



# Interviewing in Qualitative Research

## Chapter Summary

### Introduction

Interviewing in qualitative research is much like good conversation. It is the process of extracting people's experiences, describing how they felt about them and how they affected their lives. It is the most widely used method in qualitative research. It is flexible, inexpensive, and does not interfere with the researcher's life the way that ethnography does.

This chapter looks at qualitative interviewing and how it compares to other types of collecting evidence in research, particularly structured interviewing and ethnography. It considers the process of conducting a qualitative interview, and best strategies for it. The chapter also looks at focus groups as a type of qualitative interviewing, and discusses the use of qualitative interviewing in feminist research.

### Differences between Structured and Qualitative Research Interviews

*Qualitative interview* is a broad term uniting **semi-structured** and **unstructured** interviews. Qualitative interviewing is less structured and more likely to evolve as a natural conversation; it is often conducted in the form of respondents narrating their personal experiences or life histories.

Qualitative interviews can be part of ethnography but can also be conducted independently. Since they can be conducted separately, qualitative interviews are more flexible and less time-consuming than ethnographies, which require total immersion in the field and often totally engross the researcher's life.

While quantitative interviewing is very structured, the **classic qualitative interview** is typically conducted as a freely-developing conversation, where the interviewer encourages the respondent to talk and is interested in respondent's perspective on life and the topic of the interview. Respondents' digressions from the main interview topic are not problematic; they are actually seen as a source of additional contextual information, and may reveal interesting points in respondent's views or experiences.

The main differences between qualitative and quantitative interviews are summarized in the table below:

<b>Differences between quantitative and qualitative research interviews</b>		
	Quantitative (structured)	Qualitative (unstructured)
Purpose	Structured interviewing is used heavily in quantitative research in order to show <b>reliability</b> of the data gathered and thereby validate measurement of the key concepts.	Qualitative interviewing is aimed at an open free-flowing collection of data that allows for <b>flexibility</b> to adapt to the research project as a particular set of social interactions are investigated.
Aim	Aim is to <b>measure</b> and quantify the research data related to predetermined research questions	Interest in <b>interviewee's perspective</b>
Variability in questions	<b>Discouraged</b> because it interferes with the ability to compare answers and measure the concepts	<b>Encouraged</b> as a specific goal to enhance the opportunity to grasp what the interviewee sees as relevant and important
Direction of interview	<b>Predetermined</b> to standardize answer format for later comparison	<b>Follows</b> the direction that comes from the <b>interviewee</b> . Allows the interviewee to go off on tangents to accommodate emergent themes.
Interview depth	<b>Specific</b> answer choice to ease coding	Rich, detailed ( <b>free-flowing</b> ) answers
Number of interviews	Once	Several

### **Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing**

The two types of qualitative interviews are unstructured and semi-structured interviews.

- **Unstructured interviews** are almost completely interviewee driven. The interviewer may use memory aids or a small set of prompts to get the interview started. The interview then develops in a conversation style and further inquiries about the issues are raised by the interviewer in the process of conversation.
- **Semi-structured interviews** are also held in the form of a conversation, but the researcher uses an *interview guide* with a series of questions to address specific issues. The interviewee may still answer any way he or she wishes. The order of questions may change and the new questions may be inserted as probes in response to what an interviewee says, but there is a set of similar (or the same) questions addressed to all respondents, so the answers across interviews are more comparable than in unstructured interviews.

The process of qualitative interviewing is designed to bring out the issues and social interactions stemming from the experience of the interviewee, and as interpreted by the interviewee. There is no hypothesis testing. Although both unstructured and structured interviews are referred to as in-depth interviewing, their results may differ in the depth and scope of the issues covered.

Choosing between the unstructured and semi-structured interviews may hinge on the following:

- Researchers who believe that any guide will impact what the interviewees say will prefer unstructured interviews, but they ensure that a broad research topic was originally decided upon.
- A clear focus on a topic of interest will tend to lead to semi-structured interviews. The identified issues of interest can be addressed.
- Where more than one interviewer is used, semi-structured interviewing will assist with later comparison of the data gathered. It reduces the reactivity to the interviewer.

