

Effective Practices for Research Interviews

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Interviews are a very common approach in research, particularly in qualitative designs. Here are some tips to make sure the data you obtain through interviews are valid, trustworthy, and usable in your study.

Note: Taping or digitally recording the interviews allows you to do a more thorough and objective analyses of the data. People are becoming more comfortable with having their conversations taped. It is increasingly common to be told that your conversation may be recorded during a phone interview, and most focus groups in marketing studies use unobtrusive video recording equipment to capture what's being said. However, some people are not comfortable knowing their remarks are being recorded word-for-word. Respect this. Although it is better to have your interviews recorded, be mindful of those who prefer that their conversations not be recorded.

1. Distinguish between research questions and interview questions. Keep these questions separated into systematic components of your study. Research questions are usually 1-4 overarching questions guiding your study, are not directly asked of participants, and should not be yes/no questions (see <http://dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Developing-Research-Questions.pdf>). Interview questions are built around the research questions, help you answer the research questions, and are directed to the person you are interviewing.
2. Script the interview from start to finish, including introductions, instructions, probes, etc. A common sequence of events would be: a) establish rapport, b) briefly explain the intent of your study (without giving away too much), c) conduct the Interview, d) debrief at the end of the interview.
3. Select the most appropriate approach to asking your questions. For example, your interview may include semi-structured questions where you are seeking particular types of responses, or they may be more open-ended questions that could generate a much broader

array of responses. Make certain that the type of questions you ask fit with what you are trying to measure and explain.

4. Make certain that you obtain permission to audio or video tape the interview, ideally in advance, and that your equipment is working well, easy to set up, and unobtrusive. Test your equipment before you conduct the interview. Always bring a notepad and pen/pencils to the interview even when the interview is being recorded – this is a useful backup in case of technology problems, and enables you to make notes during the interview to use in further probing participant responses.
5. Develop very clear and concise interview questions. Make them short and direct. Consider back-up questions and probes as needed.
6. Do not ask leading questions. Most of your questions should be What, Why, and How questions. For example: “What do you think of standardized tests? Why does the possible merger concern you? How do you think the current situation got this way?”
7. Consider going from the general to the specific. For example, “What do you think of the federal immigration policies? What do you think of your state’s immigration policy?” How has the immigration policy affected you directly?
8. To develop and maintain flow and pacing in an interview, first ask a direct question, then follow up on ideas presented, then ask an indirect question. Never give your opinion, even if asked.
9. Sometimes an interviewee can become aggressive and start controlling the interview. Be prepared to regain control of the interview. Have a well honed comment or two that allows you to stop a response that is tangential or off-question. For example, “I believe at this point you are responding no to question X...? Good, let’s now address.....” Make sure it is gentle and considerate of the interviewee, because embarrassment or feelings of disrespect can invalidate the interview.
10. Be comfortable with occasional silence. The most effective way to encourage someone to elaborate is to do nothing at all - just pause and wait. It suggests to the interviewee that you are waiting, and ready to listen to what he or she will say next.

11. Always take time to ask for an explanation about things you don't understand. Don't rush.
You can encourage further discussions by asking: "Would you like to elaborate on that?", "Is there anything else you would like to add?", or "Can you clarify what you mean by...?"
12. Even if you are recording an interview, take notes. Don't try to write every word said, since this will slow down the interview. Just jot down the highlights.
13. During the interview try to be a conscious listener and patient.....do not talk while your interviewee is speaking.
14. When a theme or a line of questioning is exhausted, tell the interviewee: "I would now like to introduce another topic..."
15. Never argue, yawn, fidget, roll your eyes, or seem uninterested. The research interview is an interpersonal situation. Two people are involved in the development and sharing of knowledge. Make sure you pay close attention to the interviewee's comments and body language. If you are video taping the interview, you might want to watch the interview once without sound to get a general feel for the demeanor of the interviewee.
16. If the interviewee appears bored or restless, it may be time to move on....or it may indicate that you have touched a sensitive issue. Sometimes important responses can come from discussing sensitive issues. Feel free to probe in such situations, but be attentive to signals from the interviewee that they are uncomfortable in proceeding, and if so, move on to a different topic.
17. The debriefing should provide a clear signal that the end of the interview is happening. Use a closure such as "Thank you for efforts here and all the helpful information. Have you any questions for me?"
18. Consider sending a transcript of the interview, if recorded, so that corrections can be made by the participant if needed. This type of "member checking", also called informant feedback or respondent validation, helps improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of a study.
19. Following each interview, reflect on what kind of talk or discussion emerged when questions were asked, and identify questions that need to be refined. Also, identify new experiences shared by the interviewee that could be incorporated into subsequent

interviews. Finally, reflect on your role as an interviewer and on your preconceptions and behaviors during the interview and make any needed adjustments

20. All data obtained through questionnaires, surveys, or interviews adhere to the same ethical system: The privacy of the individual is respected and weighed against the public's right to know. Make certain that you have established defensible safeguards for participant confidentiality and data security, and that you "do no harm" either during the interview or in reporting the results.

Participant interviewing is a fun and enlightening element of research. Good luck with it!

More information and suggestions can be found at:

<http://www.public.asu.edu/~kroel/www500/Interview%20Fri.pdf>

<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/interview.php>

References

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