Essentials of Qualitative Interviewing

KARIN OLSON

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3. Approaches to Data Generation

Hardly a day passes that one does not encounter an interview in some form. For example, an interview could be part of a late-night television program or an article in a popular magazine. Most often interviews are not conducted for research purposes. Readers interested in the history of interviewing may enjoy a recent book on this topic by Fontana and Prokos (2007).

In this chapter I discuss the specific kinds of interviews that are conducted for research purposes and the way one goes about generating data in each of them. Structured interviews are most often found in quantitative studies such as surveys. Because this book is part of a series on qualitative research, this chapter focuses primarily on the kinds of interviews used in qualitative studies, but structured interviews are briefly discussed. I have outlined the strengths and weaknesses of each kind of interview and given examples of when each kind of interview might be used.

Interviews in the Context of Research

There are two basic kinds of interviews: formal and informal. Both kinds of interviews may be conducted with either individuals or groups. Each kind of interview is used under different circumstances. Table 3.1 provides a brief description of each type of interview, including its knowledge requirements, strengths, weaknesses, and uses.

Formal Interviews with Individuals

Formal interviews take place at a time jointly set aside for the interview and are generally recorded so that they can be transcribed to facilitate analysis. They are commonly used as the primary data-collection method in

Table 3.1
Kinds of Interviews

Kind of Interview	Knowledge Required	Strengths	Weaknesses	Uses
Formal Structured	Extensive	Standardized Easy to use Easy to summarize Data can be gathered quickly	Responses are limited to the questions included Limited control over the interview by the participant	Summarizing population characteristics or trends Gathering data for testing of hypotheses
Formal Unstructured	Minimal	Creates maximum space for the participant to tell his or her story. Maximum control over the interview by the participant	Discussion can be wide ranging, easy to lose focus	First interview
Formal Guided	Minimal	Planned questions give a common starting point for early interviews	Danger of inadvertently limiting descriptions	First interview
Formal Semistructured	Modest	Allows interviewer to follow up on ideas raised by participants	Participants not necessarily all asked the same questions More complicated to analyze	Later in a study to seek clarification Focus groups

Table 3.1
Continued

Kind of Interview	Knowledge Required	Strengths	Weaknesses	Uses
Formal Group	Minimal-Modest	Quick, able to observe interactions among group members	Possibly some reluctance to discuss experience in a group setting	Focus groups Families
Informal	Not applicable	Able to collect important data shared spontaneously outside the formal interview	No opportunity to record conversations	Unplanned interactions

both quantitative and qualitative research designs. They can be structured, unstructured, or semistructured.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are used when knowledge on a given topic is sufficiently large that its dimensions are known, and thus this type of interview is well suited for use in quantitative research designs. The existing knowledge base guides the development of questions that are specific and focused. Participants are given a limited range of response options. Given the underlying knowledge base, the responses to structured interviews can be linked theoretically and used to advance knowledge in the field under investigation.

Structured interviews are most often found in the context of survey research. For example, in a survey being conducted for community development purposes, a participant might be asked if he or she has lived in a certain neighborhood for five years or more and, if so, to rate his or her satisfaction with proximity to various amenities such as recreation/leisure facilities, grocery shopping, and restaurants on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "very satisfied." The questions in a structured interview resemble those incorporated in a questionnaire, with the only real difference being that the questions in a structured interview are read to the participant by the interviewer, whereas in a questionnaire the participant answers the questions independently.

It is not uncommon for a short series of open-ended questions to be added to the end of a survey. For example, the questions in the paragraph above could be followed by a question such as "What is the best thing about living in your neighborhood?" or "How would you describe this neighborhood to someone who was thinking about moving here?"

