

Interviews: A general overview of practices and techniques

Interviews are a tool for getting information from living subjects. Whether you use interviews or not depends on the type of research you do and your research objectives.

Technical aspects: Interviews are often **recorded** (which allows for later analysis and accurate citation), and it is advisable also to **take notes** while conducting the interview (for later reference, and also to note interesting points during the conversation to ask the interviewee for elaboration). The recorded interview is later **transcribed**; this can be a transcription of the entire interview or merely relevant sections.

Equipment: In addition to bringing a notebook and pens to take notes, a digital voice recorder is used to record the interview conversation. Make sure to familiarise yourself with the recorder's settings before the interview. Always check to make sure there is full battery life before beginning the interview, and always bring extra batteries!

Importance of location: Choosing where to conduct interviews is very important, and the surrounding ambiance also can be quite informative in itself. Setting up a comfortable environment during the interview helps both you and the interviewee to relax and concentrate on the conversation (i.e. Are there many distractions or potential interruptions? If you are discussing sensitive topics, will the interviewee feel secure?) Location is particularly important for the recording quality – continual interfering sounds, loud background noises, and wind will all impact how well you can understand the recorded interview once back home.

Main types of interviews:

- 1) **Structured:** The interview is conducted following a pre-set list of prepared questions.
- 2) **Semi-Structured:** While often based on a pre-determined set of themes, the interview structure is more flexible and allows new questions to be brought up during the course of the interview; this flexibility allows the interview process to be tailored to the individual interviewee. Often the interviewer will have an 'Interview Guide' at hand, which lists the general topics they wish to address in each interview.
- 3) **Questionnaires:** An alternative to face-to-face interviews, which facilitate statistical or quantitative analysis.

Types of questions / Framing questions:

- 1) **Open-ended questions:** Ask questions which require descriptions or for interviewees to elaborate their opinions and experiences; avoid simple yes/no responses.
- 2) **Avoid leading questions:** Remember that the way you frame your question can direct the interviewee's response. If you ask a question which overtly leads or directs the interviewee's response, not only will you be distorting the information you receive, but you are missing out on potentially learning about other interesting factors or new issues which are of importance to your research subject.
- 3) **Asking questions that you already know the answer:** When interviewing multiple people about the same subject, sometimes it is helpful to ask interviewees questions that you might already have an idea of the answer (i.e. you already know how a certain process works or you already are familiar with an event), so that you can get the interviewee's opinion and elaboration on this topic.

- 4) **Asking the right question:** The wording you use changes the information you will receive; as such, slightly modifying your wording or your question can get you totally different information and responses. Pay attention to the vocabulary being used by your subjects, and shift your wording appropriately!

Probing – getting interviewees to give further information:

- 1) **Silent probe:** Try to be comfortable with silences and slight pauses in conversation; subtle encouragement for the interviewee to continue speaking can be done through nodding or an encouraging “um-hum” – let the interviewee have a bit of time to think, and many times s/he will fill in the silence.
- 2) **Echo probe:** One way to get someone to elaborate further is simply to repeat their previous statement, and ask for further information (for example, to elaborate on a particular aspect of the statement; or if discussing an event, asking what happened next or about the details of how something proceeded, etc).

Informed Consent and Ethical Research:

Working with living people is an interaction full of ethical responsibility. Here are a few considerations and tips:

- 1) **Ask permission.** It is important to get written or recorded verbal consent to conduct (and record) the interview from each interviewee.
- 2) **Emphasize that their participation is totally voluntary** – and if someone says they do not want to do an interview with you, try not to feel personally offended. Sometimes it takes awhile to build up a sustained relationship to get to the point where people feel comfortable speaking with you.
- 3) **Be open with people about your research project and how the information you gather will be used.** This doesn't mean that you need to give a chapter-by-chapter description of your thesis – but it is very important that the people you work and interact with in the field (both interviewed and non-interviewed) know that you are there conducting research, understand the basics of what your project is about, and that the research will be used for academic purposes (an MPhil or PhD thesis). What type of information is shared can be adapted to the context of each research project and subsequent research relationships.
- 4) **Research confidentiality and ensuring the security of your research subjects:** Depending on your research topic, your interviewees might need to remain anonymous or be referred to by pseudonyms. On the other hand, sometimes research subjects find it empowering to be directly named and referenced in your research. In deciding what names to use in your thesis, consider 1) your ethical responsibility in directly naming the subjects (i.e. will mentioning their real identity endanger the individuals in their community, or put them in legal danger?), and 2) you can directly ask the interviewee if you can cite the interview in your work and by what name they wish to be referred.

Working in a non-native language:

If doing interviews in your native language has its challenges, then doing an interview in a non-native language can definitely feel a bit daunting! Here are a few tips:

- Before jumping straight into interviews, take a bit of time to get comfortable with chatting and everyday conversations on arrival.
- Write down essential vocabulary, or phrasing for specific questions.
- If you don't understand a word or phrase, ask the interviewee to explain.
- One advantage is that people often are willing to explain things in more detail to you; while a disadvantage is that you might miss or misinterpret slang and subtleties.

Things to keep in mind:

- Be rested and alert – a successful interview depends on your state-of-mind too!

- Don't beat yourself up if an interview felt awkward or didn't flow – each interview is a learning experience, and the chemistry between you and each interviewee is unique.
- It's not necessary to record everything in the field – you get different information from different types of social situations. Be sure to write down notes and reflections after interesting conversations that were not recorded.
- Remember that by speaking with you, your interviewees are placing confidence in you and how you will responsibly and respectfully use the information they have shared.
- Have fun! Interviews can be really enjoyable and informative learning experiences.

Written by: Chandra Morrison (University of Cambridge), 2010 – cefm3@cam.ac.uk