A Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology

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Chapter 6

Semi-structured interviewing

Fiona Fylan

Interviewing is one of the most enjoyable and interesting ways to collect data. As a psychologist, you probably have an interest in the way that people think and feel. During interviewing, particularly semi-structured interviewing, you get to talk to people in order to find out about what they have experienced and what they think and feel about something that you are interested in.

And this, some people say, is work.

In this chapter I hope to give you a useful and easy-to-follow guide about how to conduct effective semi-structured interviews; before we start, let's examine that statement in more detail.

- By *useful* I mean that this is a practical guide to semi-structured interviewing – we will not explore the various theoretical frameworks within which you can conduct and analyse your interviews. There are various texts, for example Lindlof and Taylor (2002) if you want to read more about theoretical perspectives.
- By *easy to follow*, I mean that I have kept the text brief, and have included examples and tips to remember.
- By *effective* I mean that you should be confident that the results you obtain are a reasonably accurate representation of what your participants think, feel and have experienced, and that the participants you have selected to interview are sufficiently diverse for you to have developed a good understanding of your topic.

This chapter describes the methods that I use to conduct interviews so that they're enjoyable rather than onerous. I hope it works for you too.

What are semi-structured interviews?

Semi-structured interviews are simply conversations in which you know what you want to find out about – and so have a set of questions to ask and a good idea of what topics will be covered – but the conversation is free to vary, and is likely to change substantially between participants. They contrast with structured interviews, in which there is a predetermined list of questions that are covered in the same order for each

person: you can think of these as questionnaires that are administered verbally. They also contrast with unstructured interviews, in which the area of investigation is delineated, but there is no assumed order to the questions, and very little predetermined boundaries as to the topics that should be covered.

This being said, semi-structured interviews vary tremendously. At one extreme, the questions are very simple and the order of questions easily adhered to. At the other, the questions can be very open, and the conversation can take many directions before all the areas you want to address are covered. The amount of structure you use will depend on the research question being asked – more complex questions generally need less structured formats. You should also bear in mind the method you are using to analyse the data. Less structured formats are well suited to social constructionist paradigms, whereas if you intend to use a coding frame, your semi-structured interviews should contain more structure. (See Elliott and Timulak, this volume.)

Why use semi-structured interviews?

The starting point is to look at your research question and decide whether semi-structured is the right approach. Semi-structured interviews are great for finding out *Why* rather than *How many* or *How much*. For example, if you want to find out whether or not people buy vitamin supplements, and how much per month they spend on them, this is a 'how many, how much' question and probably better answered using a questionnaire or a structured interview. If, on the other hand, you want to know why some people, but not others, buy vitamin supplements, and why they spend a particular amount, then you're on the right track with a semi-structured interview.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews makes them so well suited to answering a 'why' question. By changing the questions and the areas discussed during the interview we can address aspects that are important to individual participants, and by doing so we can gain a better understanding of the research question. For example, imagine that we want to find out about why people choose to wear contact lenses rather than glasses. Our semi-structured interview would have a list of questions – a schedule – that cover the main areas we think will be important. Our list might include reasons for wearing contact lenses or glasses when socialising, when working, when playing sport, and when going on holiday. Our schedule wouldn't have a long list of detailed questions that our participants would respond yes or no to (e.g. Would you prefer wearing contact lenses to glasses when going to a bar? What about the cinema? And to work?) — this would be a structured interview. And not every question would be relevant to every participant – for example not everybody plays sports, and not everybody works. Instead, we would talk around the area with the participant, and find out from him or her about what is important, and why. Therefore, you can use semi-structured interviews to explore more complicated research questions.

Because the semi-structured interview is such a versatile means of collecting data, you can also use it to develop a much deeper understanding of the research question by exploring contradictions within your participants' accounts. Now I know I began by saying that this chapter would be practical rather than theoretical, but if you take a social constructionist perspective, a participant's attitudes would not be fixed and predetermined, but would emerge as part of the interview. If you identify contradictions within their conversation, you can explore these in more detail by careful (not confrontational) questioning.

Another reason to use semi-structured interviews is that they provide a more appropriate format for discussing sensitive topics. For example, in the UK the British Psychological Society Codes of Conduct for Psychologists (available from http://www.bps.org.uk) requires us to ensure that

> Where research may involve behaviour or experiences that participants may regard as personal and private the participants must be protected from stress by all appropriate measures, including the assurance that answers to personal questions need not be given.
>
> (p. 12)

If we were to administer a postal questionnaire about a potentially sensitive area, e.g. loneliness, childlessness, or illness, we could not be sure that participants realise that they do not have to answer all (or any) of the questions, or that completing the questionnaire won't cause participants to dwell on the topic and become more unhappy as a result of taking part in our survey. While taking part in an interview is likely to be equally uncomfortable/distressing – the fact that we can talk through the topic with the participant, debrief them afterwards, and answer their questions about why we are doing the research, and stop at any point means that we can be much more confident that at the end of the interview they are not any worse off emotionally than they were before.