Raising the possibility of including open-ended questions in a survey provides an opportunity to stop briefly to discuss an interesting methodological question: how would one describe the design of a survey that includes open-ended questions? Although qualitative data are obtained in such studies, it would be more appropriate to describe the design of such studies as "mixed." Mixed-method designs may be planned around the requirements for reliability and validity of either qualitative or quantitative designs, with various data collection strategies not normally found in the preferred design added as required by the research question (Morse, 2003). Thus, one may speak of a mixed-method design as having either a qualitative drive or a quantitative drive. A survey with added open-ended

questions is a good example of a mixed-method design with a quantitative drive, since surveys are generally planned around the requirements of quantitative designs such as representative sampling. For a survey to be considered to have a qualitative drive, it would need to meet the requirements of qualitative designs, such as purpose sampling, prolonged engagement in the field, and data saturation (Morse et al., 2002), and this is seldom the case.

The main hallmark of structured interviews is that all participants are asked the same questions in the same order, and thus one of the strengths of this type of interview is that the results are easy to summarize. A second strength is that structured interviews generally take less time to complete than other kinds of interviews. A key limitation of structured interviews, however, is that they provide very limited opportunity for the participant to add new ideas that are not addressed by the survey questions but are central to his or her experience. Thus, structured interviews may constrain the ways in which a participant would otherwise describe an experience.

Interviews for the Early Phases of Qualitative Studies

When sufficient knowledge is not available to guide the development of interview questions, a different approach to interviewing is required. In this case, the researcher must find a way to begin sketching out the dimensions of the information that will eventually be used to answer the research question. Two kinds of interviews are particularly helpful in this regard, unstructured interviews and guided interviews. Excerpts from hypothetical interviews using both of these formats are included in the Appendix.

Unstructured Interviews

The objective of an unstructured interview is to begin a relationship with the study participant and create a space within which the participant feels free to tell his or her story. The participant thus has maximum control over the interview process (Corbin & Morse, 2003). As shown in the unstructured interview included in the Appendix, the interviewer using this format does not have any "questions" that are "asked" per se, but requests information by introducing some very broad topics for discussion within the context of a general conversation. For example, if the research question were focused on the experience of becoming a parent, the researcher might begin the interview by saying "Please describe something that has happened to you that would help me understand what becoming a parent

has been like for you." At some point in the conversation, the participant locates an anchor to which he or she can "tie" his or her story, and description of experience begins. A topic that works well with one participant may not be helpful at all with the next participant, however. As a result, comparison across stories is tedious and time consuming.

Because unstructured interviews are commonly used for the first interview with a study participant, they are wide ranging, and some content may appear to wander "off topic." The interviewer's task is to determine which elements of the interview are relevant to the study and how they are related. At a loss to know whether the participant has indeed wandered "off topic" or I am simply not seeing relationships that are apparent to him or her, I have sometimes simply asked a participant to help me locate the connections between ideas by saying, "You started by taking about xxx and now you are talking about yyy. It would be helpful for me to know whether these two things are connected for you and, if so, how they are connected."

Guided Interviews

The "guided" interview is another approach commonly used for the first interview with a study participant. The term *guided* here is used to indicate that the interviewer has constructed some opening questions, and, as shown in the excerpt included in the Appendix, the interview is therefore slightly more constrained than an unstructured interview. Using this approach, the researcher prepares a set of three or four general, broad questions designed to help the participants find a way to begin telling their stories. Continuing with the example from above in which the research question was about the experience of becoming a parent, an example of a question for a guided interview could be "How is your life different now compared to how it was before your baby was born?"

There is some advantage, particularly for the beginning researcher, to having a common set of questions to use as a starting point for an interview. The danger, however, is that in the process of constructing the questions, the researcher may inadvertently exclude an important aspect of the experience that a participant would otherwise have described.

