interruptions. Interviewing in an open plan office will affect how honest your participant is. Equally, interviewing in a cramped, dark or hot meeting room won't encourage your participant to talk at length.
- Book your location for longer than you need it so you have time before the interview to set out the room and confirm housekeeping issues (eg toilets, fire alarm, etc.).



Difficult to travel?

Ideally, interviews should be conducted face-to-face, but they can also be done by phone or video conference.

While remote interviews can help save time and costs they're not necessarily the easy option. It can be harder to build rapport and encourage participants to elaborate in remote interviews. The lack of non-verbal cues (in the case of phone interviews) can also limit your ability to properly manage the conversation. Carefully consider whether the time and costs savings are worth the risk of collecting less insightful information.

Have a break

Interviews are tiring and can often run over, so make sure you plan time between interviews to have comfort breaks.

Communication

You should send information to participants well in advance of the interview. Including:

- The purpose and broad topics of the interview.
- What is expected of them, eg how long you expect the interview to last.
- Location, directions, timings, contact details and arrival procedure – invite your participant to arrive at least five minutes before the start time of the interview.
- Financial implications of participation (eg any incentives you can offer, expenses procedures).
- Benefits and risks of participation.
- Data handling and confidentiality procedures (anonymity, data recording procedure, access and storage of data).
- Their right to withdraw at any time and to not answer specific questions.




Ethically, you must obtain informed consent to take part from the participant. This can be via a form or response to an email that contains all the relevant information.

If you are recording the interview, make sure your participant has agreed to be recorded before starting your interview.

Don't forget:

- Topic guides.
- Recording device (eg dictaphone), spare batteries and a backup device (test it in advance).
- Clock/watch to keep track of time.
- Refreshments.

Move on if you understand

-  What information you need to provide your participants with so they can give informed consent to participate in your interviews.
-  What to consider when selecting an appropriate time and place for your interviews.
-  What equipment you need to successfully run your interviews.

Data collection

Now everything is in place, it's time to carry out your interviews. This section provides some hints and tips on how to conduct your interviews.

Set the scene

It's important that your participant is comfortable, understands why they're being interviewed and what's expected of them. Take time to refresh their memory by introducing the interview clearly and allow time to answer any questions they may have. As a minimum you should:

- introduce yourself
- re-affirm the purpose of the research
- list the broad topics you'll cover
- set any ground rules (eg confidentiality, no right or wrong answers)
- confirm housekeeping arrangements
- restate the data handling and confidentiality procedures (tell participants that you are audio recording the conversation if you are).

If you're conducting a phone interview it's advisable to confirm the participant is in a quiet, comfortable place and is not expecting any interruptions.

Ask, listen, decide, repeat

Good interviewing centres on actively listening to your interviewee and quickly deciding how to direct the conversation on the basis of what they've said. With practice, you'll be able to make these decisions almost automatically. In the broadest sense, try to have your research aims in mind during interviews and make judgements on whether the conversation is helping to achieve those aims. If your participant is going off topic or isn't providing sufficient detail, it is time to say something. But don't be too quick to jump in, you may stifle the interview.

To build a rapport with your respondent, try to maintain eye contact as much as possible. If you're taking written notes, explain to the participant that you'll be taking notes but will still be listening.

Phrasing and minimising bias

Remember to be neutral. It's very important to not add your own views. Even an overly enthusiastic nod can bias a whole interview.

It's important to build rapport to encourage elaborate, honest answers so don't forget to maintain eye contact, smile and make sure your participant feels listened to.

Ask open questions to encourage more detailed answers.

Avoid double-barrelled questions (eg 'How did the updates on the investigation and what the officer said make you feel?').

Avoid too much summing up. Summing up to clarify what people mean is helpful, but do it sparingly. Every time you paraphrase, you risk inadvertently changing the meaning of what was said.

Avoid jargon – you should identify problematic phrases when you test your topic guide.

Consider introducing controversial topics in a way that legitimises both points of view (eg 'Some people suggest [topic] is good, but others don't, what do you think?').

Recording the interview

Audio record the interview whenever possible. This will allow you to concentrate on listening and responding to the interviewee, rather than taking detailed notes. It will also help reduce bias, as you'll analyse a recording of what they said, not what you think they said.

Even if you record the interview take some key notes just in case the audio recording fails. Notes also help remind you of the key points of the conversation, which can help when you analyse your results.



Getting more detail

Here are some tips on how to probe discussion with your participant to get richer information from the interview.

Use **silence** as a prompt, do not move on too quickly. Silence indicates you expect more and will encourage your participants to elaborate.

