



Qualitative Interviews

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What is qualitative interviewing?

- The interview is a conversation (Kvale, 1996) or conversation +
- The interview involves intensive listening to 'hear' data
- There is respect for the interviewees and an openness to discover new understandings and meanings
- The aim is to generate quality data in the interview through richness and depth in what is said
- Meaning is being sought from the questioning and in the answers

Active listening in interviews

- Most people never (fully) listen
- Be completely present in the interview
- Perception checking – interviewer checks if their interpretation aligns with the interviewee's intended meaning. This step helps ensure accuracy and prevents misinterpretations.
- Try to visualise what the person is saying
- Be comfortable with silence
- Make eye contact with the interviewee

Question formats

1. 'Fixed-alternative items' allow a choice of 2 or more alternatives
E.g., Do you watch football on TV? Yes/no, Yes/no/don't know
2. 'Open-ended items' provide a frame of reference for answers, but put little restraint on the kinds and contents of answers and how they can be expressed
 - E.g., What do you like to watch on TV?
The open-ended question includes the 'funnel' which starts broad and then narrows down.
 - E.g., All babies cry, of course. Some mothers feel that if you pick up a baby every time it cries, you will spoil it. Others think that you should never let a baby cry for very long. How do you feel about this? What did you do about it? How about in the middle of the night? (Sears et al., 1957, p.157 cited in Cohen et al., 2017, p.513)

Question formats continued

3. The 'scale' (rating scales) is a set of verbal items to each of which the interviewee responds by indicating degrees of agreement or disagreement – the interviewee's response is located on a scale of fixed alternatives. E.g., attitude scales, rank order scales, rating scales.

Scales can be used with open-ended questions and then the responses can be checked against each other.

When devising interview questions

- Keep the vocabulary simple
- Avoid prejudicial language
- Avoid ambiguity and imprecision
- Decide whether or not to use leading questions
- Avoid double-barrelled questions (asking more than 1 thing)
- Avoid questions which make assumptions (e.g., 'which football team do you support?')
- Pay attention to hypothetical or speculative questions
- Consider sensitive or personal questions carefully (whether to ask or avoid them)
- Don't assume that the interviewee has the required knowledge/information
- Think about recall – how easy will it be for the interviewee to recall events etc.

Prompts

- **Prompts** enable the interviewer to clarify topics or questions
- If the interviewee does not seem to have understood, or to have misunderstood, or asks for clarification or more guidance
- The interviewer can rephrase or repeat the question or give an example
- Prompts have to be used with caution as may wrongly assume that the interviewee has not understood the question

Probes

- **Probes** enable the interviewer to ask interviewees to extend, elaborate, add to, exemplify, provide detail, clarify or qualify their answer, thus giving richness, depth, comprehensiveness and honesty which are some of the hallmarks of successful interviewing and enable the researcher to better understand the thought processes of the interviewee
- A probe may simply be:
 - follow-up questions such as ‘why’ or ‘how’ or
 - ‘can you give me an example of this?’ or
 - simply repeating the question, or
 - repeating the answer in a questioning tone,
 - asking for clarification or an example or further explication, or
 - simply pausing as if to give the interviewee the opportunity to add more.

Different types/classifications of probe

Aldridge and Levine (2001, p.119 cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.514)

1. More detailed factual information is sought,
2. Interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on accounts that they have given or on their opinions

Patton (1990, cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.514)

1. Detailed-oriented probes
2. Elaboration probes, and
3. Clarification probes

Different types/classifications of probe 1

Beatty and Willis (2007, cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.514)

1. Anticipated probes – pre-scripted probes to follow up on an initial questions (also called ‘discretionary probes’)
2. Spontaneous probes – not pre-scripted, where the interviewer decides on the spur of the moment what to probe, which is not based on a particular response from the interviewee
3. Conditional probes – pre-scripted probes which are only used if the interviewee answers in a particular way or hesitates
4. Emergent probes – not pre-scripted, where the interviewer decides to probe in response to what the interviewee says, e.g., an apparent problem

Different types/classifications of probe 2

Priede et al (2014, p.560 cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.514)

1. Cognitive probes – focus on interviewee's understandings and interpretations of the question, what they drew on and time frames they referred to when answering the question, and how easy or difficult they found the question
2. Confirmatory probes – 'to check that the information given by the respondent is thus far correct' (p.560)
3. Expansive probes – seeking further information and details from the interviewees

Probes 3

- Can be less intrusive, e.g. pausing for the interviewee to say more, or making a sound like ‘mmm’ to indicate the interview is following closely
- Or more intrusive,
 - e.g. repeating a phrase or idea that the interviewee said and then following it up with a request for further information,
 - Or summarising e.g. ‘am I right in thinking that you were saying ...’ or ‘can I just check that I have understood correctly?’ and then questioning,
 - Or asking for an example or asking for clarification or even politely and respectfully challenging, or checking

Probes - caution

- The more an interviewer prompts and probes the greater the chance of bias entering the interview (Fowler, 2009, p.139 cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.514).
- ‘Over probing’ - don’t have too many prompts or probes as this may provoke resentment or bias (Wellington, 2015, p.147 cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.514)

Semi-structured interview schedule

- The topic to be discussed
- The specific possible questions to be put for each topic
- The issues within each topic to be discussed, together with possible questions for each issues
- A series of prompts and probes for each topic, issue and question

Conduct of an interview

- Avoid interruptions from outside, e.g., telephone calls
- Minimise distractions
- Minimise the risk of 'stage fright' in interviewees and interviewers
- Avoid asking embarrassing or awkward questions
- Avoid jumping from one topic to another
- Don't give advice or opinions but be an active listener
- Don't summarise too early or close off an interview too soon
- Handle sensitive matters with careful consideration

Conduct of an interview continued

Arksey and Knight (2009, p.53 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.520)

The interviewer should

- Appear to be interested
- Avoid giving signs of approval or disapproval of the responses
- Be prepared to repeat questions at the interviewee's request
- Be prepared to move on to another question without irritation, if the interviewee indicates unwillingness or inability to answer the question
- Ensure that the interviewer understands a response, checking, if necessary, e.g. 'am I right in thinking that you mean...'
- If a response is inadequate, but the interviewer feels the interviewee may have more to say, thank the interviewee and add 'an could you please tell me ...'
- Give the interviewee time to answer – avoid answering the question for the interviewee

Kvale's 'quality criteria' (1996, p.145)

- The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from the interviewee
- The shorter the interviewer's questions and the longer the subject's answers, the better
- The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers
- The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview
- The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject's answer in the course of the interview
- The interview is 'self-communicating' – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations

Remember

- Interviews are an interpersonal matter – a social event
- Avoid saying ‘I want to know ...’, the interviewee is not being interrogated, they are doing you a favour
- Remember to follow up on your questions and the interviewee’s answers
- Keep interviewees on track and keep the interview moving forward
- Show respect to your interviewees
- Avoid using your pen as a threat, do not point it at the interviewee
- Consider your non-verbal communication, eye contact, signs of anxiety, showing respect
- Give people time to think - don’t interrupt yourself if there is silence
- Think about how you will give feedback and acceptance to the interviewee
- Put yourself in the shoes of the interviewee

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