The role of qualitative methods in agriculture, nutrition and food systems research

Dr Elizabeth Hull, Jody Harris, Lauren Blake

Session Plan

- Introductory overview of qualitative research

- Activity 1: interviewing (part A)

Lunch break

- Activity 1: interviewing (part B)

- Activity 2: coding a transcript

- Wrap-up and feedback

Discussion

- Group introductions:

  who are you?

  where are you from?

  what do you do?

- What's the main question or aspect about qualitative research that you would like to answer or understand?

  (Groups to put key questions on post-its)

Makhathini, South Africa

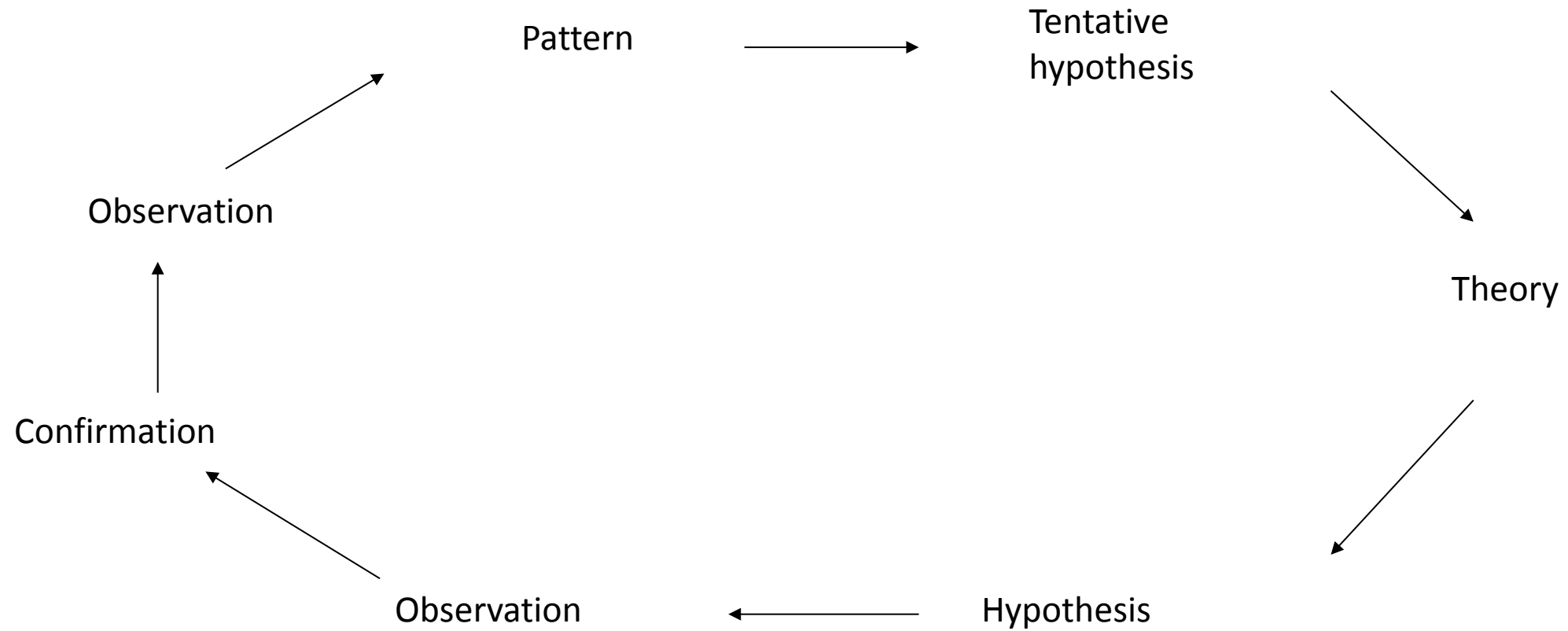# Quantitative versus Qualitative Research

Deductive and inductive reasoning

Deduction (typically quantitative):

Theory $\longrightarrow$ Hypothesis $\longrightarrow$ Observation $\longrightarrow$ Confirmation

Induction (typically qualitative):

Observation $\longrightarrow$ Pattern $\longrightarrow$ Tentative hypothesis $\longrightarrow$ Theory

# Combining inductive and deductive approaches

Research ethics

- Protecting research participants and honouring trust
- Anticipating harm
- Avoiding undue intrusions
- Negotiating informed consent
- Right to confidentiality and anonymity

