

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Guide to Design and
Implementation

Revised and Expanded from
*Qualitative Research and
Case Study Applications in
Education*

Sharan B. Merriam



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CHAPTER FIVE

CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWS

A colleague and I were collecting data for a study of older adult learning in Malaysia. The headman of a rural village escorted us to the home of an elderly woman who had agreed to talk with us. As we approached her home, a crowd of villagers gathered around us and one young man asked, "Are you from CNN? We want to be interviewed too." Interviewing has so pervaded popular media that we have become "the 'interview society,' where everyone gets interviewed and gets a moment in the sun" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 695). Talk shows, the Internet, evening news, and print media rely on interviews to make their story. Although interviewing is a common activity throughout our culture, as a data collection technique in social science research, interviewing is a systematic activity that you can learn to do well. In this chapter I explore interviewing as a data collection technique in qualitative research. I discuss several types of interviews in the chapter. Other topics include asking good questions, beginning the interview, recording and evaluating interview data, and the nature of the interaction between interviewer and respondent.

INTERVIEW DATA

In all forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews. DeMarrais (2004) defines an interview as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (p. 55). The most common form of interview is

the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another. Group or collective formats can also be used to obtain data. Both person-to-person and group interviews can be defined as a conversation—but a “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970, p. 136). The main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information. The researcher wants to find out what is “in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). As Patton explains:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things.

The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective. (pp. 340–341)

Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate. For example, school psychologists might be interested in the reaction of students who witnessed a teacher being attacked at school. Likewise, a catastrophic event such as a nuclear accident or natural disaster cannot be replicated, but its effects on a community might be the focus of a qualitative case study. Interviewing is also the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals, as Bateson (1990) did in interviewing five women for her book, *Composing a Life*. Conversely, interviewing can be used to collect data from a large number of people representing a broad range of ideas. Terkel’s (2001) book on the mystery of death and dying is based on dozens of interviews with people from all walks of life. In short, the decision to use interviewing as the primary mode of data collection should be based on the kind of information needed and whether interviewing is the best way to get it. Dexter (1970) summarizes when to use interviewing: “Interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection when . . . it will get better data or more data or data at less cost than other tactics!” (p. 11). I would add that interviewing is sometimes the *only* way to get data.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

There are a number of ways different types of interviews can be categorized. In this section I first discuss types of interviews in terms of the amount of structure, followed by different types of interviews emanating from different theoretical stances. I also discuss focus group and electronic interviewing.

BY STRUCTURE

The most common way of deciding which type of interview to use is by determining the amount of structure desired. Table 5.1 presents three types of interviews, which vary according to the amount of structure inherent in the interview. If placed on a

TABLE 5.1. INTERVIEW STRUCTURE CONTINUUM.

<i>Highly Structured/ Standardized</i>	<i>Semistructured</i>	<i>Unstructured/Informal</i>
• Wording of questions is predetermined • Order of questions is predetermined • Interview is oral form of a written survey • In qualitative studies, usually used to obtain demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, education, etc.) • Examples: U.S. Census Bureau survey, marketing surveys	• Interview guide includes a mix of more and less structured questions • All questions used flexibly • Usually specific data required from all respondents • Largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored • No predetermined wording or order	• Open-ended questions • Flexible, exploratory • More like a conversation • Used when researcher does not know enough about phenomenon to ask relevant questions • Goal is learning from this interview to formulate questions for later interviews • Used primarily in ethnography, participant observation, and case study

continuum, the range of structure varies from highly structured, questionnaire-driven interviews to unstructured, open-ended, conversational formats. In *highly structured* interviews, sometimes called standardized interviews, questions and the order in which they are asked are determined ahead of time.

The most structured interview is actually an oral form of the written survey. The U.S. Census Bureau and marketing surveys are good examples of oral surveys. The problem with using a highly structured interview in qualitative research is that rigidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow you to access participants' perspectives and understandings of the world. Instead, you get reactions to the investigator's preconceived notions of the world. Such an interview is also based on the shaky assumptions that respondents share a common vocabulary and that the questions will be interpreted the same by all respondents. The major use of this highly structured format in qualitative research is to gather common sociodemographic data from respondents. That is, you may want to know everyone's age, income, history of employment, marital status, level of formal education, and so on. You may also want everyone to respond to a particular statement or to define a particular concept or term.

For the most part, however, interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured. Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways. Your questions thus need to be more open-ended. A less structured alternative is the *semistructured* interview. As is illustrated in Table 5.1, the semistructured interview is in the middle, between structured and unstructured. In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.

The third type of interview is one that is *unstructured* and informal. These are particularly useful when the researcher

does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions. Thus there is no predetermined set of questions, and the interview is essentially exploratory. One of the goals of the unstructured interview is, in fact, learning enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews. Thus the unstructured interview is often used in conjunction with participant observation in the early stages of a qualitative study. It takes a skilled researcher to handle the great flexibility demanded by the unstructured interview. Insights and understanding can be obtained in this approach, but at the same time an interviewer may feel lost in a sea of divergent viewpoints and seemingly unconnected pieces of information. Totally unstructured interviewing is rarely used as the sole means of collecting data in qualitative research. In most studies the researcher can combine all three types of interviewing so that some standardized information is obtained, some of the same open-ended questions are asked of all participants, and some time is spent in an unstructured mode so that fresh insights and new information can emerge.

