Say *What*?
The Art of Asking in Interviews

Sarah Hautzinger, PhD
Department of Anthropology, Colorado College

Leah Haverhals, MA
VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System & Department of Health & Behavioral Sciences, University of Colorado Denver
What’s on tap today

• Goals of interviewing
• Spectrum of qualitative interviews & Interview questions
• Interviewer characteristics, skills and techniques
• Dealing with Challenges/Barriers
• Advice & Teachable Moments
Goals of qualitative interviewing

To:

- Elicit rich descriptions
- Facilitating exploration and unfolding
- Discovery of:
  - Experiences
  - Perspectives
  - Participant’s “Life world”
  - Meaning of statements
Life world:

- The topic of the qualitative interview is a participant’s everyday life world and his or her relation to it. Focus on participants’ lived experiences, not just a participant’s beliefs or attitudes about issues.
Meaning:

• The interview provides opportunities to interpret the meaning of central themes in the participant’s life world. It focuses on the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said.
Descriptive:

- The interview attempts to obtain open, nuanced, rich descriptions of different aspects of the participant’s life world.
Types of interviews

• Structured interview

• Semi-structured Interview

• Unstructured or Open-Ended Interview

• Participant Observation
Structured Interview

- Asks each respondent the same series of questions
- Questions are created prior to the interview
- Closed-ended questions
- Questioning is standardized
- Little variation in responses
- Response choices may be provided
- Interviewer plays a neutral role
- May be used for categorical rating
- Self-administered questionnaires are a type of structured interview
Semi-Structured Interview

- The interviewer and respondents engage in a formal interview.
- The interviewer develops and uses an interview guide. This is a list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order.
- The interviewer follows the guide, but is able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate.
- The guide should include protocols for prompts, follow-ups questions, etc.
Open-Ended Interview

• A scheduled time for and speak; both interviewee and interviewer recognize this to be an interview and understand the focus and goal;

• Interviewer builds rapport with respondents, getting respondents to open-up and express themselves in their own way

• Primarily open-ended questions

• Little constraints on informants' responses
Participant Observation

- Can have elements of interviewing; chance to ask questions in context;
- Informed consent standards lower;
- Ethical requirements higher
- Opportunities to see gaps between ideology and practice
- *Learning How to Ask* (Briggs 1986)
Interviews in a Multiple Method Context

• Surveys/questionnaires as foils for interviews

• Focus groups as creating a comparative context for interviews

• Follow-up interviewing for validity, collaboration
Types of Interview Questions

- Open- or closed-ended
- Introducing
- Follow-up
- Probing
- Specifying

- Direct
- Indirect
- Structuring
- Interpreting
- Silence
Introducing questions

To introduce a topic, focus or subject

• 'Can you tell me about....+'
• 'Could you describe ... in as much detail as possible‘
• ‘Do you remember the first time you...’

Avoid: yes/no; placing inhibiting (e.g. demographic) or leading questions early
Follow-up questions

- To extend the interviewee's answers to previous questions
- Need to simultaneously balance what is important to the participant and the research question in mind at all times
- 'could you tell me more about ....'
- ‘You mentioned that....can you tell me about a specific time...'
Probing questions

• The interviewer probes the content of the interviewee's answers but without giving away which parts of the answers are to be taken into account.

• ‘You mentioned that you used to…?’

• 'Could you say something more about that.'
Specifying questions

• Ask questions that allow you to gain further information about a particular aspect of the interviewee's answer
  • 'What did you think then?'
  • 'How did your body react?'
• If the interviewee has given fairly generalized answers, a specifying question could be used to personalize the answer
  • 'Have you experienced this yourself?'
Direct questions

• The interviewer asks very direct questions, often used in the later parts of the interview.

• 'Have you ever received money for achieving good grades?'

• 'When you mention competition, do you then think of a sportsman-like or a destructive competition?'
Indirect questions

• The interviewer asks projective questions. Take care to ensure that the answer is interpreted correctly in this situation. Further questions may be required to determine exactly what the interviewee means.

• 'How do you believe other pupils regard the competition for grades?'

• In this instance, determine whether the pupil's answer refers directly to the attitudes of the other students or indirectly to their own attitude.
Interpreting questions

• How or to what degree you interpret a question may involve rephrasing the answer and putting it to the interviewee or attempting to clarify their answer.

• 'You mean that ... ?'

• 'Is it correct that you feel that ... ?'
Structuring questions

• areas relevant to the research question must be covered during the course of the interview and can use questions to structure the interview accordingly.
• 'I would now like to introduce a new topic: ...
• The interviewer should also consider politely breaking off long answers if they become irrelevant to the research questions.
Silence: It’s your friend!

• Silence can be a useful tool in furthering the interview. It allows interviewee's a chance to reflect on what has been discussed. They may then be able to offer more information.

• Sometimes your best question is “huh?”
Interviewer Characteristics/Skills/Techniques

- Knowledgeable
- Structuring
- Clear
- Gentle
- Sensitive/Active Listening
- Open
- Steering

- Critical
- Remembering
- Interpreting
- Bracketing
- Not a performance
- Put yourself in their shoes
Dealing with challenges

• Relax: It’s likely not as scary as you think
• Have a plan if something goes “wrong”
• Approaching sensitive topics
• Participants who are in a “bad mood” or “busy”
• Importance of building rapport
• Develop confidence
• Complex topics
• Differences in locale: i.e. phone vs. in-person
Believing in the Enterprise

• People’s hunger to be heard, to go on record;
• Outweighs voyeurism, invasiveness;
• Avoid feeling guilty of taking their time
• Sharing transcripts
• Experimental ethnography and providing mirrors
Not ‘Fresh Air’

• Fumbling with equipment
• Big mouths as complements
• Interviewer self-disclosure
Field notes/Summary

• Provide notes describing participant’s:
  – Demographic information
  – Main points/events that the participant shared

• Think about
  – Participant’s comfort level
  – The physical environment of the interview
  – Their nature/personality
  – Whether to change order of questions or the way you ask things
  – Add/delete questions
Resources

- Susan Eliot’s website: www.qualitative-researcher.com