Conducting Qualitative In-depth Interviews

Persons who wish to conduct an effective qualitative in-depth interview will need to appreciate the purpose of these types of interviews and the basic techniques associated with them. While qualitative interviews can be guided by different objectives, those that you will conduct for this course will be based on the assumption that if done properly, interviewers will be able to help individuals represent their personal experiences fairly well.

As you read through the handouts that follow, keep in mind that the interviews you will conduct represent a special type of conversation. Ideally, the participants will do the vast majority of the talking and they will do so in a relaxed, candid fashion. You will want to encourage them to tell you stories about the issues of interest to you. You will seek to have them provide detailed, rich accounts of their experiences, not yes/no answers. You will want to know how and why they experienced certain events in their lives as they did. Understanding their emotional reactions to events is important. You will want them to trust you as an interviewer. Your interviewing style should help them to feel as though they are helping you understand something important about their lives.

I’ve divided the handouts summarizing some of the key issues related to qualitative interviewing into several sections. Much of this material has been adapted from Steinar Kvale’s book An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing published in 1996. Please read through each of these handouts carefully.

1. Aspects of Qualitative Research Interviews
2. Qualification Criteria for the Interviewer
3. Interviewer Issues
4. Types of Interview Questions
5. Guidelines for Preparing Interview Summaries
Dr. William Marsiglio

Aspects of Qualitative Research Interviews

1. **Life world:** The topic of the qualitative interview is a participant’s everyday life world and his or her relation to it. Focus on participants’ **lived experiences**, not just a participant’s beliefs or attitudes about issues.

2. **Meaning:** The interview provides opportunities to interpret the meaning of central themes in the participant’s life world. It focuses on the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said.

3. **Qualitative:** The interview seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language, it does not aim to quantify most responses.

4. **Descriptive:** The interview attempts to obtain open, nuanced, rich descriptions of different aspects of the participant’s life world.

5. **Specificity:** Descriptions of specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions.

6. **Deliberate Naivete:** The interviewer is typically open to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than using ready-made categories and schemes of interpretation. This varies depending upon the interviewer’s experience in the substantive area.

7. **Focused:** Because the interview is focused on particular themes a semi-structured interview guide is used. Thus, it is neither strictly structured with standardized questions, nor entirely “non-directive.” Subsequent interviews can introduce new questions.

8. **Ambiguity:** A participant’s statements can sometimes be ambiguous, reflecting contradictions in his/her life world.

9. **Change:** The process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness. A participant may in the course of the interview come to change his or her descriptions and meaning about a theme.

10. **Sensitivity:** Different interviewers can produce different statements on the same themes, depending on their sensitivity to and knowledge of the interview topic.

11. **Interpersonal Situation:** The knowledge obtained is produced through the interpersonal interaction in the interview.

12. **Positive Experience:** A well conducted research interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the participant who may obtain new insights into his/her life situation.

Qualification Criteria for the Interviewer

1. **Knowledgeable**: Has an extensive knowledge of the interview theme; being familiar with its main aspects the interviewer will know what issues are important to pursue. Given the semi-structured nature of these interviews, it is essential that the interviewer know the guide thoroughly.

2. **Structuring**: Introduces a purpose for the interview and outlines the procedure in brief. Here the interviewer can also answer any questions for the participant after the interview.

3. **Clear**: Poses clear, simple, easy and short questions; speaks distinctly and understandably, does not use academic language or professional jargon. Many of the participants do not know sociological jargon; it is the interviewer's responsibility to use lay terms when talking about these concepts.

4. **Gentle**: Allows subjects to finish what they are saying, let them proceed at their own pace of thinking and speaking. Frequently the interviewer is asking questions that the participant has never spent time thinking about; this, in turn, can require the participant to take longer pauses than are normal in a conversation in order to digest the question.

5. **Sensitive**: Listens actively to the content of what is said, hears the many nuances of meaning in an answer, and seeks to get the nuances of meaning described more fully. It is, for the interviewer, important to pay attention to what is said as well as how it is said and what is not said in order to comprehend the interview fully.

6. **Open**: Hears which aspects of the interview topic are important for the participants. The participants, undoubtedly, have had many fascinating experiences in their lives, but the interviewer's job is to focus on the main questions/issues associated with the interview.

7. **Steering**: Has a general sense of what information will be relevant. The interviewer controls the course of the interview and is not afraid of interrupting digressions from the participant.

8. **Critical**: Does not take everything that is said at face value, but questions critically to make sure participants are clear about what they are saying. Many times participants can become confused about events, emotions or situations. The interviewer's job is to remember, or write down, enough of the important points to aid in factual checking throughout the interview.

