

# Embedding Equity Considerations in Qualitative Research



KANSAS HEALTH INSTITUTE

*Informing Policy. Improving Health.*

## Development of the Guides

Many organizations may encounter challenges in embedding equity in their research, literature review, technical assistance, facilitation and policy analysis due to uncertainty about effective approaches and strategies. Although numerous valuable resources exist to guide these efforts, they are not necessarily structured by topic, phase of the project or as checklists.

To address this, the Kansas Health Institute (KHI) has developed a set of practical guides to integrate equity considerations at every stage of these processes. Development of the guides was informed by current literature and KHI's experiences.

Health equity – The state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health. Achieving this requires focused and ongoing societal efforts to address historical and contemporary injustices, overcome economic, social, and other obstacles to health and health care, and eliminate preventable health disparities.

Feedback on the set of guides was gathered during a convening hosted by KHI on May 14, 2024, titled "*Centering Equity in Research: Developing Practical Strategies and Identifying Considerations*," as well as through a post-event survey. The convening included about 50 stakeholders from across Kansas who reviewed these strategies and provided valuable feedback, which later was incorporated into the guides. The event featured speakers Eusebio Díaz, M.A., Vice President of Strategy, Learning and Communications at the Health Forward Foundation, Shannon Portillo, Ph.D., from Arizona State University and Bridgette L. Jones, M.D., M.S.C.R., from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. The speakers discussed the current state of equity in research, addressing challenges and exploring future opportunities.

These guides are organized by process stage and in checklist format. They are designed to be a practical tool for easy application. The strategies suggested are not intended to be a complete list of all possible strategies that could be used. Additionally, it may not be appropriate or feasible to implement all of the strategies listed in a single project. The purpose of this set of checklists is for researchers to consider opportunities to center equity more intentionally and build capacity over time to experiment with and build upon these strategies. Also, while the checklists are presented linearly, we suggest using an iterative and flexible approach in your research as necessary.

The guides are intended for a wide range of audiences, including those engaging in research activities and members of the community who are engaged in or affected by research.

## We Value Your Feedback!

To ensure we hear from as many voices as possible, we are launching an open comment period from July 1, 2024, to Dec. 31, 2024. This period is an opportunity for you to share your thoughts and help us refine these resources further. Together, we can make meaningful progress toward equity in our work. Scan the QR Code to [provide your feedback](#).



# Embedding Equity Considerations in Qualitative Research

## Definition of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to explore why phenomena occur and under what conditions. It primarily uses narrative data of stories, words, interactions and creative expression. It is used to gain an understanding of perceptions, norms, practices, experiences and underlying mechanisms. Qualitative research can also be used to more deeply explore prior quantitative research findings and inform future qualitative or quantitative research. Qualitative data collection methods vary in structure and use. Some common methods include focus groups (group discussions), individual interviews and participation/ observations, photovoice or arts-based engagements. For example, qualitative research could be used when observing existing community meetings or processes. Another form of qualitative research can involve document review.



## Why Embed Equity in Qualitative Research

Centering equity in qualitative research leads to more nuanced research questions and designs that are sensitive to the complexities of social identities, experiences and systemic barriers. It builds trust with communities and participants and ensures that the research findings are reflective of a diverse range of experiences. Additionally, by providing rich, contextual insights, this approach helps to gain context, illuminating the “why” behind a phenomenon and enabling researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying factors and dynamics at play. For example, qualitative research can help examine power, class, race, gender and more.

A set of general and specific principles important for embedding equity in qualitative research follows. Note that the strategies suggested are not intended to be a complete list of all possible strategies that could be used.

### About This Series

1. The series of guides that include strategies for embedding equity in research was developed by the Kansas Health Institute. This work is supported by the Equity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism Capacity Building Grant funded by the Health Forward Foundation (HFF). The guides should not be construed as the official position or policy, nor should any endorsement be inferred by HFF.