By way of illustrating the kinds of questions you might ask in each of the types of interviews—highly structured, semistructured, or unstructured—let us suppose you are studying the role of mentoring in the career development of master teachers. In a highly structured interview you might begin by giving each respondent a definition of mentoring and then asking the person to identify someone who is a mentor. In a semistructured interview you would be more likely to ask each teacher to describe his or her understanding of mentoring; or you might ask the teacher to think of someone who is a mentor. In an unstructured interview you might ask the respondent to share how he or she got to be a master teacher. More directly, but still rather unstructured, would be a question about the influences or factors that have helped to shape the respondent's career.

BY PHILOSOPHICAL AND DISCIPLINARY ORIENTATION

As a means of collecting information, interviewing has been with us for centuries. Census taking, surveying, and opinion polling were and still are measurement-oriented forms of interviewing. More informal interpretive interviewing arose in the early decades

of the twentieth century, primarily in sociology (Fontana & Frey, 2005). In the latter decades of the twentieth century into the present day, interviewing is being discussed and analyzed from numerous philosophical perspectives. There is now feminist interviewing, postmodern interviewing, cross-cultural interviewing, and so on.

One of the clearest analyses of the link between philosophical orientation and type of interview is by Roulston (2007). She identifies six conceptions of interviewing, each lodged in a different theoretical framework. Neo-positive interviews are those in which a "skillful interviewer asks good questions, minimizes bias through his/her neutral stance, generates quality data and produces valid findings" (p. 5). What she calls "romantic" conceptions of interviewing are interviews in which the researcher "makes no claim to being objective" (p. 11), analyzes and reveals subjectivities, and strives "to generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing" (p. 9). This type of interview draws from phenomenology, psychoanalysis, feminist research, and psycho-social theories.

Roulston's (2007) third type of interview is constructivist, in which *how* the interview data are constructed receives attention through such tools as discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and conversation analysis. The fourth type of interview in her typology is the postmodern interview. Congruent with postmodern theory, the aim of the interview is not to come up with a single perception of the self, since there is no essential self; rather, there are "various non-unitary performances of selves" and the presentations of these data are via creative performances (p. 21).

The final two types of interviewing, transformative and de-colonizing, share a critical theory philosophical orientation in which issues of power, privilege, and oppression are made visible. In transformative interviewing, the researcher "*intentionally* aims to challenge and change the understandings of participants" (p. 25, *italics in original*). In the de-colonizing interview, concern is with "restorative justice for indigenous peoples" (p. 37); a key to the de-colonizing interview is to privilege an indigenous research agenda that "involves the processes of decolonization, transformation, mobilization, and healing" (p. 32).

Other writers categorize interviews based more on disciplinary perspectives. For example, the “ethnographic” interview from anthropology focuses on culture; that is, the type of information elicited from an interview is data about the culture of a group such as its rites and rituals, myths, hierarchies, heroes, and so on. Spradley’s book, *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979), is considered a classic in the field. A second often discussed disciplinary-based type of interview is the phenomenological interview. Phenomenology is a philosophy that informs all of qualitative research (see Chapter One). However, one could also do a phenomenological study (see Chapter Two), in which case one would do phenomenological interviewing. By this is meant that the researcher attempts to uncover the essence of an individual’s experience; such an interview “focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105). It is common practice in phenomenological research for researchers to write about their own experiences of the phenomenon or to be interviewed by a colleague in order to “bracket” their experiences prior to interviewing others.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Fully a year before the 2008 U.S. presidential election, focus group interviews of voters were being held by candidates’ staffs, by the media, by citizens’ groups, and so on to ferret out voters’ views on issues, policies, and candidates. This is an extension of the widespread use of focus groups in marketing research begun in the 1950s in which businesses test consumer preferences and promote particular products. The use of focus groups as a social science research method can also be traced to the mid-twentieth century and in particular to sociologist Robert K. Merton and associates’ publication of the book, *The Focused Interview* (Merton, Riske, & Kendall, 1956).

As a method of qualitative research data collection, a focus group is an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic (Krueger, 2008; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2006). Since the data obtained from a focus group is socially

constructed within the interaction of the group, a constructivist perspective underlies this data collection procedure. Patton (2002) explains:

Unlike a series of one-on-one interviews, in a focus group participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. However, participants need not agree with each other or reach any kind of consensus. Nor is it necessary for people to disagree. The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others. (p. 386)

The composition of a focus group depends on the topic to be discussed. As with individual interviewing, purposeful sampling should be used to include people who know the most about the topic. Although there are no hard and fast rules about how many to include in a group, most writers suggest somewhere between six and ten participants, preferably people who are strangers to each other. It is also recommended that the moderator/interviewer of the group be familiar with group processes and with the range of possible roles as moderator (Barbour, 2008; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Kleiber, 2004; Morgan, 1988, 2002).

