SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS: IN-DEPTH, SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

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What is an in-depth, semi-structured interview?

At its most basic, an in-depth interview is an informational conversation. Specifically, it is a conversation between a researcher and an individual who is uniquely positioned to provide insight about the event or phenomenon under study. Researchers use interviews to gather specific information regarding personal experiences, events, emotions, meanings, and perspectives in order to formulate answers to their questions. Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with an outline of questions to address as well as the freedom to deviate from the script as each interview reveals relevant new information. This check sheet summarizes important considerations for designing and conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

When is an interview the appropriate method?

The interview is an important qualitative method that typically follows an ***interpretive constructivist*** approach. As its name suggests, this approach conceives of events and phenomena as social constructions that are assigned meaning based on individual context. That is, each person's understanding of a situation is informed by their own unique knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. This stands in contrast to a ***positivist*** approach, which seeks to explain human behavior via statistical analysis of pre-established variables. Positivist research generally uses numerical data to test researchers' hypotheses. For example, in a study of social support following a hurricane, a positivist researcher may ask, "Did you reach out to family members or close friends for emotional support after the hurricane?" The researcher would then examine frequencies of people who answered yes or no, and perhaps generate statistical models to examine responses by gender, age, or income. Alternatively, an interpretive constructivist researcher may ask someone who mentioned social support in an interview, "How did the support that you received influence your post-hurricane experience?" Instead of looking at *how many* people reached out for social support and the variables that influenced them, this question explores the *meaning* of emotional support to hurricane victims. Interviews are thus best suited to research that aims to understand nuance in behaviors, motives, and perceptions, and allow researchers to look for commonalities and differences in understandings of a situation and the underlying context informing those views.

How do I design a semi-structured interview guide?

Before the study begins, you should create an ***interview guide***. An interview guide is a basic interview script that includes an overview of the study, open-ended interview questions, and closing statements thanking the respondents. Your interview guide will be submitted for human subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, along with your general research plan, sampling strategy, and other required documents and information.

Overview. The first part of your guide provides participants with some basic information about you, your research, and how you plan to use the interview data. This section should also include:

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- A short description of why the person was selected for an interview.
- A brief overview of how the interview will proceed and how long it will take.
- An informed consent statement.
- Any relevant instructions or materials.
- A request for permission to record, if applicable.

Main Questions, Follow-Up Questions, and Probes. Next, your guide will contain the list of the questions you plan to ask.

- ***Main questions*** are those that directly inform your broader research question(s). Your questions should be guided by existing scholarship—a thorough literature review will clarify what is known about your research question and what gaps in knowledge remain.

Two other types of questions will develop more organically during the interview itself: follow-up questions and probes.

- ***Follow-up questions*** arise when the interviewee, in the course of answering a main question, reveals unexpected information that could provide you with a new perspective.
  - Follow-up questions generally take the form of asking the participant to elaborate on the new information.
  - If the response to the follow-up question is especially noteworthy, you may choose to take note of the new information and ask about it during future interviews.
- ***Probes*** are used to signal that you wish for the interviewee to continue the current line of discussion in more detail.
  - You may ask, "Can you give me an example of _____?" or "What do you mean by _____?" or "Will you tell me more about that?"

Closing Statements. Finally, your interview guide should conclude the conversation naturally. Remain flexible and tailor your approach to the conversation. For example, you may wish to end by asking the interviewee if there is anything additional they wish to share. You should always ensure you close by thanking the interviewee and leaving relevant materials such as a copy of the informed consent form and any resource lists or other items you may have compiled.

What are some strategies for effective interviewing?

There is no one-size fits all approach for interviews, as interviewees are diverse and thus our approaches to interviewing must be tailored accordingly. At the same time, certain strategies have long proven effective in the field, such as:

- Bring extra printed copies of all required forms, interview guides, and other materials to your interview.
- Understand the context of the interview and the interviewees' life. This can help you to assume a proper demeanor, to dress appropriately, and so forth.
- Schedule the interview at a time and location that are convenient and comfortable for your interviewee.
- Respect the interviewees' time. Arrive early so as to not keep the interviewee waiting. Clarify exactly how much time the interviewee has at the outset, and then respect that window of time.
- Beginning with gratitude, a compliment, and/or brief and casual small talk are all ways to show respect and make an interviewee feel comfortable with you. This is also the beginning to developing trust and rapport.
- Aim for clarity in your questions, wording them appropriately to your interviewees and avoiding the use of jargon. Be succinct and straightforward in your questioning.
- Phrase questions in an unbiased way. You should not ask leading questions or communicate opinions or expectations. For example, rather than saying, "How did that person help you and your family to recover after the hurricane?" (which assumes that someone did help with recovery), you might ask, "Tell me more about the role that person played after the hurricane?" (which is more open-ended and could allow for both positive or negative answers).
- Avoid questions that are answered with one word or yes/no. For example, rather than asking a child, "Did you like your new school?" you might say, "What was your new school like?"
- Your interviewees may lead you in new directions that provide unexpected context. Be open to changing the conversation accordingly, but also be prepared to gently steer interviewees back on-topic if they significantly veer off course.

- Begin the interview with easier topics and questions, moving toward more difficult questions as you progress.
- Recording interviews provides you with an easy way to go back and review your participants' words verbatim. However, recording may also make interviewees nervous or self-aware; you should always give them an opportunity to decline.
- Even if you record interviews, you should take notes. Use your printed guide to jot down items you wish to follow-up on, promising leads for your research question(s), and interviewees' non-verbal cues.
- The final question you ask should provide the interviewee with a sense of closure and positivity. For example, you may wish to ask, "Is there anything else you think is important for me to know about this topic?"

Other things that you can do to help build rapport with interviewees include:

- Try to think of ways to make the interview more ***reciprocal***. That is, think of ways you can compensate your interviewee in exchange for their participation. For some, this may involve material incentives (e.g., gift cards); however, other forms of compensation include assistance with tasks, information about resources, or simply listening to their concerns.
- Employ active listening techniques. Reflect back what your interviewee says ("You said earlier that…") or use short phrases such as "That's interesting" or "That sounds difficult" to communicate that you are listening. Do *not* jump in and interrupt interviewees. Take a long pause after interviewees' are done speaking to ensure that they are ready for the next question.
- Do not forget that you are talking to a person. It's perfectly acceptable—and advisable—to show empathy and kindness in your interactions. People who have experienced a disaster may feel particularly vulnerable, and remaining sensitive is especially important. Your informed consent statement should let participants know that they are not required to answer any questions they find uncomfortable, and that they may stop the conversation or take a break at any time. For more information on emotion management during an interview, please see Rubin and Rubin (2012), referenced below.

How do I recruit interviewees?

There are several sampling methods you can use to recruit interviewees. ***Convenience sampling*** involves respondents who are easily accessible to participate in research due to proximity and/or availability. For example, you may draw your sample from evacuees at a shelter where you volunteer. ***Purposeful (or purposive) sampling*** recruits specific participants based on their knowledge of, or experience with, a given event or phenomenon. For example, you may interview fire officials to learn about their views on wildfire policy. ***Snowball sampling*** involves identifying an initial set of respondents, then using their contacts and connections to recruit future participants. For example, you may reach out to Chamber of Commerce officials first, then recruit their contacts from the local business community.

For more information on sampling techniques, please refer to the CONVERGE Extreme Events Research Check Sheet on **Approaches to Sampling**.

REFERENCES:

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