



Interviews for Research

Interviews are like everyday conversations that are more or less focused on the researcher's needs for data. They differ from everyday conversations in that researchers should be more concerned to conduct interviews in a rigorous way to ensure reliability and validity of the data. Thus, findings should reflect what the research set out to answer, rather than reflecting the bias of the research or a very atypical group. The key to successful interviewing is learning how to **probe effectively and to stimulate a informant to produce more information, without injecting yourself into the interaction.** Remember, the interviewer is the learner.

Interview techniques should aim to be:

1. **Reproducible:** Someone else (especially partner organizations) could use the same topic guide to generate similar information
2. **Systematic:** Ensure that researchers are not just picking interviewees or data that work to support their pre-existing ideas about the answers
3. **Credible:** The questions that are asked and the ways in which they are asked should be reasonable ones for generating valid and truthful accounts of scenarios, situations or phenomena
4. **Transparent:** Methods should be written up so that readers and people who may use the results of the research can see exactly how the data were collected and analyzed

Interview Types

1. **Structured:** This is basically an in-person survey or questionnaire. The interviewer asks each respondent the same series of scripted questions which are created prior to the interview and the questions often have a limited set of response categories. This method can be done through paper or web-based self-reporting if necessary.

Best when used after observational and other less structured interviewing approaches have provided the researcher with adequate understanding of a topic to construct meaningful and relevant close-ended questions.

Pros: Can be conducted efficiently by interviewers trained only to follow instructions given in an interview guide or questionnaire, does not require much development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, can produce consistent data that can be compared across a number of respondents

Cons: There is generally little room for variation in responses and very few open-ended questions

Sample questions:

- How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your experience in the neighborhood?

Rate from very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, satisfied, very satisfied, to no basis for judgement.

1.) Access to public transportation

2.) Public safety

3.) Access to public amenities

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2. **Semi-structured:** Conducted with a loosely structured base, made up of open-ended questions which define the area to be explored. The interviewer will follow the guide but is able to follow trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide but may prove useful to the research when he or she feels this is appropriate. This method is often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing so that the researcher already has a good understanding of what questions to ask.

Best when you won't get more than one chance to interview someone, when you will be sending interviewers out into the field to collect data.

Pros: Provides valuable information from context of participants and stakeholder experiences, use of pre-determined questions provides uniformity, the flexibility of adding follow-up questions provides the opportunity for identifying new perspectives and understandings of the topic and/or the community

Cons: Can be time-consuming to collect and analyze data, requires some level of training and practice in order to prevent researcher suggesting/influencing answers

Sample questions:

- Tell me about your experience with the clinical services you've received before.
- Have you noticed any changes since implementing the so-and-so method? Tell me about them.
- Are there any health issues that you or your family has experienced since the installment of the water filters, in the past year? Tell me about them.

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3. **In-depth:** Also known as "qualitative" or "unstructured." Less structured than semi-structured interviews. These may only cover one or two issues (according to a topic guide or a few broad questions). This type of interview is used to explore the respondent's own accounts in detail, and is often used on topics where very little is known and it is important to gain an in-depth understanding.

Best when you want to have a more detailed conversation with the respondent to gain in-depth insight into their individual case or perspective. Recommended when the researcher already has been able to develop a clear agenda for the discussion through other methods, but still remains open to having their understanding of the area of inquiry open to revision by respondents.

Pros: Can explore long or complex topic material, can be effective with persons of lower literacy, allows considerable opportunity to probe answers, allows for intensive investigation of individual thought, opinions, and attitudes, good for assessing needs

Cons: Time-consuming, requires level of trust between interviewer and respondent especially when dealing with sensitive material, interviewer must be highly skilled in active listening, probing, and other interviewing skills, interviewer must be knowledgeable about and sensitive to a respondent's culture or frame of reference

Sample Questions:

- What do you think are the greatest strengths about the community members here?
- How do you feel about the relationship between the genders in your community?
- What would you do differently if you could lead a community training workshop?

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4. **Life histories:** A type of in-depth interviewing. These are detailed case studies which can show how much things have changed and evolved over time, or how broader social change has affected the lives of individuals in the community. Helps gain understanding of the broader narrative.

Best when you want to get an idea of the larger context of certain phenomena, or when doing psychological or sociological research (or clinical and you're trying to find patterns over a longer period of time)

Pros: Helps researchers look at people's lives in general and setting problems/concerns in a wider context, understand a broad range of psychological, sociological, medical, cultural, and other issues and influences. Also a very useful method for developing an understanding of a not yet fully-understood aspect of culture, experience, or situation

Cons: Most time-consuming, requires a high level of trust between interviewer and respondent

Sample questions:

Questions will usually follow some sort of chronological framework or pattern.