9. **Remembering**: Retains what a participant has said during the interview, can recall earlier statements and ask to have them elaborated, and can relate what has been said during different parts of the interview to each other.

10. **Interpreting**: Manages throughout the interview to clarify and extend the meanings of the participants' statements; provides interpretations of what is said, which may then be disconfirmed or confirmed by the participant.

Adapted from:

Dr. William Marsiglio

**Interviewer Issues**

As you conduct your qualitative interviews, you may have participants do or say things that require you to respond in some way in order to maintain the integrity and focus of the interview process. I’ve identified 8 different possibilities below. By being aware of and thinking about these in advance, you will be more likely to identify them quickly and be prepared to respond in a calm and effective manner when you are conducting your interviews.

1. **Non Talker**
   
   Not all participants will be talkative and articulate. Some may tend to give curt answers that are largely uninformative. They may, if you don’t prompt them, just sit there after they provide their short response.

   **Your Response:** try to get them to explore their thoughts by saying something like “could you elaborate on that,” “could you talk a bit about that,” “well, ok, but could you explain why you think that way,” “can you tell more about why you feel that way,” “can you talk some more about that.”

2. **Rambler**

   Some participants may have a tendency to ramble on and on about unrelated topics, or at least what appear to be unrelated topics.

   **Your Response:** you need to politely and gently take control of the interview process if this happens. You can do this by saying something like “excuse me, could we change the subject a bit and get back to your thoughts on...” or “excuse me, but I was wondering if you could come back to the point you mentioned about...”

   If the participant resorts back to his/her rambling ways, then you might say “excuse me, could I stop you for a second, I’m a little confused ...can you help me understand how what you’re saying relates to [mention the question you’ve asked]

3. **Uncomfortable**

   A participant perhaps says something to indicate that he/she is uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning.

   **Your Response:** say “which part is uncomfortable for you, can you talk about the part that you feel more comfortable with.”

4. **Contradicting Statements**

   A participant may say something at one point in the interview and then contradict him/herself at a later point. Sometimes it may appear to be a *factual discrepancy* or it could seem like a *difference in the degree* to which the participant felt something (e.g., earlier the participant characterized some experience as being devastating, but later describes it more like a relatively
minor experience).

**Your response:** for the former, you might say something like “excuse me, but before you mentioned that ....... but now you’re saying ....... can you clarify this for me please” for the latter, you might say “that seems a little different from what you said earlier about.....can you discuss these inconsistences for a minute.”

### 5. Confused
Participant might say to you that he/she doesn't understand the question.

**Your response:** ok, sorry, then let me try to rephrase it for you—[then rephrase the question].

### 6. Personal Questions
Sometimes a participant may ask you a personal question about yourself (e.g., asking you the question you asked them, e.g., “when did you become aware of your ability to procreate?” “Have you ever had a pregnancy scare?”)

**Your response:** you need to think quickly here and assess how personal it is, keeping in mind too how comfortable you are with the participant. In some instances, you may know this person already or you may have developed a rapport with the person through the course of the interview. If the question is not too personal it is often best to answer it, but do so briefly. If this continues to happen, then you would want to say something to remind the participant that you would really like to focus on their answers at the moment. If it is too personal, you should say “well that’s something I don’t feel comfortable talking about” and then say something to turn the questioning back to the participant, “I would like to get us back to talking about your thoughts regarding.....”

### 7. Flirt
On rare occasions, a participant may try to flirt with the interviewer, perhaps saying something flattering in a suggestive way. This is more likely to occur when it is a mixed gender interview.

**Your response:** you should step out of the role of interviewer momentarily, and say “I’m not really comfortable with that sort of comment, I’d like for us to get back to your thoughts on ....” If you are comfortable with the participant’s flirtation your should say “let’s discuss that after the interview, right now I would like us to focus on your thoughts regarding....”

### 8. Inquisitive
Participant may ask you what you think about a particular topic (e.g. contraception, abortion).

**Your response:** you can say “I would be glad to share that with you afterwards, but right now I’m really interested in how you think about this”
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Types of Interview Questions

1. **Introducing Questions**: These types of questions allow the participant to provide spontaneous rich descriptions of his/her life events, and help eliminate quick "yes" or "no" responses from the participant. For example: "Can you describe how you learned or figured out that you could get a girl pregnant?"; "What types of thoughts did you have when you discovered you could get a girl pregnant?"; "Can you tell me about your pregnancy scare?" The interview can often be structured as a follow-up to these introducing questions.

