Introducing qualitative research interviews
Learning Objectives

Overall by the end of the session users should be able to:

• Understand what a qualitative interview is, including different types and characteristics.

• Formulate open questions, avoid closed, leading and problem questions, and list their advantages and disadvantages.

• Formulate a basic topic guide for a qualitative interview.

• Understand the concept of active listening and apply this to interviewing technique.
Aims of qualitative interviews

• To obtain in-depth and contextual information about an individual’s experiences, beliefs, perceptions, motivations or values

• To explore reasons, opinions and attitudes behind respondents’ answers through asking probing questions to gain a deeper understanding/ more information and explanation
Different types of qualitative interviews

• There are a number of different types of qualitative research interviews; semi-structured and in-depth being the most commonly discussed

• In-depth can include different types such as life histories and critical incidence interviews
Characteristics of a qualitative research interview

• Face-to-face conversation to explore a topic or issue in depth

• Interaction generates data rather than predetermined set of questions

• Some variation in how structured the interview is but there is always some flexibility

• Use open ended not closed questions

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Examples of closed questions

• Closed question require a limited or closed response

• Often used in questionnaires

• Responses involve yes/no or how much of something, or basic demographics

• Within closed questions are assumptions made by researchers about what is important to the topic
Some examples of closed questions

• How many times did you go to the clinic last year?
• How often did you go to treat diarrhoea?
• Is malaria a problem in your village?
• How many children do you have?
• Where do you take your children when they are sick?
Open questions

• These are the types of questions used in qualitative research interviews and focus group discussions

• They require explanatory and descriptive responses

• The responses are expressed in people’s own words and are prompted by questions which usually use the following words: what; where; why; how; who; when
Examples of open questions

• What happens if someone in your family is sick?

• Where do you take your children if they become sick?

• Can you tell me about your experiences of being sick recently?

• You said HIV is a problem in the village why do you think this is the case?

• How do you feel about the quality of the health services you are able to access?
Tips for avoiding leading and judgmental questions

• Ensure participants are allowed to answer questions in their own words, with their own views, values and experiences

• Try to be mindful and reflective of how you are phasing questions and ensure that you are not allowing your own views to shape participants own responses

• Above all remain OPEN MINDED and be mindful of unexpected responses
Examples of leading questions to avoid

• Why do you think breast milk is good for your baby?

• Why do you think the 3 food groups are good for your child?

• Don’t you think you are lucky to have a clinic in your area?

• Do you use mosquito nets to avoid getting malaria?

• Why did you go to the clinic so late?

• Why is it unhygienic not to use a toilet?

• You must have been very worried when you were diagnosed with TB
Alternatives to leading questions

• What do you feel about breast feeding?
• What type of food do you think is good for your child?
• What do you think about the clinic in your area?
• Why would you use a mosquito net if you had one?
• Why did you decide to go to the clinic at that time?
• What sort of purpose or use do you think a toilet has?
• How did you feel when you were diagnosed with TB
Probing

- Probes allow researchers to build further on responses provided by participants in both interviews and focus group discussions.

- Depends heavily on researchers' listening and communication skills.

- Questions are not predetermined, but formulated as responses to points and issues raised.

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Examples of probes

• These can include questions using key words such as when, who, what, why, where and how to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses

• Probes can also be silent, with the researcher remaining silent to provide space for the participant to elaborate

• Probes can also involve echoing the participants last comment and then asking the participant to continue e.g. your child was diagnosed with malaria, then what happened?
Prompting

• Questions that invite the interviewee to consider issues introduced by the interviewer rather than the interviewee – e.g. sub-topics/ issues on checklist

• Need to be used sparingly and with a light touch to avoid giving undue emphasis to researcher’s concerns and perspectives
Introducing topic guides

• Flexible tool or aide memoire used for conducting a qualitative interview (and FGD)

• Sets out key topics and issues to be covered, but does not impose a fixed structure

• Adaptable and iteratively developed – i.e. new issues arising can be added

• Flexibly used – topics don’t have to be covered in the order that they appear on the guide

• Also acts as a briefing document, starting point for analysis, assists with accountable presentation of findings

• Can phrase questions but doesn’t have to
Developing a topic guide

- Outline key issues and sub-issues
- Consider probing questions for each issue, to be used if information does not come spontaneously
- The sequence of the topics moves from the general to the specific, from ‘easy’ to more ‘difficult’ questions, chronologically if relevant
- Usually wrap up by asking for suggestions for services/policy/ways forward, offering opportunity for interviewee to ask questions, seeking overall summary of perceptions or experiences
- Use simple, clear, neutral language
- Do not have several parts to each question
- Do not try to cover too many issues
Considering key skills for a qualitative researcher

• Knowing what you want to find out

• Active listening

• Question phrasing: questions should be open ended, neutral, sensitively phrased and clear to the interviewee (Patton, 1987)

• Probing

• Expressing interest and attention, especially using body language, without commenting on answers

• Sensitivity to body language and tone of voice
Preparation for an interview

• One way to prepare for a qualitative interview is through undertaking a listening exercise. To do this you need to undertake the following steps:

• You need to sit with another person and decide who will be the listener and who will be the talker

• **Part 1:**

• Sit back to back so you cannot see each other. The talker must talk on a topic of their choice for 2 minutes. The listener cannot interrupt or take notes, but must simply sit and listen
Listening exercise

• **Part 2:**

  • Sit face to face so that you can see each other. The talker must talk on another topic of their choice for 2 minutes. The listener cannot interrupt or take notes, but must simply sit and listen.

• **Part 3:**

  • Sit face to face so that you can see each other. The talker must talk on yet another topic of their choice for 2 minutes. The listener cannot take notes. However, the listener can interrupt, ask questions and clarify points.
Listening exercise

- **Part 4: Analysis and feedback**

- Discuss how it felt at the different stages.

- How easy was it for the talker to talk in the different parts?

- Which part was easiest and why?

- What can the listener remember the most clearly? Why?

- How do the physical set up of the different exchanges; facial expressions and body language affect the interaction? Why?
Do’s and don’t of qualitative interviews

• **DO:**
  - Establish that there are no wrong answers
  - Allow participants time to reply
  - Establish a private and safe environment

• **DON’T**
  - Assume you understand without probing
  - Ask leading or judgmental questions
  - Interrupt or finish answers
Steps for undertaking a qualitative interview

• Arrival – rapport building

• Introducing the topic – informed consent

• Beginning the interview – non-sensitive background information

• During the interview – guided exploration of the topic

• Ending the interview – suggest interview is winding down, give opportunity for interviewee to introduce any outstanding issues/ask questions

• After the interview – thanking, reassurances about confidentiality, ensure interviewee leaves feeling comfortable
References


References


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References


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