- What do you do differently as a parent than your parents did when you were growing up?
- How has the neighborhood changed since you were a child?
- Tell me about your childhood. Did you work? Did you go to school? What were your aspirations?
- Have opportunities changed for children now compared to when you were a child?

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Asking Questions (Some rules of thumb):

1. Start with a general question to orientate interview to the topic. Explain the purpose and intent of the interview, as well as the research objective.
2. Gauge the type of language that should be used so that participants understand the questions and do not feel intimidated or patronized
3. Use everyday vocabulary. Don't use technical words or overly complicated ones.
4. Put more sensitive questions towards the end.
5. Ask more open questions, that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer
6. Ask neutral questions. For example, do not ask: "Why haven't you had your children immunized?" but instead: "How did you decide whether or not to immunize your children?"
7. Use concrete rather than abstract questions. Base it off of something the participant has witnessed or experienced personally.

Make sure interview questions are "open-ended" instead of "leading" or "yes/no" questions.

- Open-ended questions allow for multiple answers, beyond a yes/no.
- Non-leading questions do not make assumptions, imply a right or wrong answer, or attempt to elicit a particular set of answers.
 - ex. open-ended: "What do you think are some of your biggest needs/concerns pertaining to the health of community members?"
 - ex. open-ended: "How has the community approached the situation in the past? What are some examples of successful/unsuccessful attempts?"
 - ex. leading: "Do you think that the new leadership training is much more effective than the previous ones?"
 - Rephrase into: "How do you feel about the new leadership training compared to the old one?"
- Learn how to rephrase/re-think your questions.

If your questions are not generating useful data, try these methods:

1. **Diary question:** Ask people to describe a day in their life, or their last day at work, etc. as a way to introduce the interview
2. **Critical incidents:** Ask about worst/best experiences to understand what is important about a topic
3. **Free listing:** Ask people to list all causes of an illness, for example, or all the possible ways to mitigate crop failure
4. **Ranking:** Ask people to rank items generated by free listing in order of importance

Here are some things you should keep in mind before, during and after the interview process:

1. **Access:** How are you going to gain access to the people you need to interview?
2. **Ethical issues:**
 - Make sure participants are being interviewed out of their own volition rather than being coerced.
 - Community leaders may not invite certain “marginal” members of the community. If you want their voice included and to have an equal representation of demographics, you may need other methods of access
3. **Bias:** Make sure you are getting an equal representation of the community, not only those that will give you the answer you want.
4. **Rapport:** Researchers need to consider how they are perceived by interviewees and the effects of personal characteristics such as ethnicity, status, gender and social distance. Present yourself in an appropriate manner. The aim is to be as nonjudgmental as possible, and to be sensitive to the needs of the respondents.
 - Trust is a very important thing to establish before you engage in qualitative interview methods that may make the informant feel vulnerable (to sharing ideas, perspectives, to being judged, etc.)
 - **Refer to the Trust section of the Culture Toolkit on how to effectively build trust in cross-cultural relationships**

Some things to avoid while interviewing:

- Making assumptions about answers, expecting or pushing towards answers
- Jumping too quickly from one subject to another
- Teaching, or trying to give advice during the interview
- Counseling, for example, summarizing responses too early
- Presenting your own perspective or opinion, potentially biasing interview
- Competing distractions and interruptions

Preparing the Interview

Work with the partner organization, your site team, and key persons to generate an effective method of interviewing, and come up with relevant questions.

Be able to answer, and explain your answers, to these questions below:

1. What is your research objective and why have you chosen this topic?
 - This will help you formulate your own thoughts in moving forward with your research
 - Keep in mind, it'll also be helpful for participants to know what your purpose is

2. How is your research objective important to the partner organization and/or the community?
 - Be able to articulate why the community should share their feelings, experiences, perspectives, or ideas with you
 - How will you make use of your findings to benefit the community?

3. How do you hope the partner organization will use the results of your project?
 - This could help you begin think of how to make your research useful for the community in a sustainable manner

4. What are you trying to find out through conducting this interview?
 - Is this a study on the effects of socio-economic status on access to education?
 - Is this a study on climate change on agricultural methods?
 - Is this a study on sanitation and public health?
 - Will you find out about individual experiences? Case studies? Bureaucratic process? Gender inequalities?