Probing is essential to ensure you have fully explored a theme. Probes can be used to:

- Encourage more ideas – 'Are there other times you experienced that?'
- Explore an idea further – 'Can you tell me more about that?'
- You can also combine a summary with a probe to check your understanding – 'So that made things better for you? Why do you think that is?'

Prompt if you have specific questions that aren't being discussed naturally or after probing. But be careful – prompts should be reserved for the more important points and used cautiously, as you risk 'putting words in your participant's mouth'. You should have prompts on your topic guide and tick them off as they are discussed to your satisfaction.

How to keep discussions focused

Don't force answers

If your interviewee appears to be uncomfortable with any questions being asked, ask them to take their time and remind them that they do not have to answer and can stop the interview at any time.

It's important to strike a balance between letting the discussion flow and keeping it on track.

It's fine to politely interrupt people, but make sure you explain why so you don't discourage participation (eg 'that's very interesting but can I bring us back to [the topic] as we're short of time').

If the topic discussed is relevant but the discussion is not generating any new information, try suggesting the topic can be revisited at the end if there is time, so you still manage to cover your key topics.

Be flexible. Participants may discuss a topic of interest earlier in the interview than you intended. In this case let the conversation flow and feel free to prompt and probe. It's always worth asking the relevant question later in the interview (as per your topic guide), just in case they have more to say on the subject when prompted.

Figure 4: Examples of probing and prompting





Question	What happened when the police arrived at your home?
Probe	Was there anything else that you remember them doing?
Prompt	Can you remember what questions they asked you?

Closing your interview

Don't forget to debrief your interviewee. Debriefings should, as a minimum:

- Restate the purpose of the research.
- Describe the next steps (eg other data collection, estimated time you'll complete your research).
- Provide an opportunity for follow-up questions.
- Thank the participant for their time.

Move on if you understand

-  The importance of listening and questions to bear in mind when managing an interview.
-  Things to avoid to minimise researcher bias.
-  The difference between prompts and probes and when to use them.
-  How to end your interview.

Analysis and reporting

There are many different ways to analyse qualitative data. This guide can't cover all of them, and so provides a basic overview of a pragmatic approach to analysis. We recommend exploring our reading list if you want to learn more about qualitative data analysis.

Analysis of qualitative data involves 'coding' and interpreting the record of your interviews to identify similarities and differences in what was said, and to draw out the key themes relevant to your research questions.

Preparing for analysis

Familiarise yourself with the data – listen to the recordings and read your notes to refamiliarise yourself with the key issues/themes before you start coding.

Transcribe your recording – i.e. make a written copy, to reduce the chance of adding your own opinion (bias) to your data. If this isn't practical due to time, take very detailed notes during the interviews, cross-check them with recordings (if you recorded your interviews) and add extra notes from the recordings. You should also be clear about this limitation when you report your findings.

Organise your data

There are different options for organising and analysing your data:

- Using specialist analysis software – efficient but likely to have a cost.
- By hand – using a highlighter or putting themes on sticky notes – cheap, but can be hard to manage if you have a lot of data.
- Using a spreadsheet – cheap and manageable but version control can be a problem if working with others.



Analysis

Interviews are analysed through **coding** your data. Coding is a process of categorisation to make it easier to interpret your unstructured data. A code is a word or phrase that helps you identify what the quote/sentence in your data relates to. By linking quotes or sentences from your interviews to your codes you can build an overall picture of what was said about a particular topic across your whole sample.

It is likely that a quote may relate to more than one code. In these cases you should assign multiple codes to the same quote to help your interpretation of your themes (see **Figure 5**).

You should develop a **coding framework** to help structure your analysis. A coding framework consists of all the codes (or categories) you will assign to your data.

To get started it's helpful to base your coding framework on the themes in your topic guide. By doing this you're basing your coding on your research question or theories. This approach is called **deductive** coding.

However, it's important to be flexible, as you may need to add or adapt codes as new themes emerge from your data. The aim of coding is to structure your data meaningfully, not make your data fit your framework.

Sometimes researchers will base their coding framework purely on what is emerging from the data. This approach is called **inductive** coding and is usually used when you are researching new topics. It tends to take longer as you need to review your data more times.

As you code more of your interviews you will develop and refine your overall coding framework. These frameworks are often multi-layered, for example you may have a broad code with additional sub-codes that sit within it (see **Figure 6**).

Using sub-codes gives your data more specific labels and helps keep things manageable, as these labels also remain grouped in broader themes. Be careful not to get too specific as too many codes can make it hard to interpret your data.