<b>GENERAL PRINCIPLES</b>	
<b>1. Strategies Before You Begin</b>	
	1.1. Recognize that incorporating equity across every stage in your research requires substantial time and effort. Incorporate this time and the resources required into your research project’s budget at the beginning of the project. If a project has already begun, examine how strategies might be intentionally imbedded into the existing project.
	1.2. Identify the sources of funding for your research and discuss with the funder the strategies you plan to use to incorporate equity and why these are important to the research and for building trust with the community you are researching. Additionally, inform your partners and participants about the source of your funding and why they are funding your work.
	1.3. Determine how you will assess implementation and gather community feedback on the strategies selected to ensure your approach is having the desired effect of incorporating equity in research. Outline action steps to address this feedback and build capacity in any areas in which a deficit is discovered, through training, reflection and expansion of the project team.
	1.4. Assess the historical context related to your topic, community of focus or research questions. Assessing the historical context can help the research team navigate existing dynamics and understand what is already known related to the topic. During this stage, it is important to also identify what research or work is already being done related to this topic. Consider what dominant cultural narratives exist related to the topic and how varying research approaches could contribute to or challenge these narratives.
<b>2. Strategies for Building an Inclusive Project Team</b>	
	2.1 Assemble a project team with diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives to reflect different:
	2.1.a. Race, ethnicity, national origin, etc.
	2.1.b. Gender, sexual orientation, etc.
	2.1.c. Population density, such as rural areas, urban areas, suburban areas, if applicable.
	2.1.d. Socioeconomic status.
	2.1.e. Other considerations pertinent to the research and or event.
	2.2. Evaluate the need to collaborate with external agencies or community members with lived experience to enhance team diversity and representation. If need is identified, select community representatives to serve as a close partner throughout the project.
	2.3 Ensure that policies and practices are in place to create an environment conducive to the success and well-being of diverse team members.
	2.4. Promote self-awareness among team members of their identities, biases, assumptions, preconceptions and positionality. Using regular self-assessments and subjectivity statements can make the worldviews of the team more transparent. Discussing the types of biases that exist and using tools such as a critical appraisal checklist can help the research team assess for biases in a research study.
	2.5. Foster a culture of continuous learning and reflexivity within project teams, encouraging ongoing discussions and training on topics such as unconscious bias, cultural competence and the ethical implications of data analysis in diverse contexts.
	2.6. Establish transparent and inclusive decision-making processes that value input from all team members, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in project planning and implementation.

<b>GENERAL PRINCIPLES</b>	
<b>2. Strategies for Building an Inclusive Project Team (continued)</b>	
	2.7. Regularly assess and reflect on the team’s approach to equity, including how decisions are made and how team dynamics impact collaboration and communication.
	2.8. Foster an environment where team members feel comfortable discussing issues related to equity and diversity openly and constructively.
	2.9. Create mechanisms for soliciting feedback from team members on the equity and inclusivity of project processes and outcomes.
	2.10. Be open to receiving feedback and willing to adjust project strategies and practices to ensure a more equitable approach.
<b>3. Strategies to Ensure Inclusive Terminology</b>	
	3.1. Select and validate terminology and variables that are culturally competent and reflect the diversity of populations. Consider the use of culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS) standards.
	3.2. Consult with stakeholders, experts and community members familiar with the issues discussed to identify and validate the relevance and sensitivity of terms used in the narrative and variables used in the data.
	3.3. Use terms that encompass a wide range of races, ethnicities, gender identities, geographies, socioeconomic statuses and other identity markers.
	3.4. Incorporate terms that allow for the exploration of intersectional identities and experiences. Understanding how overlapping identities impact people's experiences can provide deeper insights into equity issues.
	3.5. Include terms specifically related to groups that are historically excluded. This helps ensure that the data and analysis consider the needs and challenges of these populations.
	3.6. Use geographic-specific terms when relevant to capture regional disparities and local contexts. This approach can uncover inequities that occur at local or regional levels.
	3.7. Use a combination of broad and narrow terms to capture both general and specific aspects of issues. This can help in identifying both widespread and niche concerns related to equity.
	3.8. Include terms that reflect historical injustices and contexts. Recognizing the historical background of inequities can inform a more nuanced analysis. Facilitators can conduct research on this background before a project begins.
	3.9. Pilot test materials with audience members to learn how they understand the terminology used and how to incorporate their terminology.

