

Semi-Structured Interviews

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Problem

Identification of insights into an issue from the perspective of participants or end-users.

Solution

Semi-structured Interviews are used to gather focused, qualitative textual data. This method offers a balance between the flexibility of an open-ended interview and the focus of a structured ethnographic survey.

Use When

This method is used during both the early and late stages of exploring the research domain

Use For

Clarifying the research domain or the specific research question. This method can uncover rich descriptive data on the personal experiences of participants. Information gathered during semi-structured interviews can move the innovation process from general topics (domains) to more specific insights (factors and variables). It can be used to develop a

preliminary hypothesis, explain relationships and create a foundation for further research.

Process

1) Develop questions

Here are some guidelines for question development:

- **Style:** Use open-ended questions to get lengthy and descriptive answers rather than close-ended questions (those that can be answered with “yes” or “no”).
- **Biases:** Avoid leading questions.
- **Language:** Use terms that participants can understand, given their knowledge, language skills, cultural background, age, gender, etc. Be mindful of the social or cultural contexts of your questions.
- **Concise:** Keep the questions as short and specific as possible. Avoid asking two-in-one questions, such as, “Do you travel by car and by bike?”
- **Frame:** Avoid questions with a strong positive or negative association. Avoid phrasing questions as negatives (e.g., “How don’t you like to get to work?”).

2) Materials

Interview guide: Determine the order of the questions. There is some disagreement over whether it is better to start with non-sensitive, less important questions or to ask the most important questions first, in case participants tire of the interview. Either way, start with some warm-up questions to help the participant feel comfortable.

When ordering questions:

- Start with earlier events and move on to more recent events;

- Begin with simpler topics and move to those that are more complex;
- Group questions on each domain/topic together;
- Within domains, start with the most concrete issues and move to the more abstract; and
- Start with the least-sensitive questions and move to most sensitive.

Consent forms: Prepare and have copies ready to be signed.

Recording devices: Determine how information will be recorded.

3) **Demographics** – Identify participants and interviewers. Determine if individual or group interviews will be conducted.

4) **Session Structure**

- Introduce yourself, explain the research and get the participant's consent (either written or videotaped). If any recording devices are being used, point them out to the participant and make sure they're working.
- Ask warm-up or demographic questions first; then, using the interview guide, move on to more focused questions. Allow flexibility for dialogue.

Here are some other tips to keep in mind during the interview.

- Use probing questions to gather as much information as possible.
- Try not to interrupt participants; make a note and come back to the idea later.
- If a participant gives an answer relating to a question you have not yet asked, record the answer and avoid repeating the question later.
- Keep the conversation focused on the main domains, avoiding tangents. Time is limited, so completing the entire interview

guide may not be necessary. Instead, spend time on key factors, including what the participant is interested in speaking about.

- If time permits, ask the participant if there is anything else they'd like to share. Turning off the recording device before asking this question may lead to a different response.

5) **Record** – Immediately after the interview, take the time to check that the recording device was functioning properly throughout, and review your notes to fill in any gaps or add comments.

6) **Analysis** – Review interview responses and observational data for insights and patterns. A computer database, such as Ethnograph or others, may be used to analyze patterns and relationships.

7) **Report** – The research can either end at this point with a report on the data analysis, or it can be used to build out an ethnographic survey or other qualitative or quantitative research methods.

Examples:

Questions Here are some examples of actual questions from a semi-structured interview (LeCompte, Schensul, 1999). Some key phrases are highlighted in bold. <i>RESPONDENT'S OPINIONS ABOUT WORKING WOMEN</i> » What is your opinion of working women in Mauritius? » What major changes do you perceive in the lifestyle of working women in Mauritius? » How would you describe a working woman's relationship with her family? » How does your family feel about your work? <i>QUESTIONS ON RESPONDENT'S WORK</i> » What are your feelings about your work? » Please, could you describe to me one of your typical working days? » Could you tell me what positive/negative impacts your work has had on your life?	Probes Here are some different types of probes: » Detail-oriented Probes: 'When did that happen?' 'Who else was involved?' 'Where were you during that time?' » Elaboration Probes: 'Could you tell me more about that?' 'Why exactly do you feel that way?' » Clarification probes: 'You said the program is a "success". What do you mean by "success"?'' » Silent Probe: Remaining silent and waiting for the participant to continue, perhaps with a simple nod. » Uh-huh Probe: Encouraging a participant to continue by making affirmative but neutral comments, like 'Uh-huh.' or 'Yes, I see.' » Echo Probe: Simply repeating the last thing the participant said and asking them to continue. Especially good when a process or event is being described. 'I see. So first you pick up your mail. Then what do you do?'
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Variations

This is a method that can be adapted to many different contexts: academic, cultural, corporate, design, etc. The context of use will determine the domains chosen, the hypothesis tested, and the types of questions asked. Semistructured interviews can also be conducted as group interviews.

References

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About this site

This compilation of concise descriptions of research methods and techniques, accompanied by references for further reading, is intended to support research teams as they incorporate various multidisciplinary research methods and techniques.

The starting points for this review were texts recommended by faculty, followed by searches for academic journals via google scholar. Content was primarily inspired by ethnography, psychology, and human-computer interaction. While there are numerous methods and techniques listed, the review is by no means exhaustive and is intended to continually evolve