9. Have you made a list of key stakeholders and people affected by the particular phenomena you're researching?

- Policy makers, community leaders
- Program/project staff
- Community members
- Clinic staff, etc.

10. Have you made a list/sample that represents the community demographic equally and fairly? Consider:

- Gender
- Age (if relevant)
- Socio-economic status
- Societal status (if there is some sort of hierarchal structure, leadership)
- Vulnerable or marginalized population

11. Who might be marginalized/excluded from the interview? How can you gain access to them? What are the possible challenges or barriers to keep in mind?

Pilot Testing

The pilot test will help you determine if there are flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design and make necessary revisions before the implementation of the study. If you need to rephrase some questions in order to better guide answers towards the things you want to find out, or if there are issues of cultural sensitivities that you should be aware of for a portion of the interview, this is where you can find out and modify what you have. The test should be conducted with participants that have similar interests as those that will participate in the implemented study.

General Pointers

- **Take advantage of the partner organization as an asset to your research and consult with them through the process**
- Do not let your views predominate over participants' answers, ideas or decisions
 - **Allow people to answer in their own terms voicing their own views, values, and experiences**
- Always be be conscious of sensitive topics, subject matter, or environments
- Always **show respect for cultural traditions and protocol**
- Strive for as much transparency as possible
- Leave room for flexibility and allow for emergence of ideas from participants
 - There may be factors you did not consider that they have knowledge/concern on
 - Allow local knowledge to be the basis of the research
- **Limit the use of “why” questions because it implies there is a right or wrong answer**

Techniques to Utilize During the Interview

Especially for participatory (qualitative) research, these techniques help you ensure that the information is coming from the informant, not from your views or expectations on what you will find through your research.

Probing Techniques

1. "What..." questions
 - Works as a stimulus without injecting yourself into it
 - "What else happened?"
 - "What were your feelings about that?"
 - "What do you think about the situation you just described?"
2. Silent Probe
 - Remain quiet and wait for informant to continue
3. Echo Probe
 - Repeat the last thing an informant has said to affirm, and then ask them to continue
4. The Uh-huh Probe
 - Encourage participant to continue with a narrative by making affirmative noises
 - "Uh-huh," "Yes, I see," "Okay, go on..."
5. "You mentioned/talked about..."
 - "You mentioned _____, tell me more about that."
 - "You mentioned _____, what was that like for you?"
 - "You talked about _____, describe that experience in as much detail as possible."

*All of the above questions can be used as follow-up questions to get the informant to tell you more details and expand/elaborate on a point they raised.

Letting the Informant Lead

- Keep the conversation focused on a topic, but give the informant room to define the content of the discussion
 - Let informant's answers determine the direction the interview takes (keeping within topic of interest)
- Let the informant provide the information that he or she thinks is important
- Encourage informant to expand on their answers and give as many details as possible
 - Use "Describe...", "Can you tell me more about...?", "What do you mean by...?"

Structuring Questions

Move onto a new topic only when you feel you have explored as much of the informant's knowledge on the question at hand as possible. When you feel that you're both ready to move onto the next topic, bring it up by saying, "I would now like to introduce a new topic..." or "That brings me to the next thing I'd like to talk about..." This way, you can guide the direction of the interview and make sure that you are getting to ask about the things you set out to find out through the interview process.

Always take notes for follow-up questions and ideas to go back on later!

Conducting the Interview

Translator

If you need one, make sure you have a translator with you during the interviews. Prep the translator on your research objectives/plans so that they can give the interviews independently of you if they had to and still get the answers that you need. They should have a clear understanding of your purpose, and the meaning and rationale behind each question (so they know what kind of follow up questions to ask, or steer the conversation if needed). It is always good to have someone else there who can ensure the informant is exploring each topic in detail.

Note Taking

Use an audio recorder if available. If not, you can try recording it on your personal phone if possible. (Clarify it is for note-taking purposes to ensure confidentiality.) Otherwise, use a paper and pen, or take notes on your computer. It would be beneficial to have both you and your translator take notes so you can compare notes afterwards for review. Note down important ideas that may come up, or comments/questions you may come up with during the interview. If personnel is available, it doesn't hurt to have a dedicated transcriber.

Prep

1. Choose a setting with little distraction
2. Introduce yourself, start a friendly conversation
3. ***Explain the purpose/rationale of the interview and your research***
4. Address terms of confidentiality
5. Explain the format of the interview and indicate how long the interview usually takes
6. Ask them if they have any questions before you both get started with the interview

Sample Script for Opening the Interview

Bolded phrases are elements you should always include in your interview protocol. Your interview does not have to follow this exact format, but this will give you a good idea of how you should open your interview and the key things to go over.