Figure 5: Examples of codes




Quote	Codes
<p>“It was scary. The thought of going to court was terrifying. But the officer who dealt with me was brilliant, she explained what was happening and what to expect. She made me feel better but then the worries would come back later when I was alone.”</p>	 Fear of court attendance
	 Explaining processes
	 Isolation

Figure 6: Examples of codes and sub-codes

Quotes	Codes	Sub-Codes
When they arrived they took him outside straight away.	← Actions at the scene	← Separation
The man asked him what happened and the female officer spoke to me, I don't know if that was on purpose, I preferred it though.	← Actions at the scene	← Gender of officer
There was loads of questions. The whole time I was just waiting for them to come back in the room. It's all a bit of a blur.	← Actions at the scene	← Initial account

Defining your codes with a short description is important to ensure coding is consistent and that others understand your results and methods.

Your approach to coding should be **systematic**. Ideally more than one person should code the interviews, and this should be done independently. If possible, all coders should code a portion of the interview data first, then discuss and compare their coding to ensure a consistent

approach and agree any coding rules or further refinements to the coding framework. It is good practice to statistically test and report the level of agreement between coders. This is known as **inter-rater reliability**.

Remember – coding is time-consuming. If something is not relevant to your research aims, you don't have to code it.

Interpretation

Once you have finished coding your interviews you can then interpret the data linked to each code. You should ask yourself, 'taking all the information into account, what are the key insights and how do they relate to my research questions?'

If any interesting themes emerge from your data outside of your research questions you may wish to explore these too.

At this stage you should take lots of notes to help focus on areas of interest. By recording possible areas for further enquiry, such as similarities and conflicts between different quotes and participants, you can reflect on these areas as you go.

Like coding, you will need to review your data more than once. It is important to do this systematically so you don't miss anything.

Reporting

Golden rule: confidentiality. Do not reveal the identity of your participants.

Executive summary

Always include a 1-2 page summary explaining the key points of the study to allow busy people to understand your research.

Introduction

Include background information explaining the topic, purpose and relevance of your research. This might include a brief review of relevant literature.

Methods

You must be transparent about your methodology so readers understand how you reached your conclusions. Specifically, you should include:

- Study design.
- Sample (characteristics and how they were recruited).
- Overview of your topic guide.
- Format of the interviews (eg structure, length, question style).
- Approach to coding and analysis.

Limitations

Be clear about them. It is important people understand the context in which your findings were obtained so they are not misunderstood.

For example:

- Any issues encountered when sampling.
- Analytical issues (eg if only one person analysed the data, this may add bias).
- Issues of generalisability (eg results only represent the views of those who participated).

Findings

Only report findings most relevant to your research questions, otherwise your key points won't be clear to the reader.

Use quotes sparingly and keep them short – if they clearly illustrate a point they are useful, but too many quotes can make reports hard to follow.

Do not describe your findings numerically (eg as percentages), this may mislead people into thinking the views are representative. Simply indicate the extent to which views were shared among participants (ie, use terms like 'some' 'most' and 'few').

Quantifying views during analysis can help you understand your data, but you should only report the range and diversity of views, not the numbers.

Conclusions and recommendations

Be sure to sum up your key findings into a succinct conclusion. If appropriate, provide recommendations based on your findings to encourage others to use your research.

You should now know

- ✓ The process for analysing qualitative data.
- ✓ What codes and coding frameworks are.
- ✓ What information to include in your research report.
- ✓ The importance of being transparent about your methods and any limitations of your research.
- ✓ The golden rule – ensure participant confidentiality.

Don't forget to share your research as widely as you can. All your hard work won't have any impact if it's just sat on your hard drive. If it relates to policing or crime reduction please consider sharing it on the College's research map [here](#).

If you have any feedback regarding this guide, please email research@college.pnn.police.uk

If you would like support with your research you can book a research surgery to discuss any part of your project with College researchers by clicking [here](#).

Reading list

Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., Robson, K (2001)

Focus Groups in Social Research, London: SAGE

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013)

Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners. London: SAGE

Flick, U. (2014)

An introduction to Qualitative Research. London: SAGE

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K. M., Guest, G. and Namey, E. (2005)

Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide. North California: Family Health International

Matthews, B., Ross, L. (2010)

Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social Sciences, Harlow: Longman*

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N. and Hoagwood, K. (2015)

Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 42(5), 533-544*

Patton, M.Q. (2015)

Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. California: SAGE.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, M. C. and Ormston, R. (2013)

Qualitative Research Practice. A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers. London: SAGE

Some of these texts are available via the National Police Library. If you are not a member of the National Police Library you can join here

*Focused on sampling

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