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Preparing for One-on-One Qualitative Interviews: Designing and Conducting the Interview[1]

Kathryn A. Stofer[2]

This document provides a guide to designing the question guide and conducting one-on-one interviews for qualitative data collection. Designed to help beginning researchers and Extension and evaluation practitioners, the guide covers common types of interviews and their uses as well as strategies to use when asking the questions of the interviewee. This document is designed to accompany AEC676, Preparing for One-on-One Qualitative Interviews: Logistics.

Uses and Types of Interviews

Qualitative research methods such as interviews can provide context to the numbers gathered using quantitative methods. One-on-one interviews between a researcher and a participant reach a small number of people in-depth and offer insight into an array of experiences. Qualitative methods may be used before designing a quantitative study or may be used in conjunction with quantitative research when you desire more information in mixed-methods studies (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

There are three typical types of interviews, with varying levels of structure (Bernard, 2005). The most rigid is the structured interview, wherein the interviewer asks the same questions in the same order to all participants, without deviation. This method may also be called a standardized interview or researcher-administered survey. Because everyone asks the same questions in the same manner, multiple people can conduct interviews in parallel, allowing for interviews of a larger group of participants.

In the least-structured interview, the interviewer has only a few topics they want to discuss and conducts the interview like a casual conversation. The interviewer creates follow-up and probing questions in response to the participant's answers during the interview. The questions may vary across interviews depending upon the participant responses. The same interviewer typically conducts interviews for all participants. This case is generally reserved for the most exploratory of research when very little may be known about the participants of interest before the study takes place. For example, the first research on social media users may not have had any idea what to ask participants beyond why, when, and how they use social media. However, this approach may be used to narrow down questions for future studies. This type of interview may require multiple interviews with the same participant over the course of long-term fieldwork (Bernard, 2005).

Between the two extremes is the semi-structured interview. This format allows the interviewer to have a fairly consistent set of questions to ask in essentially the same order for each participant, allowing for similar questions to be asked of all participants. However, the structure of this interview allows the interviewer to ask probing questions for clarification when necessary and follow a participant's train of thought. Creating a semi-structured interview guide can allow multiple interviewers to collect data or ensure a single interviewer collects data consistently (Bernard, 2005).

Ethics of Interviewing

First, do no harm. Just as in the practice of medicine and other natural scientific research, ethics should be at the forefront of your activities. "There is no ethical imperative in social research more important than seeing to it that you do not harm innocent people who have provided you with information in good faith" (Bernard, 2005, p. 223). For many interviews, this means first having your interview guide approved by your Institutional Review Board. However, even once the interview guide and protocol are approved, you must remain vigilant through the course of the recruitment, consent, interview, and follow-up to keep your participant at ease and maintain trust. This trust extends to the care and keeping of your data after collection and through to publication as well. Sometimes it is better not to collect certain kinds of data at all.

Creating the Interview Guide

Before conducting an interview, a researcher must create the interview questions or guide, often referred to as the protocol. The extent of the guide will depend on the type of interview to be conducted. For example, a structured interview will have the exact order of the questions and

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exact wording of the questions set out ahead of time. Semi-structured interviews will typically have a set of questions and a desired order, with some potential follow-up questions and other notes as to how the interviewer might adjust things if need be. The least-structured interviews may simply have a guide with a list of topics to discuss. These may also be referred to, respectively, as a Structured Open-Ended Interview, a General Interview Guide, and Informal Conversation by some researchers (D. W. Turner, 2010).

- Develop the guide well before you wish to start your first interview, especially if you will need ethics board approval, discussed above.
- For a list of question types, see Telg (2015) on media interviewing. Generally, for interviews you will have open-ended, probe, and mirror questions. You may find leading questions valuable, but these can, as the name implies, lead the participant in a particular direction and suggest a "right" answer.
- One good question to start with is the grand tour question. For example, when I was asking people how they attempted to understand visualizations of ocean data, I showed them an example and asked, "When you look at a spatial data visualization like this, what do you do to interpret it?" If I needed probes for this question, I used "What do you look at first?" or "What information do you seek out as background?"
- If you are going to ask about both facts and opinions, start with the factual questions. For example, ask *what* activities the interviewee participated in before you ask *how the interviewee felt* about the activities (Boyce & Neale, 2006).
- Link your questions to your research questions and your analytical approach. For example, if you want to understand participant stories, be sure to phrase your questions to elicit narratives (D. Turner, 2016).

Bernard (2005) recommends preceding threatening questions or ones about sensitive topics with a long, rambling run-up. Bernard offers the following example, "'We're interested in the various things that people do these days in order to keep from getting diseases when they have sex. Some people do different kinds of things, and some people do nothing special. Do you ever use condoms?' If the respondents [*sic*]says 'Yes,' or 'No,' or 'Sometimes,' *then* you can launch that series of questions about why, why not, when, with whom, and so on. The wording of sensitive questions should be supportive and non-judgmental." (p. 220, emphasis in original).

