

Strategies for Qualitative Interviews

A Few General Points

- Stop and Think: should interviews be included in your research design?
 - Are there alternative ways of answering your research question through documentary review, observation or unobtrusive measures?
 - Be clear about the possible biases and limitations of interviews
- The point of a qualitative interview is to let the respondent tell their own story on their own terms.
- THIS IS NOT A SURVEY! The guide acts as a prompt, reminding you of necessary topics to cover, questions to ask and areas to probe. As such, it should be simple so that your primary focus can stay on the respondent. It's best to memorize your guide!
- How much time will you spend with each respondent? Adjust your guide accordingly (it may take several interviews to judge the correct length).
- Try out a new guide (or parts of it) on friends and get their feedback before using it in the field.

Should you record and transcribe interviews?

PROS:

- It helps to correct the natural limitations of our memories and of the intuitive glosses that we might place on what people say in interviews
- It allows more thorough examination of what people say
- It permits repeated examinations of the interviewees' answers
- It opens up the data to public scrutiny by other researchers, who can evaluate the analysis that is carried out by the original researchers of the data (that is, a secondary analysis)
- It therefore helps to counter accusations that an analysis might have been influenced by a researcher's values or biases
- It allows the data to be reused in other ways from those intended by the original researcher—for example, in the light of new theoretical ideas or analytic strategies.

CONS:

- It introduces a different dynamic into the social encounter of the interview, and recording equipment may be off-putting for interviewees.
- Transcribing is a very time-consuming process. It also requires good equipment, usually in the form of a good-quality tape recorder and microphone but also, if possible, a transcription machine. Transcription also very quickly results in a daunting pile of paper.

A Successful Interviewer is:

1. *Knowledgeable*: is thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview; pilot interviews of the kind used in survey interviewing can be useful here.
2. *Structuring*: gives purpose for interview; rounds it off; asks whether interviewee has questions.
3. *Clear*: asks simple, easy, short questions; no jargon.
4. *Gentle*: lets people finish; gives them time to think; tolerates pauses.
5. *Sensitive*: listens attentively to what is said and how it is said; is empathetic in dealing with the interviewee.
6. *Open*: responds to what is important to interviewee and is flexible.
7. *Steering*: knows what he/she wants to find out.
8. *Critical*: is prepared to challenge what is said, for example, dealing with inconsistencies in interviewees' replies.
9. *Remembering*: relates what is said to what has previously been said.
10. *Interpreting*: clarifies and extends meanings of interviewees' statements, but without imposing meaning on them.
11. *Balanced*: does not talk too much, which may make the interviewee passive, and does not talk too little, which may result in the interviewee feeling he or she is not talking along the right lines.
12. *Ethically sensitive*: is sensitive to the ethical dimension of interviewing, ensuring the interviewee appreciates what the research is about, its purposes, and that his or her answers will be treated confidentially.

The Interview as an Interpersonal Encounter

- The social skills of empathy, warmth, attentiveness, humor (where appropriate), and consideration are essential for good interviewing.
- Any judgmental attitudes, shock or discomfort will be immediately detected.
- Never answer a question for the respondent.
- One must be completely engaged with the respondent, while at the same time keeping track of the questions one needs to ask.
- Use every active listening technique at your disposal:
 - Repeating back
 - "Wow!"
 - "Tell me more about that!"
 - "That is really interesting."
- Don't be afraid of silence; you can use it to prod the respondent to reflect and amplify an answer
- Don't follow the interview guide—follow the respondent. Follow up new information that he or she brings up without losing sense of where you are in the interview.
- Try not to think about time—relax into the interview.

Guidelines for Developing Interview Questions

- Questions should be simple. Do not ask more than one question at a time.
- The best questions are those which elicit the longest answers from the respondent. Do not ask questions that can be answered with one word.
- Don't ask questions that require your respondents to do your analysis for you. This is YOUR job.
- Likewise, do not ask for hearsay or opinions on behalf of the group they are a part of "What do people around here think of x?" You rarely get anything interesting.
- Don't be afraid to ask embarrassing questions. If you don't ask, they won't tell.
- Types of questions or other interview talk:
 - *Direct questions:* 'Do you find it easy to keep smiling when serving customers?'; 'Are you happy with the way you and your husband decide how money should be spent?' Such questions are perhaps best left until towards the end of the interview, in order not to influence the direction of the interview too much.
 - *Indirect questions:* 'What do most people round here think of the ways that management treats its staff?', perhaps followed up by 'Is that the way you feel too?', in order to get at the individual's own view.
 - *Structuring questions:* 'I would now like to move on to a different topic'.
 - *Follow-up questions:* getting the interviewee to elaborate his/her answer, such as 'Could you say some more about that?'; 'What do you mean by that . . .?'
 - *Probing questions:* following up what has been said through direct questioning.
 - *Specifying questions:* 'What did you do then?'; 'How did X react to what you said?'
 - *Interpreting questions:* 'Do you mean that your leadership role has had to change from one of encouraging others to a more directive one?'; 'Is it fair to say that what you are suggesting is that you don't mind being friendly towards customers most of the time, but when they are unpleasant or demanding you find it more difficult?'

Step-By-Step Guide to Writing Interview Questions

1. Write down the larger research questions of the study. Outline the broad areas of knowledge that are relevant to answering these questions.
2. Develop questions within each of these major areas, shaping them to fit particular kinds of respondents. The goal here is to tap into **their** experiences and expertise.
3. Adjust the language of the interview according to the respondent (child, professional, etc.).
4. Take care to word questions so that respondents are motivated to answer as **completely** and **honestly** as possible.
5. Ask “how” questions rather than “why” questions to get stories of process rather than acceptable “accounts” of behavior. “How did you come to join this group . . .?”
6. Develop probes that will elicit more detailed and elaborate responses to key questions. The more detail, the better!
7. Begin the interview with a “warm-up” question—something that the respondent can answer easily and at some length (though not too long). It doesn’t have to pertain directly to what you are trying to find out (although it might), but this initial rapport-building will put you more at ease with one another and thus will make the rest of the interview flow more smoothly.
8. Think about the logical flow of the interview. What topics should come first? What follows more or less “naturally”? This may take some adjustment after several interviews.
9. Difficult or potentially embarrassing questions should be asked toward the end of the interview, when rapport has been established.
10. The last question should provide some closure for the interview, and leave the respondent feeling empowered, listened to, or otherwise glad that they talked to you.