Main Methods

- Participant observation
- Interviews (structured, semi-structured, unstructured)
- Surveys/questionnaires
- Focus groups
- Oral histories/life stories
- Case studies
- Archival and other documentary sources
- Photography and video

Considerations:
relationships and power dynamics

Research participants

Research assistants   Researchers
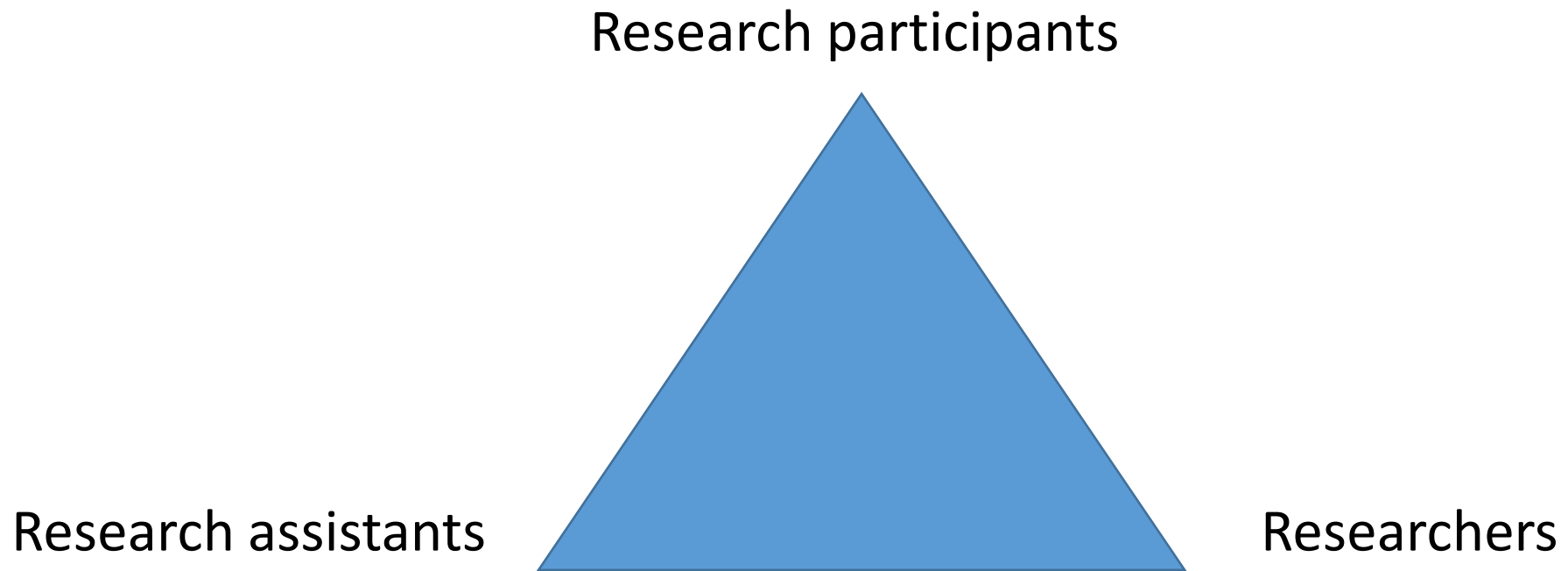
Why use qualitative research methods?

- Accessibility
- Reduces "reactivity"
- Increases relevance of survey questions
- Creates intuitive understanding
- Fuller picture of complex problems
- Explanations for inconsistent data
- Many complex research problems (especially food) require it

Drawbacks

- Time-consuming (resources)
- Time scales can be incommensurable
- Sampling and representativeness
- Inadequate to capture magnitude of phenomena
- Different qualitative methods may yield different results
- Consistency
- Unearths inconvenient and messy truths
- No quick-fix solutions
- Different methodologies make it a challenge to work across disciplines

System mapping a food issue
Example: Malnutrition interventions in Guatemala

- **Inputs:** nutritional science knowledge, health care services, governmental assistance, international development assistance, formulated fortified foods, food aid from the USA.

- **Actors**: consumers/citizens/patients (men, women, children), medical professionals, health centre assistants, community health leaders, government policy makers, nutrition supplementary feeding developers, development specialists, etc.

- **Activities**: giving food aid, measuring children, giving talks, delivering workshops, training community members, developing therapeutic foods, labouring on farms, procuring food, preparing food at home, consuming/sharing food, disposing of food, treating illness, measuring outcomes, etc.