If your project goals lead you to ask these sorts of questions, you would definitely benefit from Institutional Review Board review, or at the minimum, review by a colleague and pilot testing with a representatives of communities similar to your participants to ensure your guide is as sensitive as possible. Bernard (2005) also notes that the more the interviewer gets a participant to share with them, the more responsible the interviewer is for ethically treating the participant. Make sure every question has relevance to your purpose. If you cannot imagine a satisfactory answer to a participant who asks, "Why do you ask that?" leave the question out (Bernard, 2005). Finally, share the interview guide draft with colleagues or outside experts for additional review to address redundancy or missing items, especially when trying to assess a particular concept comprehensively. This is an important step in validation.

Here is an example of a semi-structured interview guide, for research on ocean data visualization interpretation (Stofer, 2016). I used this guide while presenting global spatial data visualizations to participants in a series with various levels of scaffolding in each visualization as well as two different topics of ocean data. I did not ask every question for each stimulus, and participants answered many questions in response to other questions. For example, when asking about the colors, participants may have volunteered information about the measurement unit.

On the other hand, this document presents more of an informal conversation guide. Many times, once teachers who had attended our workshop got to talking, interviewers did not need to ask all of the questions as the teachers volunteered this information. This guide in particular had additional topics that we did not ask all teachers, depending on the time spent discussing other ideas.

Conducting the Interview

Once you have the guide and other logistics set, you can recruit participants. For tips on sampling for qualitative research, see Israel and Galindo-Gonzalez (1992) or this web page from the Center For Innovation in Research and Teaching at Grand Canyon University.

Even though it may seem straightforward, conducting an interview in a way to elicit information from a participant without inserting the interviewer's viewpoint or even reacting to participant responses is a skill. It may be difficult not to help a participant who might struggle, especially for educators, as we are used to jumping in to facilitate. Novice interviewers may want to have a trusted, experienced interviewer watch them practice the pilot interviews and offer feedback. Piloting the interview with participants can also help the interviewer become used to typical responses. The following tips will help the interviewer suppress some of those other learned behaviors and collect meaningful data.

Starting the Interview

- If you do not collect a formal informed consent, ask permission to record the interview and take notes. Assure the participant you will do your best to keep

their identity confidential in any reports and take care to secure the data.
- Be sure to emphasize that there are no wrong answers to your questions, that you are interested in what the participant thinks and feels, and that you are interested in learning from them and their experiences.

During the Interview

- "Get people to a topic of interest and get out of the way" (Bernard, 2005, p. 216).
- Try not to place any judgments on what the interviewee is saying. Even "mm-hmm" and "okay" and nodding your head can convey agreement or affirmation. Remain silent if necessary. Resist the urge to be more conversational.
- Listen actively. For particularly crucial passages or potential areas of confusion, paraphrase and repeat back to the participant. For example, say, "I think you are saying that goats produce milk with a higher fat content than that of cows. Do I have that correct?"
- If using a semi-structured or completely flexible approach, do not hesitate to ask questions out of the order written on the guide to follow the participants' line of thought better.
- Probe for more information or clarification using one or more of the following:
    - "Tell me more about that" is a good neutral prompt to elicit further information. Variations include "why do you feel that way?" and "why do you say that?"
    - You can also simply echo what the participant said, repeating their words verbatim, followed by "then what happens/happened," to elicit more from a story or a step-by-step explanation.
    - Be careful to vary your probing questions so your participants understand you are actually listening and not simply asking questions by rote.
    - Especially in situations where you may be a cultural outsider, you might preface questions with "This may seem obvious, but ..." This could remind your participant that you do not know all the intricacies of their culture and prompt them to add additional detail for previous questions that they assumed you knew.
    - "I'm not sure I understand" is another way to solicit additional information or a different explanation.
- Try not to interrupt participants. On the other hand, if you have a long-winded participant or one who has wandered away from where you want to go, try redirecting them back to an earlier question or on to a later question in your guide.

Wrapping up the Interview

- Finish, time permitting, with a question such as "Is there anything that I have not covered that you think is relevant to add?"
- Thank the participant again for their time and for their willingness to offer candid feedback.
- See additional tips in the companion EDIS document AEC676, *Preparing for One-on-one Qualitative Interviews: Logistics*, for steps to preserve your data after the interview.

Summary

Effective interviewing can provide rich data with context that may not be available from quantitative data collection methods. However, interviewing takes deliberate forethought and practice as well as careful preservation of the data to ensure both protection of participants and their data.

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[2] Kathryn A. Stofer, research associate professor, STEM education and outreach, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.