

Qualitative Interviews

I-TECH's Technical Implementation Guides are a series of practical and instructional papers designed to support staff and partners in their efforts to create and maintain quality programs worldwide.

What Are Qualitative Interviews?

Qualitative interviews are considered the “backbone” of qualitative research and evaluation. Unlike surveys, which consist of carefully worded, closed-ended questions, qualitative interviews are one-on-one, interactive conversations between an interviewer and an informant. The objective of qualitative interviews is to get detailed information, in the form of narratives or stories,* of people’s experiences, local histories, and shared knowledge to get verbal pictures of systematic behaviors. Data derived from qualitative interviews are rich, in-depth descriptions that explain and give meaning to people’s lives. Unlike surveys, the success of a qualitative interview rests on the skill of the interviewer, rather than on the quality of the questionnaire. For this reason, training field staff on how best to conduct in-depth interviews prior to initiating a study, evaluation, or assessment is critical.

Types of Qualitative Interviews

Though all qualitative interviews contain the same basic elements of discussion, detail, and description, they vary with respect to how much control the interviewer has over the informant’s answers. The structure can range from loose—where the interviewer has minimal control over responses—to rigid—where the interviewer asks a specific set of questions and the informant has little room to elaborate. The choice of structure depends on the type of investigation being conducted and the purpose of the interview. Different types of questions are used depending on the type of interview structure and the interviewer’s level of control. What the different types of interviews have in common, however, is

that they are all purposeful and systematic—that is, the interviewer has an objective and a plan for collecting the intended information.

Unstructured Interviews

As a general rule, unstructured interviews are useful for exploratory investigations of new topics and ideas, or when the topic under study is not well known or understood. The idea is to allow informants to express themselves freely, with minimal control imposed by the interviewer, in order to gain the most information possible. Unstructured interviews involve an interviewer sitting down with another person and having what appears to be an informal discussion. In fact, however, the interviewer puts a lot of thought into the interview before it starts. For example, he or she must know what topics to cover and the direction in which to steer the discussion. In most cases, the interviewer will use a checklist to guide the direction of the interview. During the interview itself, the interviewer gently guides the flow of information by probing the informant for more detail while making sure the discussion doesn’t veer too far off topic. Because of its interactive nature, unstructured interviewing often depends on the ability and experience of the interviewer. For this reason, selecting interviewers with demonstrated experience and skills in both interviewing and note taking is highly advisable.

In a formative study or evaluation, unstructured interviews are often done at the beginning because a great deal of information can be gathered in a short period of time. This data can then be used to inform other phases of the study, such as developing interview guides and survey questions to be used later on.

**The term “story” means the same as “chronicle” or true “account” of a person’s life experiences rather than a fictional “tale.”*

Semi-structured Interviews

In contrast to unstructured interviews, a semi-structured interview is more controlled by the interviewer. Instead of a checklist, interviewers work from a script of proscribed questions, called an “interview guide,” which sometimes has prompts that allow for limited flexibility. The interview guide allows the interviewer room to follow new leads while also demonstrating that she or he is prepared and has the situation under control. The interviewer will likely need to be able to skillfully move between proscribed and unstructured questions in order to clarify responses or ask for elab-

oration if a participant seems to provide contradictory information. Thus, providing interview staff with training and practice beforehand is highly advisable.

Semi-structured interviews are very useful tools for obtaining specific details about a topic that has already been explored in unstructured interviews, or for comparing answers among a larger group of informants. This type of interview also works well in situations where the informant is accustomed to efficient use of time, for example, doctors in a busy clinic.

Type	Format	Responses	Data	Use	Question Example
Unstructured	Checklist, interview guide	Less controlled; exploratory and flexible; informants are encouraged to tell their stories	Can be tape recorded or recorded in field notes depending on the need for exact detail; transcripts and notes can be coded into a text-based database (e.g., NUD*IST, Ethnograph); often produces volumes of data	Quality of data depends interviewer’s skill; generates a large amount of rich, detailed data; very effective for uncovering new information	Can you tell me about your first boyfriend?
Semi-structured	Written interview script; all questions written down; script includes interviewer instructions	Controlled; more detailed; comparable responses; little room for exploration beyond interview script	Same as above, though usually produces narrower range and quantity of data	With adequate training and practice, can be used successfully with less experienced interviewers; easier to compare answers	Can you tell me about the first time you and your partner talked about using condoms? [Prompt: Who first suggested condoms? What did you/he say? How did you/he react?]
Structured	Most common format is open-ended survey questions; short answers; often include interviewer directions on specific probes and when to use them	Highly controlled and specific; limited detail; most easily comparable since each person interviewed has been exposed to exact same group of questions	Usually recorded on survey instrument; can be easily transformed into numerical data	Can verify information from in-depth interviews; easily integrated into surveys; effective with large study populations; generally easiest type of interviewing to “train up” staff to conduct	Over the last month, in what locations did you buy drugs?