Finally, "focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives—but don't" (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004, p. 65). Obviously, a focus group is a poor choice for topics that are sensitive, highly personal, and culturally inappropriate to talk about in the presence of strangers. Of course it's not always obvious ahead of time how appropriate a topic might be. Crowe (2003) reports successful use of focus groups to create culturally appropriate HIV prevention material for the deaf community. Jowett and O'Toole (2006) report an interesting analysis of two focus groups—one of mature students and their attitude toward participation in higher education, and one of young women and their views of feminism. They found that the mature students' focus group was a failure but the young women's group was a success. The authors had not anticipated "how ingrained the sense of inadequacy is for some people who have felt excluded from education" (p. 462), nor how the power imbalance among members of the mature students group and

between the researcher and the group inhibited participation. Finally, Stewart and Williams (2005) explore the practical and ethical issues of conducting synchronous and asynchronous *online* focus groups.

Thus, as with any other data collection method, focus groups are to be used when this is the best way to get the best data that addresses your research question. And as with any other method, the advantages need to be weighed against the disadvantages; one also needs to develop the skills necessary for using this technique.

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions; asking good questions takes practice. Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions. Not only do you get some practice in interviewing, but you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions, suggested by your respondents, you should have thought to include in the first place.

Different types of questions will yield different information. The questions you ask depend upon the focus of your study. Using the example of mentoring in the career development of master teachers, if you want to know the role mentoring played in career development, you would ask questions about teachers' personal experience with mentoring and probably get a descriptive history. Follow-up questions about how they *felt* about a certain mentoring experience would elicit more affective information. You might also want to know their opinion as to how much influence mentoring has generally in a teacher's career.

The way in which questions are worded is a crucial consideration in extracting the type of information desired. An obvious place to begin is by making certain that what is being asked is clear to the person being interviewed. Questions need to be understood in familiar language. "Using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent's world view, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview. Without sensitivity to the impact of particular words on the person being interviewed, the answer may make no sense at all—or there may be no

answer" (Patton, 2002, p. 312). Avoiding technical jargon and terms and concepts from your particular disciplinary orientation is a good place to begin. In a study of HIV-positive young adults, for example, participants were asked how they made sense of or came to terms with their diagnosis, not how they constructed meaning in the process of perspective transformation (the theoretical framework of the study) (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998).

TYPES OF QUESTIONS, GOOD QUESTIONS, AND QUESTIONS TO AVOID

An interviewer can ask several types of questions to stimulate responses from an interviewee. Patton (2002) suggests six types of questions:

1. Experience and behavior questions—this type of question gets at the things a person does or did, his or her behaviors, actions, and activities. For example, in a study of leadership exhibited by administrators, one could ask, "Tell me about a typical day at work; what are you likely to do first thing in the morning?"
2. Opinion and values questions—here the researcher is interested in a person's beliefs or opinions, what he or she thinks about something. Following the example above of a study of administrators and leadership, one could ask, "What is your opinion as to whether administrators should also be leaders?"
3. Feeling questions—these questions "tap the affective dimension of human life. In asking feeling questions—'how do you feel about that?'—the interviewer is looking for adjective responses: anxious, happy, afraid, intimidated, confident, and so on" (p. 350).
4. Knowledge questions—these questions elicit a participant's actual factual knowledge about a situation.
5. Sensory questions—these are similar to experience and behavior questions but try to elicit more specific data about what is or was seen, heard, touched, and so forth.
6. Background/demographic questions—all interviews contain questions that refer to the particular demographics (age,

income, education, number of years on the job, etc.) of the person being interviewed as relevant to the research study. For example, the age of the respondent may or may not be relevant.

Interestingly, Patton recommends against asking "why" questions because they tend to lead to speculation about causal relationships and they can lead to dead-end responses. Patton recounts an amusing interview with a child in a study of open classrooms. When a first grader responded that her "favorite time in school" was recess, Patton asked her why she liked recess. Her answer was because she could go outside and play on the swings. When he asked, "why" she went outside, the child responded, "Because that's where the swings are!" (p. 365). Although "why" questions can put an end to a line of questioning, it has been my experience that an occasional "why" question can uncover insights that might be speculative but that might also suggest a new line of questioning.

Another typology of different types of questions that I have found particularly useful in eliciting information especially from reticent interviewees is Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin's (1981) four major categories of questions: hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions. Each is defined in Table 5.2 and illustrated with examples from a case study of displaced workers participating in a Job Training and Partnership (JTPA) program.

Hypothetical questions ask respondents to speculate as to what something might be like or what someone might do in a particular situation. Hypothetical questions begin with "What if" or "Suppose." Responses are usually descriptions of the person's actual experience. In the JTPA study, for example, the hypothetical question, Suppose it were my first day in this training program. What would it be like? elicited descriptions of what it was *actually* like for the participants.

Devil's advocate questions are particularly good to use when the topic is controversial and you want respondents' opinions and feelings. This type of question also avoids embarrassing or antagonizing respondents if they happen to be sensitive about the issue. The wording begins, "Some people would say," which

TABLE 5.2. FOUR TYPES OF QUESTIONS WITH EXAMPLES FROM A JTPA TRAINING PROGRAM CASE STUDY.

