

TIPSHEET – QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Qualitative interviewing provides a method for collecting rich and detailed information about how individuals experience, understand and explain events in their lives. This tipsheet offers an introduction to the topic and some advice on carrying out effective interviews.

Why interviews?

Interviews provide greater detail and depth than the standard survey, allowing insight into how individuals understand and narrate aspects of their lives. Additionally, interviews can be tailored specifically to the knowledge and experience of the interviewee.

Designing and structuring the interview

Qualitative interviews can range from highly exploratory to addressing specific hypotheses. As a result, the structure of interviews can range from loose conversations to structured exchanges in which all interviewees are asked the exact same set of questions. Your choice of interview structure should reflect the goals and stage of your research.

- Less structured interviews are most appropriate for early stages of research because they allow interviewees to focus on what they think is most relevant to the question, providing the broadest set of perspectives. This approach can be valuable in contexts where little is known about the topic (e.g. because relatively little previous research exists), making it difficult or impossible to develop testable hypotheses and suggesting that more information-gathering is required.
- More structured interviews ensure that interviewees all address the same questions, and thus that interviewee’s responses can be compared. More structured interviews increase the likelihood that the findings of the research will be generalizable and/or can be used to test specified hypotheses.

Regardless of the format of the interview, the planning you put into your interviews will determine how useful your interviews will be for answering your research question.

- Do not expect interviewees to be able to directly address your research question. Instead, interviews should be structured around several focal questions designed to cover the main aspects of the research question
 - Questions should be designed to elicit an individual’s experiences and understanding. Asking about a specific experience (“Can you tell me about the last time you voted in person in a general election, from when you got to the polling site until you left?”) rather than a general topic (“What do you find it to be like when you go to vote?”) is usually more likely to generate specific, informative responses. Of course, being specific only works when you ask about

an experience a respondent has had, and as with other forms of information gathering, recent experiences are often easier for a respondent to recall accurately and in detail.

- Questions should be broad and open-ended, rather than tailored for a specific type of answer.
- Avoid questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”
- Avoid biasing responses
 - Do not share your hypotheses (if applicable).
 - Do not use emotional, loaded or biased language.
 - Be careful about what your behavior conveys to participants (e.g., expressions of surprise, jumping to take notes).

While the main questions will help establish the topic of discussion, most interviewees will only have a general idea of your goals and the level of depth you are looking for in their responses. The following two types of questions can be useful for directing the interview.

- Follow-up questions should be used to encourage expansion of ideas deemed most relevant to the research question
 - Used to elaborate on themes, clarify concepts
 - E.g., “What do you mean by... ?” “Can you tell me more about ... ?”
- Probes are standardized ways to get more depth and detail
 - Probes should be short and simple to avoid breaking the interviewee’s focus
 - For continuation: “Then what happened?”
 - For elaboration: “Can you give me an example?”
 - For steering the conversation: “You mentioned that...”
 - Probes can be non-verbal as well, such as using silence to encourage elaboration, or leaning forward to indicate interest
 - Be careful to vary the probes and not to overuse them
- You should also be prepared to reframe questions
 - If a question causes discomfort, try reframing it in a way to reduce any perceived judgment.
 - If a question draws a blank stare, try reframing the question to make it clearer, more concrete, or by tying it to the interviewee’s earlier comments
 - If all else fails, be ready to move on to another topic and come back to the current question. Pushing on a dead-end can be frustrating for both interviewer and interviewee
- When interviewees are on a roll, you may miss the opportunity for important follow-up questions. Rather than interrupting, keep notes on follow-up to ensure that you remember to return to them later
- It may be helpful to summarize key ideas and themes back to the interviewee to ensure you have a proper understanding of their meaning

Creating a comfortable environment for the interviewee is crucial both for the purposes of an informative and accurate interview. As such, the interviewer should seek to establish rapport with the interviewee.

- Choose a comfortable setting for the interview that is free from distractions

- Open the interview with easy questions that the interviewee can answer confidently, or even begin with friendly, off-topic conversation
- Explain in broad terms the goals of the research, particularly if you can frame it in terms of solving a problem that is important to the interviewee
- Make sure the interviewee understands the confidentiality agreement of the interview
 - Interviewees can be allowed to speak “off the record,” but be clear about what this means to you and the interviewee
- Generating trust early on can be important for acquiring interviews and making them worthwhile
 - Self-disclosure can be effective, such as highlighting shared experiences or goals that are shared with the interviewee
 - Mutual acquaintances (including previous interviewees) can generate trust
 - Trust is particularly important if the interview covers sensitive topics

Question order is important!

- Interviews should be structured like a conversation, with logical transitions between topics
- It is typically best to start the interview with an easy and general question
 - E.g., a “tour” question such as “Could you tell me what you do here?”
- Save sensitive or controversial questions for the middle of the interview, once rapport has been established
- End with a question allowing respondents to comment on any topic covered in the interview or on the interview itself

Mode of interview

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face or over the phone. While telephone interviews ease travel burdens, there are a number of downsides to phone interviews:

- Harder to establish trust and rapport
- Typically must be shorter
- Potentially miss many non-verbal cues

Recording your interview

Ideally, you should tape-record all interviews, which minimizes loss of information and allows the full attention of the interviewer. However, the interviewee must assent to being recorded.

- Keep in mind that some may be uncomfortable with the tape recorder, although many interviewers report that people tend to quickly forget its presence
- If it is not possible to use a tape recorder, bring a second person to take notes
- Take notes on body language, tone of voice, or any other clues as to the meaning of the interviewee. This will all be lost on an audio recording and may give important insight into the meaning of the interviewee
- A final transcript that integrates notes should be created as soon as possible after the interview
- A full recording and/or detailed notes are crucial for transparency of the research

References

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