Structured Interviews

In this type of interview, carefully and fully worded questions are developed before the interview is conducted. Each informant gets asked the same questions in the same way with the same probes. Structured interviews facilitate cross-comparison of answers across time and can compensate for variability in research skills across different interviewers.

Structured interviews are best used when a lot of information about the topic is already known, perhaps collected via previous open-ended interviews. The weakness of the standardized approach inherent to structured interviews is that it does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview instrument was written. Structured interviews also reduce the extent to which individual circumstances and differences can be explored¹.

Types of Informants

In general, there are two types of informants used in qualitative interviews: *key informants* and *specialized informants*². The difference between them relates to their knowledge level of the interview subject and their relationship with the interviewer.

Key Informants

Key informants are people who have much knowledge about their culture and are often well connected within their communities. Generally speaking, they are easy to talk to and willing to share information. They may also have special insight about “the big picture”—larger social, cultural, and/or political factors that might affect local conditions and behaviors. In addition, these informants tend to be thoughtful and articulate, and seem to understand what the interviewer wants to know. Importantly, when they are unable to provide the information the interviewer is looking for, key informants often serve as local gatekeepers who can introduce the interviewer to other individuals who can be of help.

The term “key informant” does not mean the same thing as “educated person” or “authoritative official.” In fact, the best key informants may not be persons

of authority at all, but rather unofficial experts who know what’s really going on. In long-term ethnography studies where the interviewer and the key informant spend much time together, close relationships are often formed between them. Alternatively, people sometimes become key informants because of their close relationship with the interviewer and their ability to understand what information she or he is seeking. Regardless of how the relationship develops, it is often the case that the interviewer and the key informants choose each other over time, rather than the interviewer choosing the informants.

Finding good gatekeepers is extremely important for studies in which target populations are hidden, vulnerable, and/or stigmatized. For example, an important key informant for a study on commercial sex work might be a taxi driver, who knows the locations where sex work is usually conducted and who may already be known and trusted by many of the clients and sex workers themselves. Because key informant knowledge is specialized and particular to the individual, interviews tend to be unstructured, with interviewers using checklists to guide the discussion.

Other Informants

Other informants are selected for interviews because they represent in some way a larger group of individuals the interviewer is trying to understand. If possible, it is best for interviewers to find informants who represent a diversity of knowledge and perspectives on the study topic in order to reduce bias. Using a broad group of informants also provides access to a wide array of viewpoints. For longer or larger studies, informants can be selected using random and stratified sampling techniques; however, care should be taken to ensure that the different relevant categories of people (sex, age, ethnic group, religion, etc.) are evenly represented.

Getting the Most out of an Interview

Building Rapport

The best way to guarantee a successful qualitative interview is to put the informant at ease and gain his or her trust. People are more willing to express themselves if they feel comfortable and safe. Inter-

views should start with an appropriate greeting and an introduction of the interviewer, the project, and the project's purpose. Informants should be told why they have been selected for participation, and how the information they provide will assist the project, such as interviewers or researchers understanding a problem in order to help improve services. Informants like to know that their stories will be of some benefit. They should also be told that the information they provide will be kept confidential, and the steps taken to protect their privacy should be outlined. If the subject matter is sensitive or personal, such as sexual behavior or illegal activities, informants should be told ahead of time and assured they do not have to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. They should also be informed whether they will be compensated for the interview and, if so, what that compensation will be. These few steps, which take less than 5 or 10 minutes, can make the difference between eliciting a rich, detailed, and insightful narrative and a skimpy, vague, and uninformative exercise.