<i>Type of Question</i>	<i>Example</i>
1. Hypothetical questions—ask what the respondent might do, or what it might be like in a particular situation; they usually begin with “what if” or “suppose.”	Suppose it were my first day in this training program. What would it be like?
2. Devil’s advocate questions—the respondent is challenged to consider an opposing view or explanation to a situation.	Some people would say that employees who lost their job did something to bring about being fired. What would you tell them?
3. Ideal position questions—ask the respondent to describe an ideal situation.	Would you describe what you think the ideal training program would be like?
4. Interpretive questions—the researcher advances tentative explanations or interpretations of what the respondent has been saying and asks for a reaction.	Are you finding returning to school as an adult a different experience from what you expected?

in effect depersonalizes the issue. The response, however, is almost always the respondent’s personal opinion or feeling about the matter. In the JTPA example, the question, Some people would say that employees who lost their job did something to bring it about. What would you say to them? usually revealed how the respondent came to be unemployed and thus involved in the training program.

Ideal position questions elicit both information and opinion; these can be used with virtually any phenomenon under study. They are good to use in evaluation studies because they reveal both the positives and the negatives or shortcomings of a program. Asking what the ideal training program would be like in the JTPA example revealed things participants liked and would not want changed, as well as things that could have made it a better program.

Interpretive questions provide a check on what you think you are understanding, as well as offer an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed. In the JTPA

example, the interpretive question, Would you say that returning to school as an adult is different from what you expected? allowed the investigator to confirm the tentative interpretation of what had been said in the interview.

Overall, *good* interview questions are those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon. The more detailed and descriptive the data, the better. The following questions work well to yield this type of data:

Tell me about a time when. . . .

Give me an example of. . . .

Tell me more about that. . . .

What was it like for you when. . . .

Some types of questions should be avoided in an interview. Table 5.3 outlines three types of questions to avoid and illustrates each from the JTPA study. First, avoid multiple questions—either one question that is actually a multiple question or a series of single questions that does not allow the respondent to answer one by one. An example of a multiple question is, How do you feel about the instructors, the assignments, and the schedule of classes in the JTPA training program? A series of questions might be, What's it like going back to school as an adult? How do instructors respond to you? What kind of assignments do you have? In both cases the respondent is likely to ask you to repeat the question(s), ask for clarification, or give a response covering only one part of the question—and that response may be uninterpretable. If, for example, an interviewee responded to the question, How do you feel about the instructors, the assignments, and the schedule of classes? with "They're OK—some I like, some I don't," you would not know whether instructors or assignments or the schedule was being referred to.

Leading questions should also be avoided. Leading questions reveal a bias or an assumption that the researcher is making, which may not be held by the participant. These set the respondent up to accept the researcher's point of view. The question, What emotional problems have you had since losing your job? reflects an assumption that anyone losing a job will have emotional problems.

TABLE 5.3. QUESTIONS TO AVOID.

<i>Type of Question</i>	<i>Example</i>
Multiple questions	How do you feel about the instructors, the assignments, and the schedule of classes?
Leading questions	What emotional problems have you had since losing your job?
Yes-or-no questions	Do you like the program? Has returning to school been difficult?

Finally, all researchers warn against asking yes-or-no questions. Any question that can be answered with a simple yes or no may in fact be answered just that way. Yes-or-no responses give you almost no information. For the reluctant, shy, or less verbal respondent, they offer an easy way out; they can also shut down or at least slow the flow of information from the interviewee. In the JTPA example, questions phrased in a yes-or-no manner, although at their core they are seeking good information, can yield nothing. Thus asking, Do you like the program? may be answered yes or no; rephrasing it to, What do you like about the program? necessitates more of a response. The same is true of the question, Has returning to school been difficult? Asking, How have you found the experience of returning to school? mandates a fuller response.

A ruthless review of your questions to weed out poor ones before you actually conduct an interview is highly recommended. Ask the questions of yourself, challenging yourself to answer as minimally as possible. Also note whether you would feel uncomfortable honestly answering any of the questions. This review followed by a pilot interview will go a long way to ensure that you are asking good questions.

PROBES

Probes are also questions or comments that follow up something already asked. It is virtually impossible to specify these ahead of time because they are dependent on how the participant answers the lead question. This is where being the primary instrument of

data collection has its advantages, especially if you are a highly sensitive instrument. You make adjustments in your interviewing as you go along. You sense that the respondent is on to something significant or that there is more to be learned. Probing can come in the form of asking for more details, for clarification, for examples. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out that "probes may take numerous forms; they range from silence, to sounds, to a single word, to complete sentences" (p. 85). Silence, "used judiciously . . . is a useful and easy probe—as is the bunched utterance, 'uh huh, uh huh,' sometimes combined with a nodding head. 'Yes, yes' is a good alternative; variety is useful" (p. 86, emphasis in original). As with all questions, not just probes, the interviewer should avoid pressing too hard and too fast. After all, the participant is being interviewed, not interrogated.

Probes or follow-up questions can be as simple as seeking more information or clarity about what the person has just said. These are typically who, what, when, and where questions such as Who else was there? What did you do then? When did this happen? or Where were you when this happened? Other probes seek more details or elaboration such as What do you mean? Tell me more about that. Give me an example of that. "Walk" me through the experience. Would you explain that? and so on.

Following is a short excerpt (Weeks, n.d.) from an interview with a man in midlife who had been retained in grammar school. The investigator was interested in how being retained had affected the person's life. Note the follow-up questions or probes used to garner a better understanding of his initial reaction to being retained.

Interviewer: How did you feel about yourself the second time you were in first grade?