<b>QUALITATIVE RESEARCH</b>	
<b>4. Strategies for Creating Authentic Engagement</b>	
	4.1. Identify and build trust and proximity with community-based organizations that serve individuals with lived experience. Foster ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships over a long period of time. Collaboratively identify alignment of goals, responsibilities and anticipated benefits for each party to avoid a unidirectional partnership. Understand any community preconceptions of researchers and your organization(s). Follow through on activities requested of you by the partner.
	4.2 Use trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches to engagement with individuals with lived experience. Recognize potential risk of harm to communities and take action to prevent this harm. Trauma-informed approaches involve strategies intended to prevent potential re-traumatization of an individual during the study. Culturally responsive approaches require contextualizing the researcher’s interactions within and fostering respect for the cultures of the community with whom they are researching.
	4.3. Establish a community advisory board to provide a safe space for open sharing of perspectives. Expectations and rules for maintaining a safe space for feedback should be determined in collaboration with the board. For example, incorporate group norms for not interrupting each other and provide opportunities for members to review and correct notes if ideas do not reflect their intended statements. Recognize existing power dynamics and define a power structure with which the board’s feedback has legitimacy and opportunities to be addressed and responded to. Ensure diversity and inclusivity within the board by seeking individuals who have not previously served on community advisory boards. Create opportunities to make engagement easier for community members to join these community conversations, rather than expect them to come to you.
	4.4. Compensate participants for their expertise and time. Clearly communicate compensation expectations. If compensation is not provided, clearly articulate the reasons behind this decision. Develop a living document outlining best practices for fair compensation, with input from community partners and guidelines relevant to the project topic. Explore non-monetary compensation options, such as child care, transportation assistance and accommodations for accessibility needs. Consider discussing with participants the compensation options that align with their needs and preferences.
	4.5. Recognize that the engagement framework may need to adapt for different populations, such as children. Tailor approaches to meet the needs of diverse groups while maintaining trauma-informed practices. Build in the time required to engage authentically. When selecting an engagement framework, work with community partners to identify the best strategies to build trust with the intended population of focus. Document and share the decisions made within this framework and why. Commit to and follow through with dissemination of the research key findings to all participants.
	4.6. Prepare the team to engage with sensitivity and awareness, incorporating trauma-informed approaches into their interactions. Provide training and resources to support effective communication and engagement with individuals with lived experiences.
	4.7 Assess and identify strategies to operate within and around power dynamic structures that exist within the community. Power mapping can be a vital resource to your community engagement. Recognize that intersectional identities such as class, race, gender, education, job position and more can affect group dynamics and engagement.
	4.8. Identify language that aligns with the community’s way of speaking and understanding. Work with community partners to identify and use terminology that resonates with the community members. Selected terminology should be easy to understand and share a common meaning amongst the community members.
	4.9. Build partner skills and capacity, enabling them to engage more fully and contribute meaningfully. This can be achieved through targeted training programs, resource sharing and ongoing support to empower partners with the knowledge and tools they need to actively participate and collaborate.