2. **Follow-Up Questions**: The participant may be more likely to extend his/her answers if the interviewer adopts a patient, curious, persistent, and critical attitude. Don't be quick to "jump in" after you think the participant is done talking; a little pause, a nod, or a "mm" will allow the participant time to reflect on what he/she has said. It also will let him/her to know that free talking is allowed. Try and look for "red-light" terms in the participant's answers. Think of the "turning point" concept or similar words or phrases that fit in with this course (e.g., it was a big moment for me, being a man, macho, the way I saw myself), and ask the participant to elaborate on what the phrase or term means to him/her. What is key is that the interviewer listen to what is important to the participant, and at the same time keep in mind the study's research questions.

3. **Probing Questions**: "Could you say something more about that relationship?"; "Can you describe another example of what it means to be 'a man'?" Here the interviewer pursues the answers, probing their content, but without stating what dimensions are to be taken into account. These questions should try to minimize short "yes" and "no" responses.

4. **Specifying Questions**: The interviewer can follow up with more operationalizing questions by asking specific, almost quantitative questions, e.g., "At what age did you first realize that you were capable of impregnating a woman?"; "What did you do when you first realized that your girlfriend was seeing other men?"; "How did your body react when you were in the labor and delivery room with your partner?"

5. **Direct Questions**: These questions often elicit "yes, no" answers or short responses, for example: "Have you ever thought of what your children might look like?"; "Do you think of activities that you might do with your potential children?" These direct questions should come after more open-ended questions have allowed the participant to offer his spontaneous descriptions. In some cases you can use these questions before the open-ended questions.

6. **Indirect Questions**: Here the interviewer may apply projective questions such as, "How do you think other men perceive their procreative identity?" The answer may refer directly to others' attitudes; it may also be an indirect statement of the participant's own attitude. Careful follow-up questioning will be needed to interpret these answers. These questions should be used sparingly if at all for this project because you should be focused on men’s own experiences.
7. **Structuring Questions**: The interviewer is responsible for the course of the interview and should indicate when a theme has been exhausted. This technique is useful when a participant begins to repeat himself/herself or drifts from the original question. An interviewer might say "Excuse me, but I'd like to introduce a new topic now."

8. **Silence**: Rather than making the interview a stilted conversation of questions and answers, allow some pauses for the participant to work through what he/she has just said. This time allows for other experiences or insights to come into the participant's active consciousness; the participant can then share his/her thoughts with the interviewer. This technique is particularly important when participants are being asked to reflect on issues that they have spent little or no timing thinking about in the past.

9. **Interpreting Questions**: The degree of interpretation may involve merely rephrasing an answer, for example: "I hear you saying that you felt that your experience with this pregnancy scare didn't affect your thinking about our relationship in a major way—is that correct?" Often repeating back what the participant said in the form of a question gives him/her a chance to hear what he/she has said and then expound on his/her answer. This type of questioning also reassures the participant that you are paying attention and interested in what he/she has to say.

Adapted from:

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Guidelines for Preparing Interview Summaries

Immediately after you conduct each interview you should prepare a summary of your interview. These summaries have two main parts: (a) brief description and (b) 3 types of memos (see example).

**Description:** Provide a listing of the participant’s sociodemographic information and then a brief paragraph highlighting the main points/events that the participant shared.

**Memos:** Prepare three different types of memos to help you reflect on the interview. Reflexivity is a critical aspect of doing good qualitative interviews. You should think about what just took place and figure out strategies for improving your next interview.

**Theoretical Memos/Notes:** In this section you should summarize what substantive and theoretical ideas surfaced during your interview. Think about the theories and concepts you’ve been exposed to by your readings and our class discussions–how do they apply in to this situation? As you do subsequent interviews, you can comment in this section on how this participants’ experiences are similar or different from participants you’ve interviewed already. You should be constantly comparing participants’ stories.

**Methodological Memos/Notes:** What types of things happened during the interview that affected the way it was conducted, the quality of the data, the participant’s comfort level, and other issues relevant to how the interview took place. Ask yourself if you should perhaps change the order of some of your questions, or the way you ask certain things. Are there new questions that you should be asking to your next participant? These notes should help you to improve your next interview.

**Personal Memos/Notes:** Mention how you felt during the interview (relaxed, nervous, intimidated, in control, sad, etc.). Did you feel inhibited asking certain questions? Did you find yourself daydreaming about your own life story when the participant mentioned certain things? Are there other noteworthy personal issues that arose during or after the interview?