Respondent: I really don't remember, but I think I didn't like it. It was probably embarrassing to me. I think I may have even had a hard time explaining it to my friends. I probably got teased. I was probably defensive about it. I may even have rebelled in some childlike way. I do know I got more aggressive at this point in my life. But I don't know if being retained had anything to do with it.

Interviewer: How did you feel about your new first grade teacher?

Respondent: She was nice. I was very quiet for a while, until I got to know her.

Interviewer: How did you feel about yourself during this second year?

Respondent: I have to look at it as a follow-up to a period when I was not successful. Strictly speaking, I was not very successful in the first grade—the first time.

Interviewer: Your voice sometimes changes when you talk about that.

Respondent: Well, I guess I'm still a little angry.

Interviewer: Do you feel the retention was justified?

Respondent: (long pause) I don't know how to answer that.

Interviewer: Do you want to think about it for a while?

Respondent: Well, I did *not* learn anything in the first grade the first time, but the lady was nice. She was my Mom's best friend. So she didn't teach me anything, and she made me repeat. I had to be retained, they said, because I did not learn the material, but (shaking his finger), I could have. I could have learned it well. I was smart.

The best way to increase your skill at probing is to practice. The more you interview, especially on the same topic, the more relaxed you become and the better you can pursue potentially fruitful lines of inquiry. Another good strategy is to scrutinize a verbatim transcript of one of your interviews. Look for places where you could have followed up but did not, and compare them with places where you got a lot of good data. The difference will most likely be from having maximized an opportunity to gain more information through gentle probing.

THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide, or schedule as it is sometimes called, is nothing more than a list of questions you intend to ask in an interview. Depending on how structured the interview will be, the guide may contain dozens of very specific questions listed in a particular order (highly structured) or a few topical areas jotted down in

no particular order (unstructured) or something in between. As I noted earlier, most interviews in qualitative research are semi-structured; thus the interview guide will probably contain several specific questions that you want to ask everyone, some more open-ended questions that could be followed up with probes, and perhaps a list of some areas, topics, and issues that you want to know more about but do not have enough information about at the outset of your study to form specific questions.

An investigator new to collecting data through interviews will feel more confident with a structured interview format where most, if not all, questions are written out ahead of time in the interview guide. Working from an interview schedule allows the new researcher to gain the experience and confidence needed to conduct more open-ended questioning. Most researchers find that they are highly dependent upon the interview guide for the first few interviews but that they soon can unhook themselves from constant reference to the questions and can go with the natural flow of the interview. At that point, an occasional check to see whether all areas or topics are being covered may be all that is needed.

New researchers are often concerned about the order of questions in an interview. No rules determine what should go first and what should come later. Much depends upon the study's objectives, the time allotted for the interview, the person being interviewed, and how sensitive some of the questions are. Factual, sociodemographic-type questions can be asked to get the interview started, but if there are a lot of these, or if some of them are sensitive (for example, if they ask about income, age, or sexual orientation), it might be better to ask them at the end of the interview. By then the respondent has invested in the interview and is more likely to see it through by answering these questions.

Generally it is a good idea to ask for relatively neutral, descriptive information at the beginning of an interview. Respondents can be asked to provide basic descriptive information about the phenomenon of interest, be it a program, activity, or experience, or to chronicle their history with the phenomenon of interest. This information lays the foundation for questions that access the interviewee's perceptions, opinions, values, emotions, and so on.

Of course it is not always possible to separate factual information from more subjective, value-laden responses. And again, the best way to tell whether the order of your questions works or not is to try it out in a pilot interview.

In summary, then, questions are at the heart of interviewing, and to collect meaningful data a researcher must ask good questions. In my years of experience doing and supervising qualitative research, the fewer, more open-ended your questions are the better. Having fewer broader questions unhooks you from the interview guide and enables you to really *listen* to what your participant has to share, which in turn enables you to better follow avenues of inquiry that will yield potentially rich contributions. Exhibit 5.1 is an interview guide for a study of how older adults

EXHIBIT 5.1. INTERVIEW GUIDE.

1. I understand that you are concerned about your health. Tell me about your health.
 2. What motivated you to learn about your health?
 3. Tell me, in detail, about the kinds of things you have done to learn more about your health. (What did you do first?)
 4. Where do you find information about your health?
 5. Tell me about a time when something you learned had a positive impact on your health care.
 6. What kinds of things have you changed in your life because of your learning?
 7. Whom do you talk to about your health?
 8. Tell me about your current interactions with your health care provider.
 9. Tell me about what you do to keep track of your health.
 10. What other things do you do to manage your health?
 11. What kinds of challenges (barriers) do you experience when managing your health care?
 12. What else would you like to share about your health related learning?
-

Source: Valente (2005). Reprinted with permission.

become self-directed in their health care (Valente, 2005). These open-ended questions, followed up by the skillful use of probes, yielded substantive information about the topic.

BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

Collecting data through interviews involves, first of all, determining whom to interview. That depends on what the investigator wants to know and from whose perspective the information is desired. Selecting respondents on the basis of what they can contribute to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study means engaging in purposive or theoretical sampling (discussed in Chapter Four). In a qualitative case study of a community school program, for example, a holistic picture of the program would involve the experiences and perceptions of people having different associations with the program—administrators, teachers, students, community residents. Unlike survey research, in which the number and representativeness of the sample are major considerations, in this type of research the crucial factor is not the number of respondents but the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon.