- Where there are several interviewees, semi-structured interviewing will ease comparison of the data collected from different interviewees.

### ***Preparing an Interview Guide***

An interview guide for unstructured interviewing is simply a short list of issues that the researcher would like to investigate, and it is much less elaborate than a structured interview schedule.

**Qualitative interview guide** may simply consist of memory prompts so the key issue is not forgotten as the interview moves along and divergent themes emerge. In the semi-structured interview it may include a longer list of issues to be addressed or actual questions to be asked.

Questions in an interview guide are rooted in the researcher's interest in a particular issue. Researchers must keep their minds open to possible variations in research questions to avoid closing off other issues that are relevant to the social situation they are studying. The very nature of qualitative research lays in inquisitive exploration of social settings. For example, the life history and narrative interviews have gained popularity as methods for identifying how events unfold and interrelate over long periods of time.

While being a loose interview guide, the guide should:

- establish some degree of loose order to the questioning process;
- include *only broad questions* related to the research issues;
- use language that is understood by the participants;
- avoid leading questions;
- include prompts to gather further information about the participant helping to contextualize the data.

Before the interview, the interviewer should:

- Familiarize him- or herself with the subject's social setting to contextualize the data;
- Have a good tape recorder and use it;
- Use a quiet and private setting for interviews;
- Use good interview techniques.

After the interview, the interviewer notes the following:

- how the interview went;
- where the interview was conducted;
- other feelings and issues raised during the interview;
- what was going on around the interview.

### ***Kinds of Questions***

Interviewing is a subtle balance of engaging the interviewee with a primary intent to listen. The interviewer must pay attention to the subtleties of the interviewee's words and behaviours to avoid bringing anxiety to the interviewee. Questions tend to move from factual questions, through thoughts and feelings about the experience, to finally reflection on the processes and summing up. The bulk of questioning revolves around the thoughts and feelings area.

There several types of questions that can be asked in a qualitative in-depth interview:

- *Introducing questions:* Broad, open-ended questions to start a conversation. They should be general and non-threatening, to start the conversation on the friendly note; e.g., "I want to ask you about your career in sports and how it developed."
- *Follow-up questions:* Questions that rephrase the interviewee's answer and ask them to elaborate on the answer; e.g., "When you said that sports involves a lot of competition, what kinds of competition do you mean?"

- *Probing questions:* These are short general questions inviting the respondent to reflect more deeply on what they already said without particular reference to details; e.g., “What do you mean by this?” “Can you give me an example?” “How so?”
- *Specifying questions:* Clarifying what occurred after an event that the respondent describes, these are factual questions; e.g., “After you lost that tournament, what happened?”
- *Direct questions:* Questions about the interviewee’s thoughts and attitudes to what has been described; e.g., “And how did you react to your victory?”
- *Indirect questions:* Questions about the interviewee’s view about the perception of others: e.g., “Do you think others in the team approved of your behaviour?”
- *Structuring questions:* Questions indicating a shift to a different topic/issue: e.g., “And now let’s talk about your training practices.”
- *Silence:* Pause to allow interviewee to reflect and further explain an answer.
- *Interpreting questions:* Getting clarification that you have interpreted an answer properly, e.g., “Is it fair to say that competition for you is a way of self-realization?”

Basically the main topics covered in the interview refer to the following:

- Values: of the interviewees and the groups being researched;
- Beliefs: of the interviewees and the groups being researched;
- Behaviour: of the interviewees and others in the groups being researched;
- Roles (formal and informal): of the interviewees and others;
- Relationships: of the interviewees and others;
- Places;
- Emotions: of the participants and others;
- Encounters;
- Stories.