Preparation

Many first-time interviewers underestimate the amount of planning required to conduct semi-structured interviews. Because the similarities of interviews and conversations are often highlighted, many people assume that they can throw together a few questions and, recording equipment in hand, go and do some interviews. Don't be tempted – preparation is so important – it should not be overlooked.

The first stage is to undertake a thorough literature review and evaluate previous work – both the methods and the findings. How can you use this previous work as a foundation from which to develop your research question? Similarly, are there relevant theories that you can use to guide the questions you will ask? For example, if you are interested in why people take vitamin supplements, there are several theories of health-related behaviours (for example Ajzen and Madden, 1986) that will give you a starting point from which to develop an interview schedule.

Next, you should identify who you are interested in talking to. Who is your population? There are various methods you can use to identify a sample from your population, but given the short time frame of many projects, I recommend a purposive sample (or course, you may have the luxury of sufficient time and money to be able to take a larger, random sample – if this is the case, you are in a minority). A purposive sample involves identifying the characteristics of interest along which your population is likely to vary, and choosing people who will give you the maximum variation, regardless of the relative frequency at which the characteristics occur within the population. For example, consider the contact lenses vs. glasses question. A purposive sampling schedule would include people who have never worn contact lenses, those who always wear them, and those who sometimes do. For each of these characteristics you should select at least one male and one female older and younger participant, and people with a range of occupations and hobbies. The reason for including such a range of different participants is that you are trying to find out *why*. Therefore, you want people to have lots of different beliefs, values and behaviours to explore.

Armed with knowledge of what has been done in this area before, some relevant theories of behaviour, and a clear idea of your sampling frame, you are ready to start developing your interview schedule. The interview schedule is simply a list of questions that you will address during the interview. The exact form of the schedule will differ between research questions, and researchers prefer different amounts of detail. Here are my own preferences.

- **Keep it brief**: your schedule should usually contain around five broad questions. Any more than that and it becomes difficult to keep track of which areas you have covered.
- **Differentiate the processes you are interested in**: a useful division for psychology research is cognitions, emotions and actions. You would want participants to talk about all of these – what they *thought* about an event, how they *felt*, and what they *did* in response to it.
- **Ensure the question order is logical**: try to make the questions flow so that they arise naturally as the interview progresses. While you would not expect to keep to the order in the schedule, there's no point starting with something that doesn't make sense.
- **Develop a series of prompts**: these can be used to provide examples of what you might expect participants to talk about. But bear in mind that these are prompts, to be used only if the participant needs help. Berg (2001) provides an entertaining analogy of interviewing with theatre – and in this framework, prompts should be used as a last resort, only when the actor (i.e. the participant) has a blank and cannot move on. Last resort or not, your prompts should be sensible and should help the participant explore the area of discussion without supplying leading questions.

- **Know the schedule:** there is never ever any excuse for going into an interview without knowing the schedule – backwards and forwards, inside and out. A successful semi-structured interview is a conversation with the participant and you cannot do this if you are constantly looking through your schedule to check whether an area has been covered already. This is one more reason for keeping your schedule brief.

So, by now you should have short but perfectly formed interview schedule that notes the research questions you will ask, the different aspects you are interested in, and some prompts to keep the conversation moving. The next stage is to pilot the schedule to find out if it needs changing. Conduct at least two pilot interviews with different types of participant and find out how well it works. And not just from your point of view. Seek feedback from participants about the questions you asked:

- Where they easy to understand?
- Did they seem to make sense?
- Did the questions enable participants to talk about all the areas that they thought were important?

While it's never easy to find out that something you've done isn't perfect, if your participants found any of the questions difficult to understand, then it's the *questions* that are at fault and not your participants. Make the changes, or there was no point doing the pilot. If you don't make the changes then the interviews will be more difficult to conduct, and if there are misunderstandings, your data will be less valid and you will be less confident in the conclusions you draw.

