

Massey University  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
Te Kōwhiri Whakaata

## Interviewing for research

**“The interview method is a conversation with a purpose”**

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## Interview methods – for what purpose?

- Large amounts of relevant information about the experiences of others may be collected by directly questioning or talking to people.
- Some research questions are better answered in such a fashion.
- Interviews, especially unstructured or semi-structured ones, offer considerable researcher flexibility.
- A great deal of research within at least the social sciences depends on them!

## My own experiences with interviews

Two significant pieces of research:

- a) Woods, M. (1997). *Maintaining the nursing ethic: A grounded theory of the moral practice of experienced nurses*. Unpublished master’s thesis, Massey University, NZ (pp. 150-151).
- b) Woods, M. (2007). *Parental resistance: Mobile and transitory discourses. A discursive analysis of parental resistance towards medical treatment for a seriously ill child*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Massey University, NZ.

## The interview method

...is non-experimental in design.

The interview is used widely to supplement and extend our knowledge about individual(s) thoughts, feelings and behaviours, meanings, interpretations, etc.

One of the best ways to achieve this...

The interviewer collects detailed personal information from individuals usually in one to one situations using oral questions.

## Uses of interview materials

Interview material may provide either quantitative or qualitative data.

Quantitative data is considered to be easier to analyse and more ‘reliable’ than qualitative data.

Qualitative data is less structured and therefore considered to be more difficult to analyse and, for some, not as reliable.

However, qualitative data may help to explain some very difficult questions or issues.

## Categories of interviews

1. The structured interview
  - The key feature of the structured interview is in the pre-planning of all the questions asked.
  - Structured interviews also allow for exact replication of the interview with others.
  - To an extent, it is possible to generalise what you find out about the population from which your interview sample came.
  - Structured interviews are conducted in various modes: face-to-face, by telephone, videophone and the Internet.
  - Questionnaires and surveys are common examples of structured interview tools.

## 2. the semi-structured interview

- A key feature of the semi-structured interview is in the partial pre-planning of the questions.
- Semi-structured interviews still allow for replication of the interview with others, but are be less controlled.
- Semi-structured interviews may be conducted in various modes: face-to-face, by telephone, videophone... but face-to face is probably best.
- A great deal of qualitative research (grounded theory, thematic analysis, etc) uses semi-structured interview material).

## The structured interview: benefits and disadvantages

- Standardisation of all questions can give quantifiable data.
- Replication possibilities.
- Data is considered to be more reliable because of internal consistency.
- Allows a degree of generalisation of results to the population from which the sample was taken.

### HOWEVER

- Restrictive questioning leads to restrictive answers.
- It can be insensitive to participants' need to express themselves.
- There are issues with the validity of questions asked...  
I.e. Are they the right ones?

## The semi-structured interview: benefits and disadvantages

- Standardisation of at least some of the questions increases data reliability.
- Replication possible.
- Ability to ask some spontaneous questions is sensitive to participants need to express themselves.

### HOWEVER

- Its use of an occasional spontaneous question makes these answers difficult to quantify and analyse.
- Spontaneous questions asked of some and not of others can be seen as unfair, or possibly misleading.

## Unstructured interviews: benefits and disadvantages

- Flexible, responsive and more thoughtful for the participants.
- More relaxed, natural and conversational for those taking part.
- Highly detailed and valid qualitative data (deep, or 'thick' material).

### HOWEVER

- More difficult to replicate.
- Not particularly generalisable to a wider population.
- Possible interviewer bias in 'selective' use of leading, and spontaneous questions.

## Types of interviews for research

- 1) Brief survey
- 2) Extensive survey
- 3) In-depth interviews
- 4) Monologue
- 5) Case study...

## What are the advantages and limitations of in-Depth Interviews?

The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys.

They also may provide a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collect information—people may feel more comfortable having a conversation with you as opposed to filling out a survey.

## Limitations of in-depth interviews

- Can be time-intensive
- The interviewer must be capable of performing reliable interviews
- Not generalisable
- Prone to possible bias

## Pre-interview preparation

### Planning

Identify likely participants to be interviewed.

Determine an adequate sample size if necessary.

Ensure research will follow international and national ethical research standards, including review by ethical research committees.