Semistructured Interviews for the Later Phases of Qualitative Studies

In semistructured interviews, researchers use information they have acquired to construct questions that are more focused. A semistructured

interview is commonly used later in a research study, when the researcher is seeking further clarification about some area that was discussed in earlier interviews and is relevant to the research question. An excerpt of a hypothetical semistructured interview is included in the Appendix. Because this approach may be used to follow up on information a participant has provided in an earlier interview, participants are not necessarily all asked the same questions. In the course of beginning to saturate data categories, however, the researcher may decide to use a question that was particularly helpful in an interview late in the study when they conduct follow-up interviews with participants interviewed earlier. For example, the interviewer might say, "Since I talked to you last time, other participants have mentioned xxx. If xxx has also been part of your experience, please describe a time when this took place."

Formal Interviews with Groups

There are occasions in some qualitative studies when the researcher may find it helpful to interview a group of individuals. Group interviews are difficult to manage because participants are encouraged to respond to questions posed by the researcher as well as comments and questions posed by other members of the group. Thus, the data are complex, and the recording of such data requires careful documentation of both the participants' responses and their interactions.

Focus Groups

The most common form of the group interview is the focus group. Focus groups have historically been used in fields such as marketing to acquire feedback on various topics or to test-market new products, but they are being used increasingly in qualitative research. Focus groups are conducted when the researcher is interested in the interactions that occur among group members as well as their responses to questions posed by the interviewer. The use of focus groups simply to collect data quickly or to collect data that would be more appropriately collected using individual interviews is discouraged.

The semistructured interview format is commonly used for focus groups. An excerpt of a hypothetical focus group interview using semistructured questions is included in the Appendix. The moderator generally plans a set of four or five questions and tries to ensure that all are

discussed over the course of the focus group. The content for the questions is drawn from existing literature, including theoretical material, or information obtained through some other means earlier in the study. Studies often include several focus groups. Although the same questions are used in each focus group within a given study, they might not be asked in the same order each time.

Interview data obtained from groups are much more complex than those obtained from individuals, because focus-group data include responses both to the moderator's questions and to the questions and comments of other people in the group. As a result, the nature of the data is different from that of data obtained from individual interviews, and the two types of data cannot be used interchangeably.

When analyzing focus group data, in addition to the actual text from the interview, the researcher must also consider issues such as the social context of the group, nonverbal data, and the sequential nature of the interactions when developing the interpretation of the data (Carey, 1995; Hollander, 2004). Because of the complexity of the data, focus groups are often conducted by a moderator and an individual who records the social interaction. The moderator asks the interview questions while the recorder monitors nonverbal data and tracks participation of all members so that the moderator can help those who have not participated join the conversation if they wish.

In addition to their usual uses, focus groups can be helpful during the planning phase of a study to help work out topics and questions for individual interviews. For example, in our study of fatigue in individuals with lung and colorectal cancer (Olson et al., 2002), which was a mixed-methods study with a qualitative drive, we conducted several focus groups with patients who had completed their treatments to get input on the best ways to frame the topics we wanted to discuss.

There are many kinds of focus groups, and a complete discussion is beyond the scope of this book. Readers interested in learning more about focus groups and how to conduct them might wish to review the work of David Morgan (1997) or Richard Krueger (2009) on this topic.

Family Interviews

Group interviews may also be conducted in situations in which a group such as a family, rather than an individual, is the intended unit of analysis or in situations in which one was intending to interview an individual but a second person was present and contributed to the interview. The use

of group interviews in this context is controversial. Although one could argue that family members should be interviewed separately so that they feel less constrained by other family members, our experience is that such an approach has the potential for generating conflict within some families. Members of our team found, for example, that family members sometimes asked the interviewer what other family members had said. We reminded the family members that we could not disclose this information, given issues of confidentiality as outlined in the consent, and encouraged them to discuss their concerns with their family member. Nevertheless, we were concerned that our decision to conduct interviews of family members separately had inadvertently triggered conflict within the family, or at least a concern that "family secrets" may be shared inappropriately.

Researchers planning to interview family groups must be clear about their reasons for interviewing the family together or separately. If the researcher's interest is in the family's perspective, he or she must determine how to get the family story, not just the story of each individual family member.

Morris (2001) outlined some issues related to group interviews, based on her work with individuals who had cancer and their family caregivers. When given a choice of individual or group interviews, she found that her study participants frequently requested to be interviewed together. She noted that although the group interview shared some characteristics with a standard focus group in that participants were encouraged to respond to the questions posed by the researcher and to comments and questions posed by other group members, there was an added level of intimacy, given the relationships of the group members to one another. Although families with problematic dynamics would not likely volunteer to participate in a study, one could imagine other situations in which it might be more useful to interview family members separately.

There are some benefits to including both individual and group interviews when studying dyads (Eisikovits and Koren, 2010). By comparing themes across interviews with each participant individually to themes that arise when both individuals in a dyad are interviewed together, the researcher is able to explore views held in common and views held separately, as well as views apparent to one partner but not apparent to the other.

An important difference between family interviews and focus group interviews is related to representativeness. In the group interview with a family, all members of a family could be included, and thus the data

obtained could be considered to represent the views of the whole family. Participants in a focus group, in contrast, are drawn from some large population. Depending on how the focus group members were selected, the data obtained might not be representative of the population from which they were drawn.

Informal Interviews

Informal interviews do not take place at a specific time set aside for the interview. Rather, they occur as part of normal, everyday conversations when the researcher happens to be interacting with individuals within the research environment, as is often the case in studies that use an ethnographic or participatory action design. Thus, one does not have any interview questions per se, and it is difficult to record such interviews. As a result, after the interview is over, the researcher must prepare a field note in which the material discussed in the interview is described in as much detail as possible.

Informal interviews raise an important ethical issue. Although the researcher may have obtained consent from the person with whom he or she is conversing, the person might not realize that the researcher is "collecting" data. Recheck participants' willingness to participate in the study each time data are collected, regardless of whether the context is formal or informal.

Given the nature of informal interviews, sometimes an individual from whom consent has not yet been obtained provides information that is relevant to the research question. Should this happen, the researcher should obtain consent to include the information before formally incorporating the data. In this situation, it is not uncommon to request consent following the interview. It is also possible that sometime after a conversation, perhaps several days, the researcher may realize that he or she learned some important information in an earlier conversation with someone from whom they do not yet have consent. Again, the researcher must obtain consent to include this information before formally incorporating the data.

Generating Data in Early Interviews

Figuring out how to begin an interview is difficult. The way an interview is started must account for whether the researcher is interviewing an individual or a group, the kind of interview, the research questions, and

the context that surrounds the research questions. If the opening is not sufficiently broad, the researcher will not have sufficient contextual information to interpret the data. If the opening is too broad, however, the researcher runs the risk of gathering irrelevant information.

When beginning the early interviews, the researcher should remember that although he or she may have developed some "guiding" questions, the objective is not to "guide" an interview. Indeed, the interviewer should avoid all subtle indications that this is intended, since this would be a major threat to the validity of the data. Rather, one wishes to open a conversation with the participant. The key message should be "I am interested in your story and whatever you want to tell me about it." When conducting an unstructured group interview, the researcher should make a few introductory statements before beginning to outline the parameters of the group process—for example, "I would like to know your thoughts about xxx. Please feel free to also comment on points raised by others in the group."

Some years ago, a member of a research team on which I worked obtained the consent from a study participant and then simply said "Any time you're ready." I was amazed by the incredibly rich data he obtained using that simple introduction but should add that although I have tried a similar approach, I have not been as successful. Nevertheless, I think he had a good understanding of what was required in the first interview. The primary characteristic of the opening approach used at the beginning of a study must be broad and open ended.