Interviewing Tips

1. Build rapport
 - Be sure to introduce yourself and explain the project
 - Help the informant feel at ease
2. Sequence questions
 - Start in the present and move towards the past and future
 - Move from impersonal to personal
 - Facts first, then opinions
 - Save sensitive questions for later
3. Phrase questions carefully
 - Avoid asking yes/no questions
4. Clarify responses
 - Clear up confusing or inconsistent responses
 - Use probes to gain more information
5. Thank the informants!
 - Tell them how important their contribution is
 - Provide compensation, if appropriate

Question Sequencing

Just as building rapport is critical to qualitative interviewing, so too is properly sequencing interview questions. Like in sports, informants need a chance to “warm up” before tackling challenging, complicated questions. Begin in the present and move to questions about the past and future, which may require more reflection and/or recall. The same goes for facts and opinions—ask fact-related questions first, such as “What was the last grade you completed in school?” before asking “What do you think about the quality of your education?” Also, interviewers should ease into the discussion by asking impersonal questions first. Starting out with a question such as “What do sex workers around here think about using condoms with their clients?” is less threatening than “What happened the last time you asked a client to use a condom?” The interviewer can always ask the second question later, once the informant feels more comfortable. This technique is especially appropriate when the interview requires an informant to reveal highly sensitive, illegal, or stigmatizing information.

Probing

Probing is a highly effective way to stimulate informants to provide more information. This technique encourages informants to say more without the interviewer inserting him- or herself into the narrative. If done skillfully, probing can provide an abundance of rich information that otherwise might have been missed; sometimes it can reveal particularly interesting information that leads to a new line of questioning. However, caution should be taken so that a line of probing does not put words in people's mouths. Rather, the goal is to create an opening for the informant to continue speaking without directing the course of what she or he might say. There are a number of commonly-used ways to probe, some of which are discussed here in more detail.

The “Uh-huh” Probe

It is easy to encourage an informant to continue speaking with the simple use of affirmative comments, like “Uh-huh” or “OK.” These neutral comments by the interviewer allow the informant to

know that she or he is listening, and would like the informant to continue talking. In addition to the extra information that can be gathered, this simple technique—demonstrating an interest in what the informant is saying—also serves to build rapport.

The “Tell-Me-More” Probe

One of the easiest probe techniques to use is the “tell-me-more” technique, in which the interviewer simply asks the informant to elaborate on the previous comment. Variations on this probe include “What exactly do you mean by that?” and “Could you say more about that?” For example, if an interviewer wants to know about alcohol use and sexual behavior among young men, the discussion might go like this:

Interviewer: “Do you drink alcohol?”

Informant: “Yes.”

Interviewer: “Do you drink often, like every day, every afternoon and evening?”

Informant: “Yes, probably.”

Interviewer: “And after you’ve had several drinks, it’s typical for you to find a woman?”

Informant: “Yes, I guess so.”

In this example, the interviewer is essentially answering the question for the informant. A more effective approach would be something like this:

Interviewer: “Do you drink alcohol?”

Informant: “Yes.”

Interviewer: “What do you usually drink?”

Informant: “Oh, I like beer the best. When I go to bars, I usually drink beer. Sometimes with friends we drink palm wine. Last night, I went out to a bar with my friends.”

Interviewer: [Probe] “Can you tell me about that evening?”

In the first version, the interviewer is directing the course of the conversation, or “leading” the informant. In the second example, the interviewer lets the informant tell his own story, which results in a much richer account of his experiences from his own point of view.

The Echo Probe

Another effective probing technique is the “echo probe,” in which the interviewer repeats the last thing an informant said. The echoing probe encourages the informant to continue with the story. This method is particularly useful when informants are explaining a process or an event. For example, if a recent bride is being interviewed about wedding customs, the interviewer may ask, “The couple exchanges wedding bands, and the person officiating the ceremony tells the groom to kiss the bride. Then what happens?” The beauty of the echo probe is that the interviewer is able to remain neutral while allowing the informant to continue with his or her explanation.

The Silent Probe

One of the most effective but most difficult probes to use is the “silent probe.” Sometimes interviewers are uncomfortable with silence, and will rush to fill a lapse in the conversation with another question instead of giving informants a chance to think and reflect. Often, silence will prompt an informant to reveal something highly significant or unexpected, resulting in a flow of rich and insightful information that otherwise would not have come out. These tidbits of information are well worth the minor discomfort a few moments of silence may impose.

It is very important that the interviewer remain attuned to the informant when using this probe. An informant naturally looks to the interviewer for guidance throughout the course of a conversation, and the interviewer uses his or her own judgment to determine whether to ask another question or seek more information of the last one. The interviewer can choose to remain silent if using the silent probe, but if the informant is already at the end of a thought and guidance from the interviewer is not forthcoming, the silence can become awkward. This may be a temporary setback, but it may also result in the interviewer’s loss of credibility with the informant.

