

TIP SHEET – QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING¹

Qualitative interviewing provides a method for collecting rich and detailed information about how individuals experience, understand and explain events in their lives. This tip sheet offers some guidance on carrying out effective interviews.

Structuring the Interview

1. Please avoid:
 - Questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”
 - 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).
2. 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
 - 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
3. Creating a comfortable environment for the interviewee is crucial both for the purposes of an informative and accurate interview. As such, the interviewee 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
 - 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

¹ This tip sheet was modified from the Duke Initiative on Survey Methodology.

Recording your interview

Ideally, you should 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 recording
- If it is not possible to record, please take notes
- Notify interviewees that they will receive a copy of the recording and transcript

References

- Kvale, Steinar. 1996. *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Interviewing*. Sage Publications.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. 2001. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. Sage Publications.
- Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. 2005. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Sage Publications.
- Turner, D. W., III. 2010. "Qualitative Interview Design: A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators." *The Qualitative Report* 15:754-760.

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