<b>QUALITATIVE RESEARCH</b>	
<b>5. Strategies for Inclusive and Effective Formulation of Research Questions</b>	
	5.1. Familiarize yourself with the literature in your area of interest to identify what has been studied, gaps in the literature and potential biases or limitations. For strategies on how to embed equity in literature reviews, see the guide, <i>Embedding Equity Considerations in Literature Review</i> .
	5.2. Build relationships with community members by listening and setting aside your own agenda. Focus on listening to the community’s priorities and needs before engaging stakeholders in your work. Identify if there is alignment rather than expecting the community to align with your priorities. This approach helps prevent tokenism, where connections are made only when “we need them.” Over time, reassess to confirm continued alignment.
	5.3. Engage stakeholders from diverse backgrounds in identifying questions that should be addressed through qualitative research. This approach improves the inclusion of concerns from various groups, particularly those often underrepresented and historically excluded. Share with the stakeholders how this information informed your work. When finalizing questions, decisions should consider:
	5.3.a. Determine the number of questions to focus on, considering data availability, resources, timing, the opportunity to make an impact and which questions most align with the community members’ stated priorities and needs.
	5.3.b. Ensure that the research questions are centered on understanding the impact of the issues on the social determinants of health and populations who have been historically excluded.
	5.3.c. Recognize, define and address biases:
	5.3.c.1. Acknowledge biases in theoretical frameworks by engaging in discussions with a diverse group, including meetings or listening sessions with community stakeholders, and seeking frameworks created by researchers to respond to the need for more equity in research suitable for your research question and setting. For example, one option is to consider frameworks created by researchers in non-Western cultures or by Black, Latino and female researchers. Examine how your research frameworks could potentially reinforce existing power dynamics and marginalization and adjust accordingly. Determine what can be done to recreate or change the framework. Use the framework created by stakeholders to make the research more meaningful to them.
	5.3.c.2. Acknowledge that the biases in work are shaped by who is allowed to pose questions and undertake the work and use inclusive wording or terms in the questions. Recognize the historical contexts, assumptions and dominant cultural narratives that the questions may reinforce or challenge. Priority questions for the community members involved may differ from the research questions most of interest to the research team. Ensuring diverse inclusion and preventing repetitive exclusions can mitigate the recurrence of the same biases. Additionally, consider the impact of funding sources on which questions are asked, by whom and the partnerships that are created as a result. With this information, work to modify the questions to limit the potential impact of these biases.
	5.3.d. Consult with communities on how to best to incorporate asset-based framing for questions, as appropriate for the community’s context and need. Asset-based framing focuses on recognizing and identifying community strengths and resources instead of leading with gaps and challenges (deficit-based framing).

**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**5. Strategies for Inclusive and Effective Formulation of Research Questions (continued)**

	5.3.e. Recognize the value of addressing a small number of questions thoroughly as opposed to taking on numerous questions and diluting resources.
	5.3.f. Before beginning the study, analyze the questions developed through an equity lens and the historical context of the community with whom you are researching.

**6. Strategies for Equitable Data Collection**

	6.1. Implement data collection methods that minimize participant burden by offering various options for information provision, such as translated materials and accessible formats. Consider asset-based framing for all materials.
	6.2. Address barriers associated with child care, transportation or work hours to ensure accessibility for all participants. Consider methodologies that allow for asynchronous participation in the study to increase access for participants. Consider the distances participants must travel and the costs of travel and lodging (if needed) when setting meeting start and end times.
	6.3. Develop data collection instruments in plain language to enhance understanding, and ensure materials are translated to accommodate diverse language needs.
	6.4. Utilize trauma-informed, culturally responsive and non-stigmatizing data collection methods to avoid further stigmatization of participants. Provide training for all staff engaged in qualitative research or related topics to build capacity in these approaches, how to recognize the need for them and how to implement these strategies consistently. Confirm participants understand they have option to opt out of answering any question they do not feel prepared or comfortable responding to. Focus on developing physical and social space that feels safe and comfortable for all participants to engage with the research.
	6.5. Include follow-up interviews or focus groups to gather further information and deepen understanding.
	6.6. Allocate additional time for building rapport with participants and providing guidance on data collection practices, especially for staff engaging directly with participants.
	6.7. Develop strategies to assist with initial recruitment, considering diverse recruitment channels and accessibility needs.
	6.8. Connect with strategies for building a diverse research team to ensure representation and sensitivity to participant needs.
	6.9. Incorporate guidance and considerations for working with communities that require interpretation or translation services, ensuring effective asset-based communication and cultural sensitivity.
	6.10. Consider the community dynamics and power structures that may exist and implement strategies to mitigate potential negative impacts of these dynamics on the participants.