Conducting the interview

Equipment

Having done all of the preparation, we are ready to start conducting the interviews – this is the part I enjoy the most. First, you need to think about practicalities – where the interview will take place, and the equipment that you will need. The room should be reasonably quiet and comfortable. The interviews should be recorded if at all possible – with the participant's consent of course – so you'll need a power socket or recording equipment that runs on batteries (make sure you have spare batteries too). I usually take a power extension lead with me so that I can be sure that I can get to the power. It's also worth investing in a good microphone. Around £20 will buy you a good surround microphone suitable for both interviews and focus groups (see Wilkinson, this volume). A good microphone (for example, the Sony ECMF8 condenser microphone) improves the quality of the recording and thereby makes transcribing the interview much easier.

The room

When you arrive for the interview, the first thing you should do is check the layout of the room. Both you and the participant need to feel at ease, so arrange the chairs and

table (if there is one) so that your participant can sit and talk comfortably. Chairs should be placed fairly close together, but not so close that your participants feel uncomfortable, and placing them at a slight angle will help you make eye contact without feeling as if you are staring at the participant. It's also a good idea to have access to tea and coffee so that you can take a break, or continue to talk over refreshments.

The opening

When your participant arrives, make them welcome. The interview should begin with a briefing – you need to tell your participant enough about the interview to enable them to provide informed consent to participate. This is important not only for the ethics of the study, but also because your participants will try to make sense of the interview process and your motivation for conducting the interview – it is better that they have an accurate understanding of this rather then misunderstanding the purpose, which could lead them to provide biased responses. You then need to negotiate terms, such as whether they agree to the interview being audio recorded. Hopefully, your participant will agree to this – particularly if you point out that it's just to make sure you don't have to keep stopping so that you can write down what they say. Place the recorder somewhere unobtrusive so that the participant does not focus on it. Follow the British Psychological Society Code of Conduct for Psychologists on confidentiality and anonymity. Tell your participants who will have access to the data.

It is worth repeating that a good semi-structured interview is like a conversation rather than a series of questions and answers. So it helps to begin the interview with a general conversation, such as getting to the interview, e.g. public transport or parking. Then you can guide your participant around to questions from your research schedule. This initial conversation can give you valuable insight to interpreting the responses your participant provides later, and help you identify important areas to pursue later in the interview. For example, consider this opening exchange during an interview about factors influencing a person's decision about taking part in a clinical trial to diagnose knee problems:

I: Thanks for coming in today to talk to me. It's good of you to give up your morning.
P: Monday mornings, I never like those anyway.
I: I know what you mean, the weekends go so quickly.
P: They fly by.
I: Did you do anything over the weekend?
P: I went to the football – I go every week for the home matches, and when I can make if for the away ones.
I: Which is your team?
P: Manchester, the proper one [sorry, United fans, he's talking about Manchester City]
I: Oh yes?

P: It was a brilliant game, although the referee we had was a disgrace, sent off xx. Mind you, when he went off, I was ranting and raving. Actually it's quite good because it's a good stress buster and it gets the adrenaline going. I used to play: for 20 years, 30 years I played football. I used to be the goalkeeper, so I was diving around here, there, everywhere.

This opening conversation revealed that the participant (*P*) is a football fan and used to play a lot of football, but now has stopped doing so. This information was used by the interviewer (*I*) to contextualise a subsequent interview question about the effect of his knee injury on leisure activities.

Moving through the interview schedule

Once you are ready to start, move onto the first question on the interview schedule. Often the conversation drifts naturally from the initial briefing and exchange onto one of the questions from the interview schedule. This is fine – don't stick rigidly to asking the first question on your schedule – you should aim to let the interview develop naturally. In the above example, the first question on the interview schedule was about when the knee injury occurred, but because of the opening exchange we drifted straight into a discussion about the effects of having to stop playing sports. We immediately developed a rapport, and the interview was much richer because of the flexibility offered by a semi-structured format.

The ease with which participants talk expansively varies tremendously from one participant to another. Some participants talk at length about events, feelings and actions, while others require more help. When you think your participant has more to say, use a series of probes. As the name suggests, probes are simply tools for deeper exploration of a topic. The verbal probes that we use can be either simply encouragements, such as:

- Really?
- Yes?
- Tell me more about that
- What happened next?
- What did you do?
- Why did you do that?
- How did you feel about that?

You can also use non-verbal probes such as nodding. Don't forget your body language right the way through the interview. Crossing your arms and looking away will inhibit your participants from speaking further. So nod, smile appropriately, and make eye contact (without, of course, staring). Don't over-use probes, though. Many inexperienced interviewers describe how they use probes or prompts to fill silences because they feel uncomfortable during silences. At first, it may feel awkward to sit in

silence – a few seconds can seem like hours. But it is perfectly acceptable to give participants enough time to collect their thoughts. They may be thinking of examples or trying to remember an event or feeling.