How can such people be identified? One way is through initial on-site observation of the program, activity, or phenomenon under study. On-site observations often involve informal discussions with participants to discover those who should be interviewed in depth. A second means of locating contacts is to begin with a key person who is considered knowledgeable by others and then ask that person for referrals. Initial informants can be found through the investigator's own personal contacts, community and private organizations, advertisements on bulletin boards, or on the Internet. In some studies a preliminary interview is necessary to determine whether the person meets the criteria for participating in the study. For example, in Moon's (2008) study of the transformational potential of grieving in older adulthood, he first had to determine if prospective participants could identify some change in their sense of self or view of the world as a result of grieving the loss of a loved one.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) list five issues that should be addressed at the outset of every interview:

1. The investigator's motives and intentions and the inquiry's purpose
2. The protection of respondents through the use of pseudonyms
3. Deciding who has final say over the study's content
4. Payment (if any)
5. Logistics with regard to time, place, and number of interviews to be scheduled (pp. 87-88)

Besides being careful to word questions in language clear to the respondent, the interviewer must be aware of his or her stance toward the interviewee. Since the respondent has been selected by the investigator on purpose, it can be assumed that the participant has something to contribute, has had an experience worth talking about, and has an opinion of interest to the researcher. This stance will go a long way in making the respondent comfortable and forthcoming with what he or she has to offer.

An interviewer should also assume neutrality with regard to the respondent's knowledge; that is, regardless of how antithetical to the interviewer's beliefs or values the respondent's position might be, it is crucial for the success of the interview to avoid arguing, debating, or otherwise letting personal views be known. Patton (2002) distinguishes between neutrality and rapport. "At the same time that I am neutral with regard to the content of what is being said to me, I care very much that that person is willing to share with me what they are saying. *Rapport is a stance vis-à-vis the person being interviewed. Neutrality is a stance vis-à-vis the content of what that person says*" (p. 365, emphasis in original).

There are several ways of maximizing the time spent getting an informant to share information. A slow-starting interview, for example, can be moved along by asking respondents for basic descriptive information about themselves, the event, or the phenomenon under study. Interviews aimed at constructing life-histories can be augmented by written narratives, personal documents, and daily activity logs that informants are asked to submit ahead of time. The value of an interview, of course, depends on the interviewer's knowing enough about the topic to

ask meaningful questions in language easily understood by the informant.

INTERVIEWER AND RESPONDENT INTERACTION

The interaction between interviewer and respondent can be looked at from the perspective of either party or from the interaction itself. Skilled interviewers can do much to bring about positive interaction. Being respectful, nonjudgmental, and non-threatening is a beginning. Obviously, becoming skilled takes practice; practice combined with feedback on performance is the best way to develop the needed skills. Role playing, peer critiquing, videotaping, and observing experienced interviewers at work are all ways novice researchers can improve their performance in this regard.

What makes a good respondent? Anthropologists and sociologists speak of a good respondent as an "informant"—one who understands the culture but is also able to reflect on it and articulate for the researcher what is going on. Key informants are able, to some extent, to adopt the stance of the investigator, thus becoming a valuable guide in unfamiliar territory. But not all good respondents can be considered key informants in the sense that anthropologists use the term. Good respondents are those who can express thoughts, feelings, opinions—that is, offer a perspective—on the topic being studied. Participants usually enjoy sharing their expertise with an interested and sympathetic listener. For some, it is also an opportunity to clarify their own thoughts and experiences.

Dexter (1970) says there are three variables in every interview situation that determine the nature of the interaction: "(1) the personality and skill of the interviewer, (2) the attitudes and orientation of the interviewee, and (3) the definition of both (and often by significant others) of the situation" (p. 24). These factors also determine the type of information obtained from an interview. Let us suppose, for example, that two researchers are studying an innovative curriculum for first-year college students. One interviewer is predisposed to innovative practices in general, while the other favors traditional educational practices.

One student informant is assigned to the program, while another student requests the curriculum and is eager to be interviewed. The particular combination of interviewer and student that evolves will determine, to some extent, the type of data obtained.

There has been much attention in recent literature to the subjectivity and complexity inherent in the interview encounter. Critical theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and postmodernism have been brought to bear on analyzing the intricacies of the interview encounter. Although each of these perspectives challenges us to think about what we are doing when interviewing, what they have in common is a concern for the participants and their voices, the power dynamics inherent in the interview, the construction of the "story," and forms of representation to other audiences.

Some of this discussion is framed in terms of insider-outsider status, especially with regard to visible social identities, most notably gender, race, age, and socioeconomic class. Seidman (1991, p. 76) discusses how "our experience with issues of class, race, and gender . . . interact with the sense of power in our lives." And, in turn, "the interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power—who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, who benefits." Foster (1994), for example, explores the ambiguities and complexities of the interviewer-respondent relationship in her study of attitudes toward law and order among two generations. She analyzes her stance with regard to interactions with women versus men, the younger generation versus the older, middle class versus the working class.

Does a researcher need to be a member of the group being investigated to do a credible study? Is it preferable for women to interview women or for Hispanics to interview Hispanics? What about the intersection of race, gender, and class? Are people more likely to reveal information to insiders or outsiders? There are of course no right answers to any of these questions, only the pluses and minuses involved in any combination of interviewer and respondent. Seidman (1991) suggests that while being highly sensitive to these issues and taking them into account throughout the study, "interviewing requires interviewers to have enough distance to enable them to ask real questions and to explore, not to share, assumptions" (p. 77).