**7. Strategies for Inclusive Questions and Engagement**

**7.1 Approach to Question Development**

	7.1.a. Engage communities in suggesting questions for the questionnaire.
	7.1.b. Host focus groups or community forums to brainstorm and refine questions collaboratively.
	7.1.c. Utilize online platforms or surveys to gather input from a wider range of community members, including those who may not be able to attend in-person meetings.
	7.1.d. Collaborate with community stakeholders to test and discuss the questionnaire, focusing particularly on framing and interpretation from a community perspective

**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH****7. Strategies for Inclusive Questions and Engagement (continued)****7.2 Terminology**

	7.2.a. Ensure that terminology used in the survey is culturally appropriate, centers their human experience and does not stigmatize populations.
	7.2.b. Ensure terminology is accessible for those with intellectual disabilities and/or limited reading proficiency, use plain language, visual aids and simplified explanations. Provide alternative formats, such as audio or video content, and offer support for understanding through personalized assistance or interpreters. Regularly review and adapt materials based on feedback from these audiences to maintain clarity and inclusiveness.
	7.2.c. Conduct cultural sensitivity training for questionnaire designers and administrators to ensure a nuanced understanding of diverse cultural perspectives.
	7.2.d. Pilot test questions with representatives from different cultural backgrounds and lived experiences to identify any potential issues and make necessary adjustments before wider distribution.

**7.3 Demographic Questions**

	7.3.a. Include questions to identify participant demographics, such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, disability status and other characteristics. Ensure that demographic questions are reflective of the current practices.
	7.3.b. Provide opportunities for self-identification beyond the listed categories. For example, this can be achieved by including another option and suggesting respondents provide a description if they do not identify with the specific demographic groups listed.

**7.4 Accessibility**

	7.4.a. Implement accessibility best practices for all research activities, ensuring that locations for focus groups are wheelchair accessible, offering sign language interpretation and providing materials in accessible formats. For interviews and focus groups that occur online, ensure that virtual platforms are accessible to individuals with disabilities and participants have opportunities to access the internet or participate via other means. Additionally, consider opportunities to increase access among participants with limited ability to read or write including opportunities to contribute verbally.
	7.4.b. Provide interpreters for focus groups and interviews and offer transcripts in multiple languages to accommodate participants with limited language proficiency and for whom the primary language used is not their first language. This approach promotes inclusivity and ensures that language barriers do not hinder participation.
	7.4.c. Offer various formats for participation in the research, such as interviews, focus groups, listening sessions, art photovoice, written submissions and more.

**7.5 Building Partnerships and Distribution Channels**

	7.5.a. Build ongoing, long-term partnerships with community organizations, local leaders and individuals interested in prioritizing equity with strong connections to the population of focus. These partners can facilitate access to participants for focus groups and interviews by leveraging trust and established relationships. The relationships should be maintained beyond the life of a project. Before ending a project, the team should meet to discuss with the community partners how to mindfully adjourn the project while maintaining relationships. Identify avenues to empower community partners to approach the researcher about future research questions or suggested projects they have.
	7.5.b. Include potential community partners early in the planning stages of the research project. Allocate adequate time and resources for these collaborations, ensuring they are integral to the project's success from the outset. Build capacity among community partners for them to progressively become more engaged in or lead future research. For example, community partners may grow in capacity to be able to host or facilitate data collection efforts with researcher support but without the researcher present.



## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

### 7. Strategies for Inclusive Questions and Engagement (continued)

#### 7.5 Building Partnerships and Distribution Channels (continued)

	7.5.c. Work collaboratively with community partners to identify the most effective means of reaching and recruiting participants for interviews and focus groups. It's important to consider how communities are seeing information shared. This may involve community events, local networks or social media platforms tailored to the target demographic.
	7.5.d. Provide comprehensive training and ongoing support to community partners. Ensure they understand the research objectives, ethical considerations and privacy protocols. Empower them to act as informed ambassadors for the project within their communities.
	7.5.e. Establish and maintain long-term relationships with community partners to support current and future qualitative research efforts. Regular communication, feedback solicitation and exploration of collaborative opportunities can enhance the effectiveness and reach of qualitative research projects. Outline action steps for how you will respond to feedback received to show gratitude and maintain trust.
	7.5.f. Create a central, easily accessible channel for communication and resources during the recruitment stage that also will serve for participants to rapidly receive materials, updates and findings after the study.
<b>8. Strategies for Inclusive Data Analysis and Interpretation</b>	
	8.1. Implement methodologies that ensure qualitative input is representative of the community in question by engaging diverse community members, employing stratified sampling techniques and continuously validating findings with community stakeholders.
	8.2. Develop a coding framework that includes themes and sub-themes relevant to all participant groups. Involve community members or people with lived experience related to the domains of inquiry in collecting feedback on the coding framework to ensure it accurately represents key concepts, including assessing any potential unintended consequences of the research.
	8.3. Use an iterative process to review and revise codes, allowing the analysis team to adapt and refine the coding framework as they engage more deeply with the data. Engage with community organizations to inform the process.
	8.4. Offer participants the opportunity to review and comment on the findings related to their contributions. This can help verify the accuracy and authenticity of the analysis and interpretations.
	8.5. Involve and train community members or individuals with lived experiences in the data interpretation process with whom relationships were built before and throughout the project. This collaborative effort can ensure that the findings are contextualized, reflecting the true nuances and complexities of the community's experiences.
	8.6. Provide training and support for community members to engage effectively in the data interpretation process. This includes familiarizing them with the data analysis methods and ensuring their insights are integrated into the findings.
	8.7. Encourage regular reflection sessions within the analysis team to discuss biases, challenges and insights related to the analysis process. Reflective practice can help identify potential unforeseen issues or biases in the analysis.
	8.8. Document the analysis process, including how decisions were made regarding coding, theme development and interpretation. Transparency in the process can aid in accountability and provide a roadmap for addressing biases.

<b>QUALITATIVE RESEARCH</b>	
<b>9. Strategies for Inclusive Development of Documents</b>	
	9.1. Ensure that the reporting of results includes diverse perspectives and voices, especially those of historically excluded groups. Highlighting these perspectives can contribute to a more equitable understanding of the data.
	9.2. Develop brief, accessible summaries of the findings tailored to different audiences, including policymakers, community members and other stakeholders. These summaries should highlight key insights in clear, non-technical language.
	9.3. Present these summaries in various formats (e.g., infographics, short videos, executive summaries) to ensure accessibility and engagement across diverse audience groups.
<b>10. Strategies for Developing Inclusive Documents</b>	
	10.1. In the reporting phase, prioritize and emphasize the perspectives and voices of historically excluded communities. Ensure that these narratives are represented accurately, respectfully and prominently.
	10.2. Utilize a storytelling approach to bring these narratives to life, providing concrete examples and quotes from participants to illustrate key findings and themes.
	10.3. Share preliminary findings with participants and stakeholders, inviting them to contribute to the development of recommendations. This participatory approach ensures that the recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences of those most affected by the research.
	10.4. Focus on developing clear, actionable recommendations that stakeholders can realistically implement. These should aim to address the issues and opportunities identified through the research. Work closely with technical experts to ensure that the information and insights from individuals with lived experiences are given due weight and are integrated into the findings in a meaningful way.
	10.5. Be open to adapting the analysis and presentation style based on the nature of the data and the preferences of the community being engaged. This flexible approach can lead to more meaningful and impactful findings.
	10.6. Establish a tracking system to monitor the impact of the findings on community partners.
	10.7. Celebrate wins and successes with community partners, the research team and community members involved with the research.
	10.8. Invite community members who participated in the process to be in the audience or co-share results.

<b>REFLECTION QUESTIONS:</b>	
	1. What are the research goals, and how will qualitative methods like focus groups and interviews help in achieving these goals for all involved in this work?
	2. How might biases of those involved in the research influence the outcomes, and what strategies can be employed to mitigate this impact?
	3. How will all individuals involved in this work ensure the ethical treatment, confidentiality and informed consent of all participants?
	4. How can all parties ensure their research is culturally sensitive and inclusive of diverse perspectives?
	5. What strategies can be employed by everyone involved to ensure the richness and accuracy of data collected and its analysis?
	6. How can everyone involved communicate their findings effectively to contribute to broader societal or academic advancements?

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