- **Drivers/Influencers**: racial discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, poverty (lack of income, hygiene, disease), gender dynamics (gender roles, inequality, control over finances, influence over food choices and education), food preferences (cultural identity), prestige of meat over fruit and vegetables, expense of cash crops, lack of land and autonomy, lack of stability, political instability.

- **Outcomes**: contamination from waste, shame of malnourished family, "ignoring" advice, domestic abuse…

To understand a person's world, talk to them!
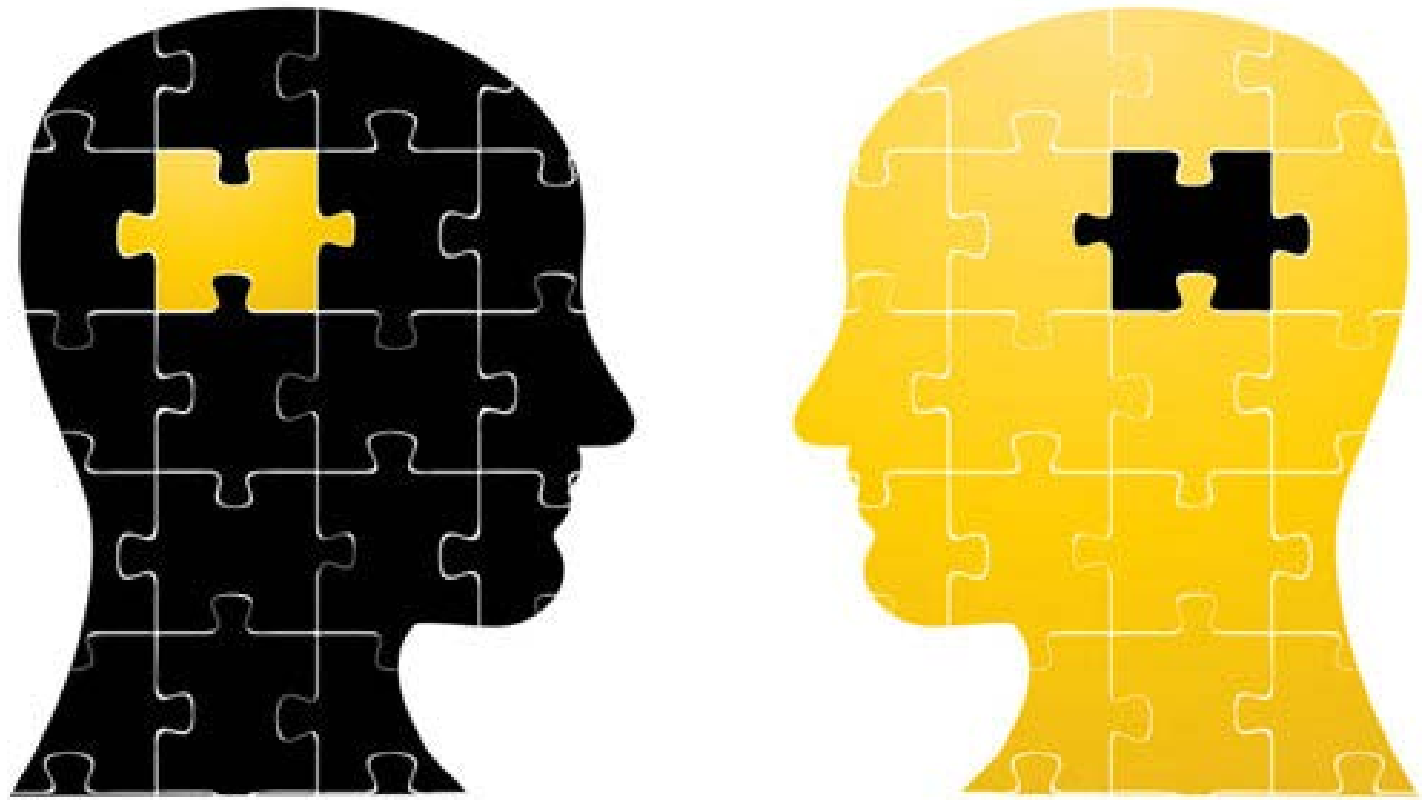
Qualitative interviewing

- Conversations on life in a professional form

- Has structure and purpose; beyond the spontaneous

- Careful questioning… and listening! Really hear the responses.

- Interviewees are given space to expand accounts of their experiences and feelings

- No common procedure; interviewing as a craft and an art….