The interviewer must be prepared to adjust the questions from one type to another, and it is best to avoid overtly general questions which create confusion and need to be clarified anyway. *Vignettes* are questions where the researcher presents a scenario and asks the interviewee what they think and feel people would do, and they might serve as invitation to the respondent to reflect more on his or her position. They can be used with the above types of questions to draw out how behaviour is impacted by particular contexts.

### ***Recording and Transcribing***

Usually the researcher asks the interviewee for permission to record the interview. Recording has several advantages:

- It reduces the interviewers need for writing, which would interfere with the interview process;
- It captures all the details of what was said verbatim, which allows for thorough analysis by the researcher or secondary analysis by other researchers later;
- It allows for reuse of the data in ways not planned;
- It allows the interview to be transcribed as a whole or in parts only.

Negative aspects of recording are the following:

- Cost of equipment;
- Some interviewees may be uncomfortable with a recorder and not be completely open;
- Malfunctions of equipment bring interruptions to the process;
- It takes five to six hours to transcribe one hour of interview;
- Transcription by trained transcribers may be expensive;

- Research analysis may become delayed if the researcher does the transcribing herself; experts suggest to start the analysis in the process of research before the end of transcription;
- Transcription by others may lead to errors in transcription.

### ***Flexibility in the Interview***

Flexibility in qualitative interview is very important and captures one of the advantages of qualitative research. The researcher should be flexible to alter the question order to adapt to the storyline the interviewee. Further, the researcher must be able to adjust to situations where the recording equipment doesn't work, the interviewee does not wish to be recorded, or the interviewee continues to talk after the recording has stopped. Being responsive to these situations and finding a solution enhances the quality of in-depth interview.

### **Focus Groups**

**Focus groups** are an interview with a group of four or more people who can interact with one another and the interviewer. The interviewer is more of a **moderator** who guides the discussion session rather than conduct a formal interview. This allows the researcher to explore why people feel a particular way about an issue because the individuals in the focus group can add comments to what another person says and probe another's thoughts. This may include challenging one another's views, an activity that is not typically done in a one-on-one interview. The focus group process is seen as a *naturalistic approach* that explores meanings ascribed to particular circumstances/issues as they are developed within a group. Theories such as symbolic interactionism speak directly to this process as part of social life. The difficulty with this presumption of the created meaning is that the meanings may not exist beyond the duration of the focus group.

### ***Conducting Focus Groups***

The value of focus groups is gaining access to the meanings that develop during the interaction with others rather than in isolation. This implies the need for more than one focus group. Often the researcher is seeking to gather information from a wide range of people (e.g., age, gender, social class). Once the researcher reaches a point where the focus group discussions can be predicted, there is no need to continue with further groups. It is like a *theoretical saturation* point in *grounded theory*.

### ***Size of Groups and Selecting Participants***

Small groups of six to ten people are recommended. The group should be smaller as the topic increases in controversy, complexity, or emotionality. The researcher may wish to grasp the thoughts of a wide range of people, but the groups may need to be designed to reflect particular demographics for comparison to other groups. The focus group may be made up of strangers or a pre-existing group. The stranger focus group avoids skewed data due to absence of the pre-existing patterns of interaction, social statuses, or understated assumptions. The pre-existing, or natural, group may be valuable if social interaction or status is a key concept being studied.

### ***Asking Questions and Level of Moderator Involvement***

The moderator wants to maintain an open mind-set starting with a few broad questions, asking clarifying questions or refocusing the group if necessary. The style of moderating depends on the nature of the research topic (e.g., embarrassing topics require more questions), on the level of interest among the participants (low interest requires more questions), and on the composition of the group (strangers may require more moderation).

### ***Recording and Transcription***

Recording (video or audio) is required because the moderator will not be able to stop the flow of discussions from several people at once and then regain the discussion momentum. Transcription of the focus groups takes much longer because of the difficulty with distinguishing voices and there may be talk-over between subjects.