Summarizing

Summarizing prompts often are used at the end of an interview, or after the informant has given a lengthy or complicated answer to a question. By summarizing the response, the interviewer can make sure she or he properly captured the content and meaning of an informant's narrative. For example:

Interviewer: "I understand that you are telling me that antiretroviral therapy tracking forms are processed in this way [description of process repeated]. Is this correct?"

The informant can then confirm whether the information is accurate.

Extreme caution must be taken, however, so that assumptions are not made about an informant's meaning, or that their words are not reinterpreted to fit some preconceived notion of what the answer should be. These kinds of presumptions are dangerous (and often wrong), and can be highly insulting to the person being interviewed, as the following example of an interview with a sex worker shows:

Interviewer: "OK, so what I heard you say is that sex work is dangerous and hard work, and your clients are rough and abusive."

Informant: "Well, sometimes they can be abusive but most of them treat me fine."

Interviewer: "OK, so a few are nice, but most of them are pretty violent, right?"

Informant: (annoyed). "No, that's not what I said. I said that every once in a while, a client can get rough, but that most of them don't give me any trouble."

This example shows how the interviewer can completely change the meaning of the given response if care is not taken to interpret it accurately. If this happens, summarizing is a technique that allows the interviewer to correct any misunderstandings.²

The Importance of Interview Language and Structure

When people are asked to give their time to talk about their lives, it is important for the interviewer

to treat that time with respect. That means choosing words and questions carefully. There are several simple ways this can be done throughout the interview process:

- When designing the interview guide, the questions should be focused on a few big issues. Being clear about the most needed information and staying on track will help to ensure that something valuable comes from the data gathered.
- The questions asked should all be necessary ones. If the interviewer cannot provide a satisfactory response to the question: "Why did you ask that?," then the question shouldn't be asked.
- During the interview, the interviewer should listen carefully to what the informant says, as well as pay attention to his or her word choice, as both have bearing on the meaning of an answer. Informants may choose specific words to regulate how fully they answer the question, sometimes using vague language to ensure their answer remains polite or respectful of cultural norms. For example, in response to a question about spousal support for HIV testing, a female respondent might answer that "My husband didn't stop me." Phrasing an answer in this way does not really answer the question of spousal support, only that the spouse wasn't actively preventing the woman from getting tested. Thus, it is important to be attentive, to make the interview questions clear in terms of what is being asked, and to think about what follow-up questions and probes to use to elicit the desired information.
- Listening to the language respondents use is also important because any cultural or professional group tends to have "code" or "shorthand" words and expressions that represent larger ideas and phenomena. For example, in some communities, using the word "friend" when referring to a member of the opposite sex could mean sexual partner. Depending on the topic of research, clarifying what is meant by the word "friend" could be an essential component of the interview.
- When interviewing on sensitive subjects or topics that are politically or emotionally charged, it is possible that awkward or tense moments might occur. This might happen if the informant is talk-

ing about a really personal or stigmatized issue, or if the informant assumes that he or she does not share the interviewer's political or social viewpoint on a topic. At these times, it is important for the interviewer to remain professional and keep his or her composure by listening politely and choosing words carefully.

Making a Record of the Interview

The interviewer must decide whether or not to use recording equipment during an interview. This will depend on the circumstances under which the interview is conducted as well as whether the informant grants permission. Generally, it is a good idea to have a permanent record of the conversation, and to not rely on memory alone.

However, there are times when it is not feasible to record. For example, an informant might not be comfortable with recording, especially when sensitive topics are being discussed. This particular problem can often be ameliorated by not starting the recorder immediately when the interview begins but rather easing into it as the informant becomes more comfortable, or by giving the informant control of the device to stop it whenever she or he feels the

need. Further, when the interview is recorded, it is a good idea not to rush to stop the recorder at the end. Sometimes the informant has more to say, and valuable information often comes out when the perceived pressure of the interview is gone.

Other instances that might make recording an interview problematic include ambient noise that could make hearing the played-back conversation difficult, or if time does not allow for transcribing the entire interview.

Regardless of whether the interview is recorded, it is very important that the interviewer take notes for unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews. It should be observed that, as with a sound recording, the interviewer must seek the informant's permission to take notes of the conversation. In taking notes, the interviewer avoids losing a lot of data, especially in the event that the recording device fails. Additionally, notes can provide a lot of additional contextual information about the interview, if the interview itself is captured by the recording device. Interviewer's notes can also be used to create an interview summary if full transcripts are not produced.

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Resource List

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