Thus the interviewer-respondent interaction is a complex phenomenon. Both parties bring biases, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that affect the interaction and the data elicited. A skilled interviewer accounts for these factors in order to evaluate the data being obtained. Taking a stance that is nonjudgmental, sensitive, and respectful of the respondent is but a beginning point in the process.

RECORDING AND TRANSCRIBING INTERVIEW DATA

Of the three basic ways to record interview data, the most common by far is to tape record the interview. This practice ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis. The interviewer can also listen for ways to improve his or her questioning technique. Malfunctioning equipment and a respondent's uneasiness with being recorded are the drawbacks. Most researchers find, however, that after some initial wariness respondents tend to forget they are being taped, especially if one uses an unobtrusive digital recorder. Occasionally interviews are videotaped. This practice allows for recording of nonverbal behavior, but it is also more cumbersome and intrusive than tape recording the interview.

A second way to record interview data is to take notes during the interview. Since not everything said can be written down, and since at the outset of a study a researcher is not certain what is important enough to write down, this method is recommended only when mechanical recording is not feasible. Some investigators like to take written notes in addition to taping the session. The interviewer may want to record his or her reactions to something the informant says, to signal the informant of the importance of what is being said, or to pace the interview.

The third—and least desirable—way to record interview data is to write down as much as can be remembered as soon after the interview as possible. The problems with this method are obvious, but at times, writing or recording during an interview might be intrusive (when interviewing terminally ill patients, for example). In any case, researchers must write their reflections immediately following the interview. These reflections might contain insights

suggested by the interview, descriptive notes on the behavior, verbal and nonverbal, of the informant, parenthetical thoughts of the researcher, and so on. Post-interview notes allow the investigator to monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyze the information itself.

Ideally, verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis. Be forewarned, however, that even with good keyboard skills, transcribing interviews is a tedious and time-consuming project. You can of course hire someone to transcribe tapes for you. This can be expensive, and there are trade-offs in doing it. You do not get the intimate familiarity with your data that doing your own transcribing affords. Also, a transcriber is likely to be unfamiliar with terminology and, not having conducted the interview, will not be able to fill in places where the tape is of poor quality. If someone else has transcribed your tape, it is a good idea to read through the interview while listening to it in order to correct errors and fill in blanks. However, hiring someone to transcribe allows you to spend time analyzing your data instead of transcribing. I recommend that new and experienced researchers transcribe at least the first few interviews of any study, if at all possible.

The format of the interview transcript should be set up to enable analysis. At the top of the first page, list identifying information as to when and where and with whom the interview was conducted. A crucial factor to enable analysis is to add *line numbering* down the left-hand side of the page. Begin with the first page and number sequentially to the end of the interview. Another format consideration is whether you are using single or double spacing. It's been my experience that single spacing works best but *double space between speakers*. You can also put the interviewer questions in bold or italics, which further enables ease of reading. Finally, leave a wide enough margin on the right-hand side of the pages for you to add notes or codes as you analyze the transcript. Exhibit 5.2 presents an excerpt from a transcribed interview that was conducted for a study of the role of culture in the health-related behaviors of older Asian Indian immigrants (Thaker, 2008). Notice that identifying information is at the top, there is consecutive line

EXHIBIT 5.2. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT.

(Excerpted from Interview with Deepak, March 22, 2008)

1 *Swathi*: Could you tell me a little more about the check-up that you had,
2 you said it is for older people. Where was that?

3

4 *Deepak*: Lyla Shoals, hospital, they, every year like they have prostate week or
5 something like that. At that time they all the doctors come and give free check up
6 for 50 or old people, you know. So I just heard that and I said ok let me go and
7 get check up because I'm 50 and it's free.

8

9 *Swathi*: It's for the whole community.

10

11 *Deepak*: Yeah, whole community. Anybody over 50 can go and have a check up.
12 And there I think 4 or 5 doctors were checking over there.

13

14 *Swathi*: And how did you find out about that?

15

16 *Deepak*: They were advertising on the radio and local newspaper and so I said
17 let's go. So after work I stopped by over there.

18

19 *Swathi*: But you said they didn't do the blood test at that time.

20

21 *Deepak*: No, they recommend. Because, you see, I lied on the questions. And you
22 know they take finger test and they checked it. They might have realized that I
23 might have little bit enlarged prostate at that time, but then they weren't sure so
24 that's why they recommend, PSA, take that test, blood test, positively it tell you
25 um that you have enlarged prostate or not. But then I didn't go. I thought it was
26 going to go away.

27

28 *Swathi*: So, you mentioned that up until this point you hadn't gone to the
29 doctor at all. Why do you think that is?