The other extreme is a participant who talks very easily and extensively. You need to focus their conversation and make sure it addresses the topics you are interested in. This requires you to steer the interview skilfully.

Steering the interview

The major difference between a conversation and an interview is that you, as interviewer, control the situation. While conducting interviews is a great deal of fun, especially if you enjoy listening to people, you always need to remember the purpose of the interview – what you are trying to find out – and steer the conversation in that direction.

There is often a fine line between what is of interest and what is not. Particularly with participants who talk readily, you may begin by thinking that a topic is not going to help you answer your research question, but find out after a few minutes that the topic being discussed is very relevant to your participant, it was simply that the link wasn't obvious to you at first. The following example is taken from an interview which was part of a study to explore women's experiences of colposcopy (examination of the cervix) following the result of an abnormal cervical (Pap) smear result. The following extract explores whether women would prefer to have their colposcopy in their family doctor's surgery rather than hospital.

I: So would you choose to have this done at your family doctor's surgery, if it were available there?
P: Erm, no, I don't think I'd want that. I'd rather come here.
I: Why's that?
P: Oh, I don't know, really, I just would.
I: So have you been to the same family doctor for a long time?
P: About ten years.
I: Where were you before that?
P: Well I wasn't based anywhere, really, I used to travel about a lot.
I: That sounds interesting, where did you go?
P: Oh, all over the place. I used to work on a cruise ship, I was a dancer, so we went all over the world, really. We all had such a great time. It was work, but it was like a huge holiday at the same time. You had your groups of friends, as you do at home, and we just went around together and enjoyed it. We mainly worked in the evening so we had all day to do what we wanted.
I: That sounds brilliant!
P: Oh, it was, but then you can't do it forever, so I settled back home again, but people talk.
I: About what?

P: Well, you know, that it's an unusual job, you haven't just stayed at home. And that, you know, you might not be respectable.
I: Oh, I see.
P: So that's why I'd rather come here, really, because I wouldn't want anybody to know I've had this done.

This example shows how, although the participant's previous job did not initially appear relevant, it allowed her to reveal the reasons behind her preference for having her colposcopy at the hospital. She thought that if she went to her family doctor's surgery, there would be more chance of somebody finding out that she had received an abnormal cervical smear result – she feared that she might be labelled as sexually promiscuous, and believed that her previous job might make this labelling more likely. Of course, receiving an abnormal cervical smear result does not mean that the person is sexually promiscuous, but this participant believed this to be the case. Allowing her to digress meant that her reasoning became clear.

The trick is to know how long to let your participant talk about something that seems unrelated to your research question, and then steering them back to a topic you want to find out about. There is no fixed time for this – to some extent it depends on how long has been scheduled for your interview. If your participant is expecting the interview to last for only half an hour, then you must be a lot more focused. If, on the other hand, they have dedicated a couple of hours, then you can afford to talk about seemingly unrelated topics for longer. Bringing the interview topic back on course requires skill. You can't just tell your participant you want them to talk about something else – they will be a lot more guarded about what they talk about for the remainder of the interview, and they may feel resentful – that you're not interested in them or what they have to say, and that you don't value their experiences. So your steering should be very light. Done skilfully, the participant will not notice that you have shifted the topic of the interview because it will have appeared as a normal conversation. Some techniques you can use are:

- Introduce an example or experience of your own that is more closely aligned to what you want to find out about.
- Mention something the participant had talked about earlier, and get them to expand on it.
- Provide prompts in the form of "some other people I've talked to suggested this". Is that something you've ever come across, or not?
- Break the interview by suggesting refreshments, and then resume with a different topic.

If all else fails, simply tell your participant that their experiences are very interesting, and so you'd appreciate their thoughts on a few different topics before the interview ends, so can they tell you about their experiences of the new topic.

But beware – you should steer the interview, not guide it. Never ever ask leading questions, unless it's a topic you need a definite opinion on. One example of this is as follows: a researcher was conducting a practice interview about the experiences of being a patient on an intensive care unit. The interview was progressing very well, until she asked: 'did the tubes make you feel tied down?' The participant had not talked about this, and by introducing such a leading question she ran the risk of making the patient believe that this was important, and in so doing biasing the interview.

Another topic that can be very difficult for the novice interviewer to handle is that participants sometimes become emotional, particularly when talking about a sensitive or traumatic topic. As with the rest of this chapter, my advice relates to what has worked best for me over many years of interviewing. I recommend acknowledging the emotion and assuring the participant that it is OK to become tearful or cry – keeping a box of paper tissues close by can be useful. Encourage the participant to keep talking, if they want to, but tell them that they can take a break if they prefer. Don't ignore the emotion and continue the interview as if nothing were happening. This is confusing and unpleasant for the participant, and they may well avoid sensitive topics for the rest of the interview. In contrast, don't force participants to keep talking about the topic, and explore their feelings deeper if they would rather not. You should aim to create an atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable enough to talk about emotional topics, but not one in which they feel coerced into doing so. If, at the end of the interview, the participant is still upset, don't just leave. Stay with them for a cup of tea or coffee to enable them to unwind out of the interview mode and feel their usual self again.

Debriefing

Every interview should end with you summarising what you have talked about. Don't turn your recording equipment off just yet, as participants often provide valuable information at this point – and it provides evidence that you've debriefed in line with ethical requirements. Seek feedback from the participant about whether you have interpreted what they said correctly – this provides a useful check for validity. Ask if there is anything else they think is important that you haven't already talked about – your participants will sometimes have further experience that your schedule hasn't covered and yet is important to them. For example, the following extract from an interview with a university student about what they would like to change about their accommodation:

I: Ok, well I think we've covered everything that I wanted to. But is there anything else that you think is important that we haven't yet talked about?

P: No, I don't think there's anything else that's important, oh, except that maybe we haven't talked about that they don't give you the option to leave your stuff in your

room over the holidays. That's really annoying. I know that they rent the rooms out to conference people...

And so on. The participant then talked more about how having to empty their room meant that it felt less 'homely'. Once this conversation had finished, the interviewer then summarised the main points and checks that they have been interpreted correctly.

I: Right, I'll summarise the main points of what we've talked about, and if I've missed any, or got anything wrong, please tell me. We talked about the size of the room as being most important, and that if you could leave your stuff in there over the holidays it would make it feel more like your own space. The facilities in the kitchen are OK, but it would be better if there were table and chairs so that you could sit down to eat together with the other people in the flat, rather than taking your food back to your room. You said that it would also be nice if there were a living area with a sofa or comfy chairs that you could put a TV in. You like the shops on campus but would prefer it if they opened later, and you like the social atmosphere in the bar. Have I got that right?

P: Yes, that's it exactly.

You should then ask participants if they have any questions about the interview. Finally, thank them for having taken part. I always ask participants if they would like a summary of the results of the study when you have finished. Some do, and some don't, but it helps them feel a valued part of the research. This may not benefit you directly, but they may be more willing to volunteer for other research projects in the future, or provide feedback to their friends that taking part in research interviews is enjoyable. I usually provide a contact telephone number or email address so that participants can contact me again in the future if they think of any questions they want answering. Very few people tend to get in touch, but it gives them, and me, piece of mind.

Reflexivity: acknowledging your effect on the interview

You have a tremendous effect on the way in which the interview unfolds, and the quantity and quality of what your participant talks about. It's worth examining the way in which you affect the interview for two reasons: first, to identify how you can improve your interview technique; second, to consider how you might have affected what the participant talked about, and so how you influenced the results obtained.

First, let's consider the ways in which you can examine your behaviour with the aim of improving your technique. Participants will generally talk more, and more genuinely, when they have a rapport with the interviewer. Hence you must make the participant feel relaxed, and chat to them – genuinely – at the start of the interview to put them at their ease and convince them that you're interested in what they have to say.

You must also build an atmosphere of trust – tell participants that you are interested in their thoughts and feelings and experiences and that there are no right or wrong

answers. Assure them of the confidentiality of what they say (but be honest about who will have access to the transcripts).

Once you have developed a trusting relationship and a good rapport with the participant, don't ruin it by being judgemental about what they tell you. It is likely that in the course of your interviews that people tell you things that you don't agree with, or you don't approve of. You must not show them how you feel about what they say. Always maintain an atmosphere of encouragement. And beware of conveying your feelings by facial expressions or body language. This is not to say that you should be poker-faced throughout, or not to show any feelings to your participants – you need to let your personality show through in order to build a rapport. But you mustn't influence what your participant tells you by overt approval or disapproval of their story.

We've already touched upon asking leading questions – don't do it. Probe those areas you are interested in – and if you have a specific topic you want to explore, then ask specific questions, but do so without suggesting the answers you anticipate. A good interviewer acts as a conduit through which the participant tells their story. Make sure you tell the participant's story, and not the one you expect or hope to hear.

Top tips

- Tell the participant the purpose of the interview
- Know the interview schedule
- Keep the questions simple
- Steer the interview subtly
- Don't ask leading questions
- Silences aren't scary
- Ask the participant if there is anything else you should talk about

Further reading

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