### ***Group Interaction in Focus Group Sessions***

Interaction between group members must be addressed. It may be categorized as *complimentary* or *argumentative*. *Complimentary interaction* occurs when the participants build on remarks of others. *Argumentative interaction* does not require hostility; it may reflect a simple disagreement. Analyzing the way in which the focus group responds provides more meaningful data on feelings about particular circumstances and why certain beliefs are held by participants.

### ***Limitations of Focus Groups***

The main advantage of the focus groups is that they illustrate how a shared meaning is created during the process of interaction. However, focus groups also have some drawbacks:

- The researcher has less control over the process: the question of balance between participants' and the researcher's control is delicate. Feminist scholars welcome more control from participants;
- Focus groups produce large amounts of data and transcribing difficulties;
- Analysis of the developing themes and overlapping patterns of interaction is very difficult;
- Focus groups are difficult to arrange: motivation for participation?
- Individual personality traits (e.g., overbearing, quiet) may be difficult to manage;
- The degree of group cohesion at the start of the focus group;
- Variation between individual and perceived socially acceptable answers (although this discrepancy may become the area of interest);
- Difficult when the topics are sensitive due to intimate issues, when social hierarchy or strongly opposing positions exist.

### **Online Interviews and Focus Groups**

These are easier to organize assuming the necessary computer applications and skills are present for potential participants.

#### ***Online Qualitative Interviews***

These may be conducted by email or directly through chat. The lack of visual and auditory cues may skew the data. Discrepancies between what is said and physical response cannot be identified and addressed. Online experience has its own presentation fronts that are harder to discern. Now online video interviews through media like Skype are more popular. Their advantage is an immediate reaction like in personal interview, and the possibility to record video and audio files. This allows the interviewer to see the reaction of the person to the questions and adjust the interview in the process.

#### ***Online Focus Groups***

Online focus groups are gaining popularity at the moment over the online personal typed interviews. They are organized in the following way:

- Should be six to eight participants.
- An opening message is sent establishing how the process will work.

- Most participants tend to respond quickly to what appears on the screen.
- Participants' typing skills are required.

The table below lists advantages and disadvantages of the typed online interviews versus face-to-face personal interviews.

<b>Online typed interviewing (vs. face-to-face)</b>	
<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Less expensive	Take longer than face-to-face
Inaccessible and reluctant may participate	Online access and skills are required
Participant can review what is written	Spontaneity may be lost
No discomfort to participants	Hard to establish rapport
Anonymity – reduces potential embarrassment	Increased possibility of staged performance by participant
Safe for researchers	Higher non-response rates
Less affected by obvious social status	Probing is harder
No transcribing costs for audio recording	Loss of online connection is a problem
Anonymity – safe environment for disclosure	Distracted participants go undetected
Equalizes conversations between quiet and dominating personalities	Considerable cost, time, and skill commitment due to technology
	No body language to assist the interviewer

### **Feminism and Interviewing in Qualitative Research**

Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing is common in feminist research. It keeps the interviewer open to the varying goals of feminism. A norm has been established of developing significant rapport, exchanging information, standing in the shoes of the interviewee, and promoting equality. Still, the researcher does come with a set of individual biases and perceptions that will likely influence, to some degree, the analysis of collected data.

#### ***Focus Group as a Feminist Method***

This method has grown in application because (1) the research groups tend to be selected from naturally-occurring groups that are already part of their current life, (2) the process mirrors real-life where the individual experience is rooted in a social context, and (3) the participants are not subjugated to the researcher.

### **Qualitative Interviewing (without Immersion in a Social Setting) versus Ethnography**

What are the differences between ethnography and qualitative interviewing? Basic differences are that qualitative interviews may or may not be part of ethnography. The advantages of ethnography over qualitative interviewing and vice versa are summarized in the table below.