- …. but several common processes and stages to the method.

Resources: https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/interview

Types of interview

- Structured interviews
  - Asking the same set of standardised questions
  - Getting responses in predetermined categories to (dis)confirm hypotheses
  - Useful to make comparisons between responses from different interviewee

- Semi-structured interviews
  - Allowing for the exploration of emergent themes and ideas
  - Scope for pursuing and probing for novel, relevant information

- Unstructured interviews
  - Not simply answering the questions posed by the interviewer
  - Freedom to tell their own story or biography
  - concerned with finding meanings, and attempts to develop a detailed biography with the interviewee

Semi-structured interviews

- Knowledge is gained from the interviewee's view point
- Research data comes from the interaction between interviewee and researcher
- Need to interpret information in context
  - Location of interview; degree of ease; how questions were asked and answered
- Key skills:
  - Remaining open to emerging issues and surprises, and following these… and then getting back to your interview schedule
  - Having knowledge about the interview topic to allow broad scope… but not imposing your own assumptions or leading the responses

Balance….

Types of interview questions

- Degree of focus
  - 'Grand tour': General overview
  - Specific: 'please tell me more about…'

- Degree of open-endedness
  - Open-ended: 'How do you feel about…?' Used to discover perceptions
  - Closed: 'Do you agree with the idea that…?' Used to confirm findings

- Types of information
  - Descriptive: 'Could you tell me what happened when…?'
  - Structured: 'What factors do you think are involved in…?'
  - Contrast: 'What changes have you seen since…?'
  - Clarification: 'Can you clarify what you mean by…?'
  - Follow-up: 'Can you tell me more about…?'

Interview procedures

- Establishing relationships: Putting the interviewee at ease
  - Communication of aims, asking permissions, sensitivity to body language…
- Using the interview schedule
  - This is generally a reminder, not a list; be flexible and iterative…
  - Know your schedule well, so you don't have to refer to it too often
- Following leads
  - These might be body language or verbal; be sensitive but get below the surface and uncover new ideas and areas
- Capturing data
  - Most researchers use audio recorders for later transcription
  - Depending on the context, taking notes might be appropriate

Exercise 1

Research question: **What influences people's food choices?**

Create an interview schedule to address this question

- Work alone or in pairs (not in larger groups- too many cooks!)
- Remember to allow for exploring of emergent ideas
- Frame your questions so they explore rather than lead
- Include a range of types of interview questions, not just facts…

Exercise 2

Research question: **What influences people's food choices?**

Undertake an interview to pilot your interview schedule

- Remember to listen and follow up, as well as ask your questions
- Listen for emotions, perceptions, and 'don't knows'
- Interviewee: While answering, think about how well the questions are working, what is harder or easier to answer or engage with…

Lunch!

Data analysis

Coding

- <u>Open coding</u>: read data line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate

- <u>Focused coding</u>: fine-grained, line-by-line analysis on the basis of topics that have been identified as of particular interest

Developing theory

1. Theoretical memos

- Elaborate and integrate the analytical categories you identify
- Connections to ideas you are familiar with already
- Note your own reactions and judgments
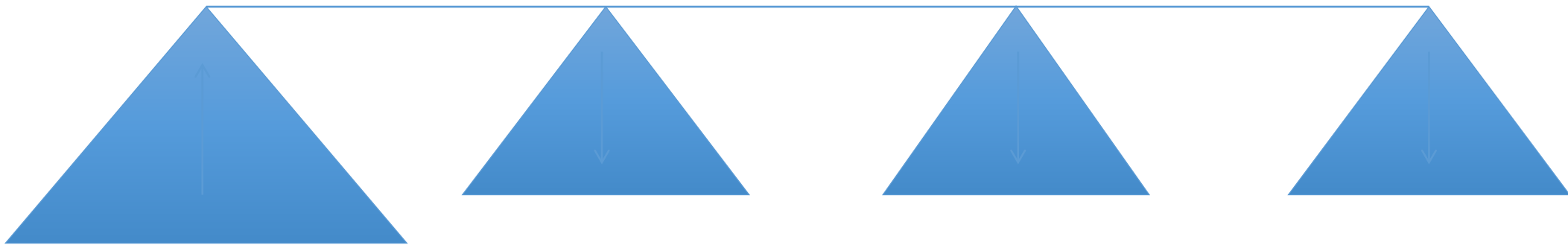- Further questions arising from the data

