

# TIPS FOR CONDUCTING SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS



## Qualitative data collection methods

This infographic is for undergraduate student researchers who are conducting semi-structured interviews for their qualitative research study. This is a generic guide; the specific form of interview, analysis etc. will be determined by your research question and the paradigm and methodological approach you are working in (e.g., interpretive, phenomenological).

Qualitative paradigms and designs video

Qualitative methodologies and methods video

Strategies to ensure trustworthiness (quality) video

Qualitative data analysis video (focus on thematic analysis)



### Interview guide

The interview guide serves as a memory tool for focusing the discussion, not a script.

- Open-ended questions on interview guide should have a rationale behind them connected to research objectives.
- Keep phrasing of questions neutral - i.e., no questions that suggest a positive or negative opinion. Neutral starters: "please tell me about...", "could you describe...", "can you share your thoughts on..."
- Ask general before specific questions.
- Keep the structure flexible.
- Try out the questions with non-participants to check for sense-making and clarity.

### Preparation and setting



- Arrange a private, quiet space without unexpected interruptions.
- Organise the space to make participant feel comfortable; preferably don't have a desk between you.
- Aim for between 30-60 minutes, depending on topic/questions.
- Familiarise yourself with your interview guide. Practice with friends beforehand!
- Check digital recorder is working and fully charged; take back-up batteries.



### Interviewer behaviour

- NB: Informed consent process must be followed before interview. Explain aim of interview at start. Allow for questions.
- Adopt a curious, open stance in body language. Dress appropriately for context.
- Keep expressions interested and non-judgmental.
- Think about ways to establish rapport - small talk at beginning is a good start!
- Show that you are listening empathetically.
- Good interviews = rapport + active listening + eliciting information. See key techniques for eliciting information below.
- Know your interview guide and prompts well...but don't stick rigidly to the order.
- Keep note taking to a minimum to maintain focus on interviewee.
- Remember that the interviewer is not a blank screen but is co-constructing meaning.
- Be aware of the potential for social desirability bias.
- Be aware of drifting into educating or counselling, or giving own opinions.
- Reflect on power dynamics.

### Interview guide example



Here is a sample interview guide with open-ended questions and some follow-up prompts to help guide the discussion.

Can you describe an interaction that you've had with a student with mental health difficulties?

- Who initiated contact?
- What was the nature of the contact? Could you describe the nature of the difficulty the student seemed to be having?
- What signs/symptoms did they present?
- Why do you think this occurred?

What actions did you take with or for the student to assist them?

- Did the student come with any specific requests?

How equipped or prepared did you feel to assist the student?

- Were there aspects you found particularly challenging?
- What helped you?

### Encouraging prompts



Slow nods

Head tilting

"Hmmm" or "uh huh"

"Yes" or "I see" or "Okay..."

Echo last words of participant's response

Don't rush to fill pauses with more questions

Allow interested silences to encourage more of the participant's thought

Show engagement with eye contact (but be aware of cultural norms)

Maintain a warm, conversational tone

Pay attention to participant's body language

### Interviews with peers



Be aware of...

- Shared language and assumptions can be both advantageous and problematic.
- There is less room for misinterpretation but researchers could make unwarranted assumptions and not question underlying ideas or meanings.
- Being 'equals' means there may be more trust and opening up, but there may be over-involvement and identification.
- Peers may feel their knowledge is being tested and feel vulnerable.
- Be reflexive about the pre-existing relationship and perceptions.



### Key technique: exploratory questions

Also called "probes" or probing questions, their purpose is to ask for further elaboration, explore meaning, or tap into reasons.

- "Can you tell me a bit more about that?"
- "Could you give me an example?"
- Asking for detail about who, where, what, when, how.
- "Is there anything else you'd like to add to that?"
- "What are your thoughts about..."
- "Can we focus on that for a bit?"
- "What was that experience like for you?"
- "How do/did you feel about that?"

### Key technique: clarification questions



Used to get explanations / clarity on participant's responses.

- "You said (x). Could you say a bit more about you meant by that?"
- "In connection with..."
- "Can we come back to..."
- "Do you mind us unpacking..."
- "Could we look at..."
- "I'd just like to check in with you about..."
- "Going back to what you said about (x), can you give a bit more detail that?"
- "So are you saying..."
- "Can I just check that I understood what you said about..."
- "I'm wondering what you meant by..."

### Key technique: why questions



Used to invite the participant to think about an issue on a deeper level.

- "You were saying that you feel .... when..., I'm wondering why you think that is?"
- "Why do you think that might be the case?"
- "I wonder why you felt that way about it?"
- "Any thoughts about why that happened?"



### Key technique: summarising

- Summing up and reflecting what the participant said.
- Affirming information.
- Checking interviewer's understanding of participant's responses (validity check).
- Allows participant an opportunity to further develop their thoughts on the question.

### After the interview



- Save and backup the recording immediately. Label with date & pseudonym.
- Transcribe the interview as soon as possible; decide what form of transcription you will use (verbatim most common). →
- 1 hour of audio = +/- 4-8 hours of transcribing.
- Begin analysis after first interview (iterative data collection and analysis).



### Transcription resources

- Watch: [Transcription in qualitative analysis](#)
- Read: Bailey (2008). [First steps in qualitative data analysis: transcribing. Family Practice.](#)
- Use: [Manual on transcription: transcription conventions, software guides, and practical hints for qualitative researchers](#)

### Sources

- Britten, N. (2013). Qualitative interviews. In C. Pope and N. Mays (Eds.), *Qualitative research in health care*, pp. 12-20.
- Holloway, I. & Galvin, K. (2017). *Qualitative research in nursing and health care*.
- Moerman, G. *Interviewing*. YouTube: Research Methods and Statistics. University of Amsterdam

### Further reading

- [McGrath et al \(2019\). Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. Medical Teacher.](#)
- [Roller \(2022\). The in-depth interview method: 12 articles on design and implementation. Research Design Review.](#)
- [Ryan \(2009\). Interviewing in qualitative research: the one-to-one interview. International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation.](#)

Download [Atlas.ti analysis software from SU Information Technology.](#)

For more resources, visit the [Undergraduate Research Office website](#) or contact Dr Debbie Marais ([debbiem@sun.ac.za](mailto:debbiem@sun.ac.za))

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