Advantages of Ethnography over Qualitative Interviews	Advantages of Qualitative Interviewing over Ethnography
<p><i>Seeing the world through the eyes of other</i> (because of longer immersion)</p> <p><i>Learn local language</i> (learning the local slang is necessary to understand the culture)</p> <p><i>Exposes things that are taken for granted</i> (interviewees might not discuss taken-for-granted meanings)</p> <p><i>Tends to expose deviant activities easier</i> (over longer and more in-depth observation can uncover deviance and crime)</p> <p><i>Contextualizes behaviour</i> (socializing with people in different setting and over time improves understanding of context)</p> <p><i>Naturalistic emphasis</i> (ethnographer meets participants in their natural environment)</p>	<p><i>Exposing issues resistant to observation</i> (some issues, e.g., domestic violence cannot be exposed with observation, only by questioning)</p> <p><i>Reflection on past and discussing future plans</i> (past events can be reconstructed in detail only by interviewing)</p> <p><i>Reactive effects are lower</i> (longer ethnography makes people accustomed to researcher's presence)</p> <p><i>Less intrusive in people's lives</i> (ethnography takes more of the participants' time)</p> <p><i>Easier to conduct longitudinal research</i> (repeat interviews easier to organize than a long ethnography)</p> <p><i>Wider coverage of people and situations to research</i> (ethnography limits to narrower circles of people)</p> <p><i>Specific focus of research</i> (interviews better suited to focus on particular issue)</p>

Overall, the chapter outlines the advantages of qualitative interviewing and its limitations and discussed the conduct of focus groups as a type of qualitative research.

## Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Differentiate between the types of qualitative interviews—*classical*, *life history*, and *oral histories*—from the full-blown ethnography
- Understand the main distinctions between *structured* (quantitative) and *unstructured* (qualitative) interviewing. The main goal of qualitative interviews is to receive in-depth accounts of people's lives and see how they analyze their experiences
- Being able to develop a starting research question and compose *the interview guide* for both unstructured and semi-structured qualitative interviews
- Know and comprehend the main requirements for conducting a good qualitative interview: be a good listener, remain gentle, sensitive and open, steering and flexible. Be able to use various types of questions in qualitative interviews to elucidate respondents' views to the fullest possible extent
- Recognize the advantages of *focus groups* as interviews with quick exchange of information and the best method to formulate a common meaning in the group of people, understand the role of *moderator* in the focus groups, and list the main disadvantages of focus groups compared to other types of qualitative interviewing
- Understanding preferences for qualitative methods among feminist researchers: recognition of rapport, exchange of information, standing in the shoes of the interviewee, and equality



## Media Resources

### Oprah and Elie Wiesel at Auschwitz

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IJ4mpCDVpE>

- What is the difference in impact between the report information based on an in-depth life history interview found at the beginning of the interview and the interview seen later on?
- How much directing do you see in the media interview versus the research based life history interview found at  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAKUXPARvM8> and  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51EuoHyM-Ec&feature=relmfu>
- What is the impact of having photos and movie clips interspersed?

**For a clip of a focus group discussing the issue of race and politics in the United States, in particular Barack Obama's political appeal, see**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGnePpo8JrM>

- On what sort of questions is the moderator relying?
- How is the group cohesion reflected in this video?
- What is the impact of the cameras in the room? Are they forgotten as the group goes forward?
- How can the group be categorized as complementary or argumentative?

### New Smartphone Product Testing: Funny Focus Groups

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8A4yqN4\\_9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8A4yqN4_9A)

- What is the make-up of the group? Who is represented?
- Is there conformity in the group?
- How is disagreement in the room manifested?
- Is this a qualitative interview style?
- Does quantitative assessment come into play in questioning?
- How does the moderator direct the questioning and therefore the findings?

**The Joy of Pitman Shorthand** <http://pitmanshorthand.homestead.com/> and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo3XUObpn6w>

- Pitman shorthand is a 100-year-old style of recording and transcribing focus groups and interviews.
- What are the pros and cons of using this today?
- How would it be valuable to use simultaneously with electronic recording?
- Could it replace electronic recording? Why or why not?