2. Theoretical propositions

- an *explanation* of an aspect of social life that has been observed and recorded

Levels of analysis
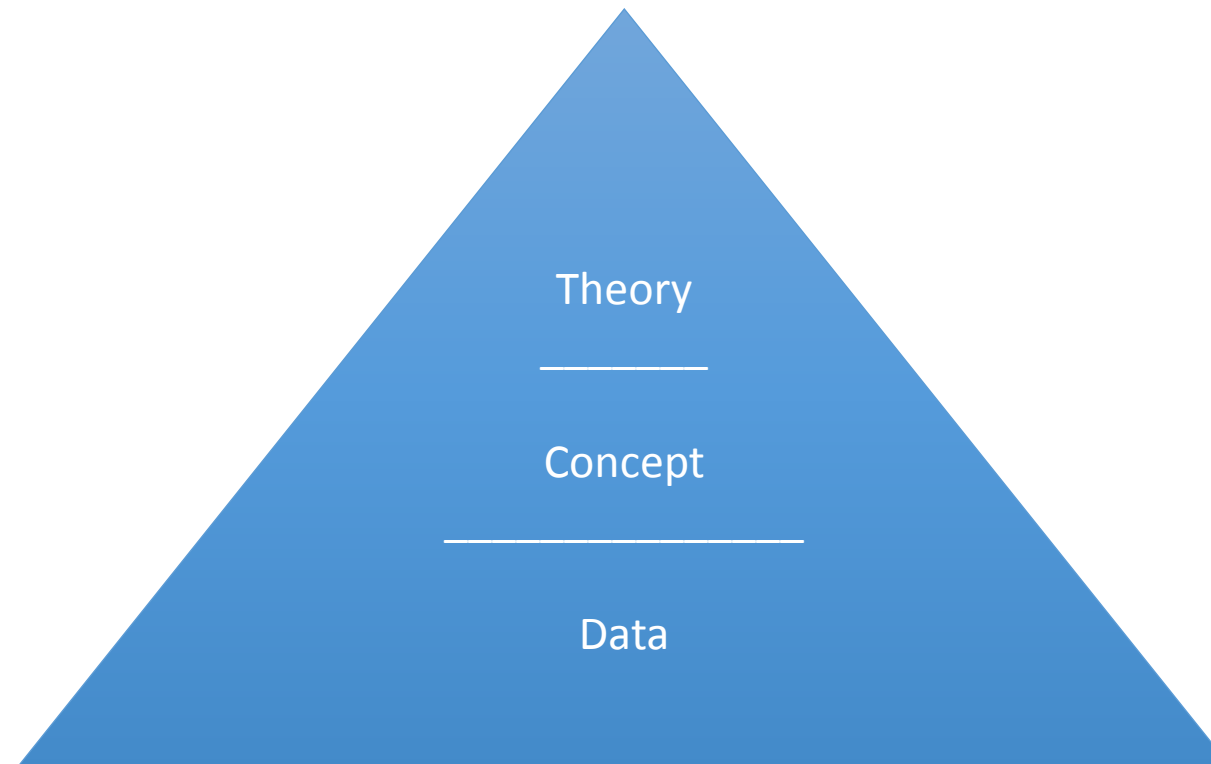
From the specific to the general…

Exercise 3

Carry out open coding analysis of the interview transcript

For open coding, remember…

• Identify analytical categories within the data.

e.g. words, concepts or explanations that the interviewee uses to account for what is happening

• Avoid looking for your own pre-conceived concepts or hypotheses.

e.g. do not assume that a category such as 'gender' is relevant until it emerges in the data. The more frequently it appears in the data, the more likely it is to hold significance

• Be attentive to possible problems of translation.

• The questions are data. Subject them to critical inquiry.

How can data analysis software help?

- <u>NVivo</u> is the most widely used programme for qualitative data analysis.

- It allows you to code, categorise, search and retrieve data.

- It cannot analyse the data or generate theory. This must be done by you!

Thank you!

- Re-cap

- Questions?

Elizabeth Hull, SOAS
Jody Harris, IDS
Lauren Blake, RVC

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Further reading

Qualitative methods

- Chrzan, Janet & John Brett 2017. *Research Methods for Anthropological Studies of Food and Nutrition*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn.

- Denzin, Norman K. & Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.) 2000. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

- Lune, Howard & Bruce L. Berg 2016. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Pearson.

Research Ethics

- https://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml