

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



Examples of closed questions

- Closed questions 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 phrasing 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 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



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

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