It is not uncommon for individuals who have not been interviewed in the context of a qualitative study in the past to feel uncertain about how to begin. Keep in mind that although the participant has signed the consent form and thus has some idea about the purpose of the study, the idea that he or she is simply being asked to describe an experience may initially feel awkward to them. Every qualitative researcher will develop strategies that work best for him or her, but one approach is to begin with a very general statement. I have used statements such as "As I mentioned in the letter attached to the consent form for this study, I am interested in learning more about how things have been going for you lately." The idea here is to let the participant know that the researcher is interested in the participant's story as a whole. Prompts can be used later to focus the interview, if necessary. For example, in my work on fatigue, I listened for words and phrases related to fatigue and asked participants to tell me more in those areas.

One may need to experiment with various ways to begin an interview. The goal is to help participants move past any introductory questions asked

and settle into "telling" their story rather than "answering" the researcher's questions. Beginning researchers often make the mistake of wanting to rush directly to their topic of interest and use their research questions as initial opening questions. The beginning of the interview needs to provide context for interpretation of the data. The opening comments by the research should invite description ("Tell me about…," "Please give an example…," "Please tell me about a time when…") rather than analysis ("How did you feel about… ?"). The "asking" for information needs to be gentle and open. This descriptive approach helps participants understand their role as a describer of their experience. By using questions that are analytic in nature, the researcher runs the risk of turning the research interview into a therapeutic exchange and thus of inadvertently moving beyond the limits of the consent.

Most research ethics committees require that the researcher submit several possible topics or questions that will be used to being the interviews. Funding review panel members also expect the researcher to provide a list of possible topics or questions for early interviews, because this lets the reviewers know that the researcher has thought about some possible strategies for beginning the interviews he or she is planning to conduct.

As the initial interview progresses, the participant (or participants, in the case of a group interview) will pause more, and the pace of the interview will slow down. The interviewer must learn to resist the urge to interject or ask more questions immediately and to wait until the participant indicates that he or she is finished with his or her comments or simply stops talking. At the end of the participant's story, there is time for the interviewer to ask the participant to elaborate on the points about which more information is needed—for example, "You mentioned xxx. Please tell me more about that."

Generating Data in Follow-Up Interviews

Prolonged engagement in the field is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research and is critical to the rigor of a qualitative study (Morse et al., 2002). By spending time in the field and really getting to know the participants, the researcher is more likely to get beyond the initial superficial responses to any questions he or she may ask and to obtain the information required to answer the research question. For this reason, qualitative research is a time-intensive endeavor. In most research designs, participants are interviewed at least twice, but in ethnographic studies,

oral histories, or studies using participatory action designs, one might interview participants many times.

There are several ways to begin a follow-up interview, but a simply strategy is to say, "I have a couple of things I'd like to follow up on. But before we do that, is anything else you've thought of since we last talked that you would like to add?" Once the participant has finished with any additional comments, the researcher could continue by saying, "When we spoke last, you mentioned xxx. Please tell me more about that."

Subsequent interviews also provide an opportunity to return to participants interviewed early in a study with new information that surfaces in interviews with individuals recruited later in a study. Remember to mention this possibility in the consent form and to remind participants of this possibility, including their right to refuse such interviews even though they initially gave consent. The opportunity to move back and forth among the study participants in this manner increases opportunities to saturate data categories, and thus one is likely to require fewer participants.

At the end of the interview the interviewer should always ask the participant if there is anything else that he or she thinks is relevant to the topic of the study that has not been discussed ("Is there anything else that would be helpful for me to know that we haven't discussed?"). This is often the point at which some of the most important data in a study surface. Participants have a wealth of information that they are generally willing to share, but they might not do so, because they do not recognize its value. This information may stretch far beyond the interviewer's thoughts about the topic. To access this information, interviewers must convey that they are open to hearing it, even though they might not have asked explicitly about it.

Data Generation and Design

Never lose track of the research questions that drive a study. This is because the research questions, in turn, drive the choice about the best design for the study, and the design selected has implications for how the interview questions are framed and for the interviewing process. Although interviewing is a common data-collection strategy across most, if not all, qualitative designs, the nature of the interview questions is different.