30

(Continued)

EXHIBIT 5.2. (CONTINUED)

31 *Deepak*: Not yearly check-up, but also I wasn't that sick at all. Every year I knew
32 that I was getting cold, especially when I was living in New York, but then
33 Contact and those other kind of common cold medicines, I take it and I'm alright
34 So I never was that seriously sick that I needed to go to the doctor or something
35 for anything, you know. That's why I've never been. At that time, it wasn't like,
36 we didn't know, that actually it's nice to go, even if you're not feeling good, it's
37 ok to go doctor and have physical check-up or something, it would be nice.
38 That's why I just didn't go, until it got worse. And then Sumie, my wife, says go
39 doctor go doctor check it out. And then I knew I had prostate problem so I
40 wanted to take care of that anyway. And lot of time I don't I didn't go because I
41 didn't have insurance you know. Sometimes you work on your own and then you
42 don't have insurance you don't want to go. And for what? I say, for what, nothing
43 wrong, what they going to check up? So 25, 30 years, I never had to go to doctor
44 over here. Only time you go to doctor for check up if you have some problem,
45 you know. It's not like now, you should go every year and have physical check up.
46 That concept wasn't there. I mean wasn't there means for me, yeah, nothing, you
47 don't have to go to the doctor.

48
49 *Swathi*: Had you been to the doctor in India?

50
51 *Deepak*: Only time if I got hurt or something. Yeah India, when I was small boy,
52 I used to get stay sick lots of time. So every month or two months I go to the
53 doctor, we have family doctor you know over there. So you go over there and say
54 doctor uncle this is what happens so doctor gives you couple of shot. I was sick, I
55 mean not sick but skinny, so always wanted to go and get fat. So I always tell
56 doctor uncle, give me something for fat. He said there is no such thing. You take
57 uh like some vitamins, not vitamins I'm sorry, you drink cod liver oil it's going to
58 be fine, those kind of things. So drink and it will be alright. And after we grew
59 up, and then high school we say we eat meat, eggs, or something like that then we
60 can get fat too. So even though we are Brahmin we are not supposed to, we,
61 friends we go to the Muslim, always the Muslim restaurants you know they serve
62 that and we eat that meat. But no, we didn't get fat (laughs). But otherwise, so

EXHIBIT 5.2. (CONTINUED)

63 that's the only reason I used to go to the doctor. Couple of time I got, one time I
64 got, uh, not influenza, what they call it, then I was sick for a few days. When I
65 was in 11th grade I got small pox, when I was grown up. So, but then doctor,
66 usually then doctor comes to your home you know and check and nothing I can do,
67 just three or four days. You know, there is no cure. Otherwise no, after, like until
68 3rd or 4th grade I used to get sick, but after 6th grade I never got sick even in India
69 so no need to go to doctor.

70

71 *Swathi*: How did your experience with the doctor compare in India to here?

72

73 *Deepak*: Well in India you have lot of friendly doctor because doctor is part of our
74 family you know. We call them Uncle rather than doctor you know. Don't feel
75 any scare or strange or something and um when we're kids, I mean I don't know
76 after that, when you go to doctor you have to go with your bottle you know your
77 own bottle and they give some medications in there. Every doctor over there you
78 go with the bottle and they give you some medication and then you have to take 3
79 times a day or 4 times a day, drink it. This doctor is very nice and I say give me
80 something sweet so medications are most of them not good. I don't know what
81 they mix it but he say ok and we go home and it's so tasty. So you take 3 times a
82 day and then next day you go again and they refill that same medication, 3, 4 days
83 you go there. So over there it was fine. Over here when you came and I went
84 there or when I saw other people you do doctor they don't have any . . . in India
85 they have doctor has whole lot of bottles and whole lot of medications right in
86 their dispensary, what they call it, in their office or they mix it and they give it to
87 you or they give you shot right there. When I came here doctor's office is like a
88 living room you know and then they prescribe you medicine and say go there. So
89 that was the big difference for me that I saw over here. And uh, over there you can
90 talk to doctor as long as you want or something. It is not just time and don't feel
91 that expensive either because it's on monthly account so you even don't know
92 how much you pay. Over here, that was the difference.

Source: Thaker (n.d.). Used with permission.

numbering, and the content is single spaced but double spaced between speakers.

In addition to recording interview data for analysis, it is important to assess, as best you can, the quality of the data obtained. Several factors may influence an informant's responses, factors that may be difficult for the researcher to discern. The informant's health, mood at the time of interview, and so on may affect the quality of data obtained, as might an informant's ulterior motives for participating in the project. Furthermore, all information obtained from an informant has been selected, either consciously or unconsciously, from all that he or she knows. What you get in an interview is simply the informant's perception of the phenomenon of interest at that particular point in time. Although this personal perspective is, of course, what is sought in qualitative research, the information in any single interview needs to be considered in light of other interviews and other sources of data such as observations and documents (see Chapter Nine for a discussion of validity and reliability).

SUMMARY

In qualitative research, interviewing is often the major source of the qualitative data needed for understanding the phenomenon under study. Interviews can range in structure from those in which questions and the order in which they are asked are predetermined to totally unstructured interviews in which nothing is set ahead of time. Most common is the semistructured interview that is guided by a set of questions and issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of questions is predetermined.

Asking good questions is key to getting meaningful data. Interview questions can ask for experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory, or demographic data. Hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions can also be used to elicit good data, while multiple and leading questions, as well as questions yielding yes-and-no answers, should be avoided. Follow-up questions or probes are an important part of the process. An interview guide contains the questions the researcher intends to ask.

Considering how to begin the interview and accounting for some of the complexities in the interaction between interviewer and respondent will result in a more informed analysis of the interview data. This chapter addressed these issues, along with some of the mechanics of recording interview data.