

Semi-Structured Interviews

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A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that combines a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further.

What do we mean by Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research captures information that is not numerical in nature. It records people's attitudes, feelings and behaviours, and provides an in-depth but usually indicative picture about why people act in certain ways.

What is a Semi-Structured Interview?

A semi-structured interview has been referred to as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984), the characteristics of which include:

- The interviewer and respondents engage in a formal interview.
- The interviewer develops and uses an interview guide. This is a list of open-ended questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order.
- The open ended nature of the question defines the topic under investigation but provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. It often includes prompts to help the interviewee to answer.
- The interviewer follows the guide, but is able to follow relevant lines of enquiry in the conversation that may stray from the guide when they feel this is appropriate.

Why use a Semi-Structured Interview?

The flexible structure of the interview allows the researcher to prompt or encourage the interviewee if they are looking for more information or find what they are saying interesting. This method gives the researcher the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate or to follow a new line of inquiry introduced by what the interviewee is saying. Semi-structured interviews also allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms.

Semi-structured interviews work best when:

- the interviewer has a number of areas to be sure to be addressed
- when there is only one chance to interview someone
- when there may be more than one person involved in carrying out the interviews

Developing an Interview Guide

Many researchers like to use semi-structured interviews because questions can be prepared ahead of time. This allows the interviewer to be prepared and appear competent during the interview.

Semi-structured interviews are often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to allow the researchers to develop a good understanding of the topic of interest necessary for developing relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions.

Developing an interview guide often starts with outlining the issues/topics that should be included. This should be guided by your research question, and what you hope to get out of the interview. This can be broken down into different questions that are relevant and understandable to the person that you are interviewing. Questions should be open-ended and encourage more than a Yes or No answer. Use plain language to word your questions and be realistic about how many questions you can meaningfully ask in the time available.

A good interview guide should help conversation to flow naturally. In terms of structure, an interview guide requires an introduction, a middle and an end. Use sections to structure your interview guide. Make sure that any topic changes are well signposted, particularly where the next question may not obviously follow on from what has been asked previously. Provide an explanation where necessary to help you to make the transition from one topic to another, for example, "I'd now like to ask you about..." Consider if there is a logical order in which to ask questions. Develop prompts to help you to explore meaning, views and feelings in more detail, and ensure that important information is not missed. Plan how you will wind down and conclude the interview.

Refining your Interview Guide

Don't be afraid of sharing your interview guide with colleagues: ask for their feedback, and take on board their suggestions.

Pilot the interview guide to test out how well your questions work in an interview situation. This will help you work out how long each interview is likely to take, and where you may need to make changes to the questions or ordering.

Undertaking a Semi-Structured Interview

Some practical suggestions for undertaking a semi-structured interview:

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| Before the interview | Prepare and familiarise yourself with the interview guide Prepare verbal and written information about the research and consent |
| Setting | Consider the setting which you will use for the interview. It should be comfortable and quiet to help you to develop a rapport with the person that you are interviewing. |
| Collecting data | Consider how you will capture what is said during the interview, for example, whether you will use any recording equipment, or whether you will need someone to take notes for you. |
| Role of the Interviewer | Start by providing a brief explanation of the study that enables the participant to be informed about and consent to take part in the research. Introduce the topic(s) Keep the interview on track, and to time Be sensitive to body language and non-verbal cues Provide prompts to help your interviewee to answer Ensure that key points are captured from the interview |
| After the interview | Consider if there is a need to provide a debrief to the interviewee following the interview |

Summary

Semi-structured interviews are a good way to both cover a range of topics, and make sure that important information is not missed in a one-to-one interview.

They are an effective method for providing reliable, comparable qualitative data with different participants, even given different interviewers. The depth of discussion that interviews allow can deliver new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand.

References

Semi-structured interviews: Qualitative Research Guidelines Project

<http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html>

Strategies for Qualitative Interviews

http://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/interview_strategies.pdf