In studies based on a grounded-theory design, for example, interview questions are focused on social or social-psychological processes. The goal in grounded theory is to identify a central problem and to situate it within a basic social process. The researcher uses grounded theory because his

or her primary interest is in learning more about how meaning arises as a function of social interaction. The interviewer begins with an unstructured interview approach and uses broad, open-ended questions to learn about the participant's experience. As the study progresses and the relationships among main ideas from the early interviews become clearer, the interview approach becomes semistructured, and the interview questions become more focused. This shift is essential in more fully elaborating the relationships among the main ideas, thus making it possible for the researcher to formulate a theory about these relationships (Glaser, 1978).

In studies using an ethnographic design, however, the purpose of the study is to learn about culture. *Culture* is a word that has so many meanings that researchers are sometimes reluctant to use it. Here I have deliberately chosen the definition provided by Spradley (1979), who said that culture refers "to the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior" (p. 5). Beginning with an unstructured interview format, the focus of early ethnographic interviews is on trying to make beliefs and values explicit. This important difference can be seen more clearly in studies that use an institutional ethnographic approach, where the objective is to uncover how societal institutions shape experience (Smith, 1996). For example, using an institutional ethnographic approach, Sinding (2010) used interviews, along with other data sources, to show how disparities are produced in the routine provision of cancer care.

An additional point related to the intersection between design and interviewing is that in some designs, such as grounded theory, interviews may be the primary data source, whereas in other designs, such as ethnography and photovoice, interviews might be one of several data sources used. For example, Drew, Duncan, and Sawyer (2010) asked young people with asthma, diabetes, or cystic fibrosis to photograph aspects of their daily life and then interviewed them about the photographs they created. Generating data from several sources generally produces results that are richer and more substantial, but this benefit must be balanced against the additional expense and time required to generate, analyze, and integrate findings.

Summary

The nature of the interview conducted in the context of a qualitative study is distinctly different from interviews that take place in other, nonresearch settings. Interviews may be formal or informal, and may be conducted

with individuals or groups. Although the choices related to which kind of interview to use may vary with the design and the phase of the study in which the researcher is working, each has the potential to yield rich data that cannot be accessed any other way. The decisions about the type of interview to conduct must be made deliberately and for reasons that fit with the purpose of the study.

Throughout the interview, the interviewer must say just enough that the participant feels relaxed, comfortable, and at ease. The invitations to conversation and the questions asked play a central role in maintaining the conversational space. The use of questions early in the study that are too focused might limit the ability of participants to share their whole experience, and the continued use of broad questions late in the study might prevent researchers from refining their results and answering their research questions.

Exercises

1. Think about your research topic. What kind of interviews do you plan to use? Formal? Informal? Why?
2. Imagine that you are preparing to interview an individual for the first time, and develop one or two possible ways to open the interview using an unstructured interview format. How will you explain to the participant what you want him or her to talk about? Now find a friend who is willing to role-play an interview with you. Try out your introductory comments. How did your comments work? Ask your friend for feedback about how to make them more "inviting." Switch roles and ask your friend to use another of the strategies you developed for opening an interview. Which approach worked better? How does it feel to be interviewed? How does it feel to be the interviewer?
3. Think about how the design of your study will influence what you will say to your participants. Try adjusting your research questions so that the research design would change and then compare the opening comments for a first interview from the standpoint of each design.
4. How many interviews do you think you would like to have with each of your study participants? Why?
5. Although it is hard to plan questions for follow-up interviews before you have completed your initial interviews, make a list of some of the topics you think might arise that would require follow-up.

6. Think about a situation in which you might prefer to conduct an interview with a group rather than an individual. Make a list comparing the strengths and limitations of individual and group interviews. Create a research question and then prepare two or three semistructured questions that you could use to begin the focus group discussion. Practice them with a few friends. Take turns being the moderator, the assistant, and the study participants. What are the similarities and differences in the role of the moderator of a focus group and the role of the interviewer of a single participant?
7. What are some strategies that could be used to keep track of participation in a focus group?