Welcome and thank you for your participation today. My name is _____ and I am a student at _____ . Thank you for completing the surveys, and this follow-up interview will take about 60 minutes and will include 8 questions regarding your experiences and thoughts concerning _____. I would like your permission to tape record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. **All of your responses are confidential. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used to develop a better understanding of how you and your community view _____ and what might influence it. The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of _____ and to make recommendations and improvements through our findings. Your responses are important because _____.**

At this time, I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this study. You and I have both signed and dated each copy, certifying that we agree to continue this interview.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, or return a page, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

When you're finished interviewing, thank the participant warmly for their time and participation!

Analyzing the Data

The main purpose of analyzing qualitative data is to find emerging patterns and draw out meaningful conclusions out of the discussion. Depending on what your research objective is, there are several methods you can use to analyze qualitative data.

Thematic Analysis

This method looks across all the data collected to identify the common issues that recur, and identify the main themes that summarize all the views you have gathered.

1. Read and annotate transcripts: Make preliminary observations of the transcripts to get a feel for the data.
2. Identify themes: Start looking at the data in detail to start identifying themes. Ask yourself: “What is going on here?”
 1. Take notes of what the interviewee is referring to.
 2. Read the extract below for an example on how to identify themes
 3. Make a list of identified themes

This is an example from an interview with a mother about access to healthcare:

1. My baby was very hot with a fever in the morning
2. He cried and cried
3. My mother in law said to put a flannel on his head
4. But he was so hot I knew it was not right
5. And I told my husband to hurry to get him to the clinic

Here, the big theme is “coping with fever,” but you will get more out of the data if you think in detail about the various things that are going on here, such as: sources of information and advice; remedies; triggers to seeking healthcare

You can begin developing a coding scheme or a way to organize or data. In the given healthcare case, some of the codes might be: (1) initial symptoms; (2) informal help seeking; (3) giving advice on what to do; (4) formal health-seeking; (5) responsibility for taking child

Source: “A Guide to Using Qualitative Research Methodology” Medecins Sans Frontiers

3. Code the data using the strategy above. (Some other coding categories could include; problem, possible cause, reaction, subject, process, solution, etc.)
4. Compile data by assigned codes. (Cutting and pasting from transcripts)
5. Begin identifying patterns and relationships within the themes
6. Make sense of the patterns and relationships and consult with host organization or the community to see if your findings are accurate throughout

Interpreting the Data

Maintain meticulous records of all interviews and group discussions, and document the process of analysis you went through in detail. Record (**memo**) your thoughts and ideas as they evolve throughout the study. When you consult and discuss your findings with your organization and/or community, write them down.

Generating Theories and Hypotheses

You can now begin to propose theories and run through different scenarios or hypotheses. This is an iterative process through which you will identify core theoretical concepts. As you gather more data, you will be able to start making tentative linkages between theories and the data you've gathered. Through multiple iterations of this, you will ideally approach a conceptually dense theory and hypothesis that you can flesh out into a very well-considered explanation for the phenomenon of interest.

Validation Strategies

It is important to ensure that your analysis is reliable and your findings are valid.

1. **Triangulation:** Seek evidence from a wide range of sources and compare findings from those different sources. For example, if you've done interviews, surveys, and focus groups, compare the findings from each. If patterns coincide, then that strengthens the validity of identified issues.
2. **Member checking:** This method involves feeding findings from the analysis back to the participants, through focus groups for example, and assessing how much they consider the findings to reflect the issues from their perspective.
3. **Deviant cases:** These are data or findings that do not fit with your conclusions. Look in detail into why these cases may differ from the others. Explaining these will strengthen your analysis further.
4. **Prolonged Engagement:** Spend sufficient time in the field with the community to learn and understand the culture, social setting, or phenomenon of interest. This involves spending adequate time observing various aspects of a setting, speaking with a range of people, and developing relationships and rapport with members of the community. *It is crucial to understand the context, build trust, be able to detect and account for distortions in the data, and rise above his or her own preconceptions.*
5. **Examination of Alternative Explanations:** Like any research, a good researcher should engage in a systematic search for alternative themes, divergent patterns, and rival explanations. Look for other ways to organize data or seeing the data. This helps you see and eliminate your own bias/predisposed-thinking from your research, and help validate your own theory if you can dispel why the alternative could not be true.

References:

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"Research Sequence, Interview Protocol," School of Social Work, San Jose State University