

HOW TO ENSURE DATA VALIDITY WHEN CHARACTERIZING AUDIENCES THROUGH INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

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I perform community engagement at sediment remediation sites that fall under the EPA's Great Lakes Legacy Act. As a Sea Grant liaison between EPA and the community, my objective is to address concerns and interests toward sediment remediation. I communicate short-term construction disturbances and long-term benefits of a healthier, revitalized environment. Each community is different and requires a tailored approach to outreach and messaging. I work with a team consisting of representatives for various entities (EPA, state resource agency, municipalities, NGOs, neighborhood, etc.) to choose target audiences for outreach on the sediment cleanup. Due to capacity constraints, we typically choose three to four audiences that are most impacted by or most interested in the cleanup and channel our efforts with them.

To inform our outreach, I perform a qualitative needs assessment (interviews and/or focus groups) on the target audiences to learn about their interests and concerns. I have completed four assessments in the following communities; Sheboygan, WI; Duluth, MN; Milwaukee, WI; and Muskegon, MI. The assessments focus on community perceptions toward the impacted waterway and the associated remediation and restoration projects. The assessments use the same qualitative open-ended interview or focus group methodology. A conventional content analysis of coding is used to analyze data. Each study produces findings documented in a report, which we use directly to make outreach decisions at the sites.

I will continue to use the qualitative needs assessment approach, but I would like to better establish credibility and validity of the data. I have taken a couple courses in qualitative research and reviewed some literature on validity. I engage in peer debriefing, member checks, and prolonged engagement, but I'm wondering if there is more I could or should be doing to make the data more valid. Also, how do I explain the validity of my research to my science and engineering colleagues at EPA? Furthermore, how do I keep the report easy to understand for my team members while establishing validity? I don't want to scare away non-scientist and non-social scientist team members with social science jargon.