## Pre-interview II

### Developing

- What to say to interviewees when setting up the interview;
- What to say to interviewees when beginning the interview, including ensuring informed consent and confidentiality of the interviewee.
- What to say to interviewees in concluding the interview;
- What to do during the interview (e.g. take notes, audiotape, etc);
- What to do following the interview (e.g. more notes and/or check audiotape for clarity; perhaps summarize key thoughts).

## Stages of an interview

There are at least five stages:

- 1) Arrival process
- 2) Introducing the research topic, aims, etc
- 3) Starting the interview
- 4) Keeping the interview focussed
- 5) Closing the interview

## Arrival mechanisms

Introductions

Background noise checks

Getting to know each other

Setting up audiotape/recording equipment

Settling down

## Introducing the research

Explain:

- the purpose of the interview,
- why the participant has been chosen, and
- the expected duration of the interview.

Seek informed consent of the interviewee:

- Use the information sheet,
- explanation of how the information is confidential, etc.,
- the use of note taking and/or the tape recorder,
- written or documented oral consent.

If the interviewee has consented, conduct the interview.

## Starting the interview

Gradually, unhurried, relaxing...using open-ended questions.

- Semi-structured format...
- Although you should have some pre-planned questions to ask during the interview, you must also allow questions to flow naturally, based on information provided by the respondent.
- Do not insist upon asking specific questions in a specific order.
- In fact, the flow of the conversation dictates the questions asked, and those omitted, as well as the order of the questions.

## Starting: Issues to remember when interviewing

The interviewer:

- must make the interviewee comfortable.
- appear interested in what they are saying.
- avoid 'yes/no' and leading questions.
- Use appropriate body language.
- Keep personal opinions in check.

## Questions to avoid when interviewing

Biased questions:

Poor: Don't you agree that smacking a child is necessary sometimes to maintain control?

Better: How should children be disciplined?

Questions that assume what they ask:

Poor: Many people believe that children should be smacked to maintain parental control. Are you one of them?

Better: What are your thoughts on parental discipline of children?

Double-barrelled questions:

Poor: Do you agree that hospital waiting lists are a problem and that the health authorities should be working diligently on a solution?

Better: Are hospital waiting lists a problem?

(If the participant responds yes): Who do you think should be responsible for solving this problem?

Questions that do not directly relate to what you want to find out:

(e.g. when trying to find out a specific viewpoint about hospital waiting lists)

Poor: Have you ever encountered any health care problems?

Confusing or complicated questions:

Poor: So, our healthcare services, what about them?  
OR

Very poor: Do you believe that the health care services in this country are adequate, or do you think that perhaps they are not properly managed, or even mismanaged in some way or another, or perhaps not mismanaged but more fraught with difficulties across a wide spectrum of socio-political... etc, etc.

Better: Tell me about your recent experience of New Zealand's health care services?

## Keeping focussed: More interview tips

Questions should be open-ended rather than closed-ended.

You should usually ask a factual question before an opinion question.

Use probing questions as needed...

These include:

- Would you give me an example?
- Can you elaborate on that idea?
- Would you explain that further?
- I'm not sure I understand what you're saying...
- Is there anything else?

## Keeping focussed II

Seek understanding and interpretation...

Try to interpret what you are hearing, as well as seek clarity and a deeper understanding from the respondent throughout the interview.

Remain conversational but remember your role is primarily that of a listener.

Do not force or push the pace unnecessarily, or 'put words into the participant's mouth'.

There should be smooth transitions from one topic to the next.

## Ending the interview

Finish on time if possible, but try to make sure everything has been covered sufficiently.

Make sure that you have made a suitable arrangement with the participant concerning the reviewing of the transcript material.

Thank the participant for their valuable time.

## Interviewing... some basic things to remember

1. Background noises can really affect the quality of any recording.
2. Faulty recording equipment can be disastrous.
3. People often say some very interesting things after the recording device has been turned off.
4. Not every session will last the full amount of time.
5. What is not said may sometimes be of considerable interest in an interview.
6. Participant body and facial gestures, pauses, silence, laughter, etc can be of interest.
7. Transcribing is a lot of hard work.
8. Good transcribers are worth their weight in gold.

## *Tips on the preliminary analysis of interview data*

- Read through the interview responses and look for patterns or themes among the data.
  - You should be able to discover a variety of themes, codes, or even possible categories that will provide the beginnings of analysis, and/or ideas for future interviews.
- You may, for example, find that younger participants tend to think and feel differently from older ones, or that men and women respond differently to the same questions, etc.
- You can also get some useful ideas for how to improve the next interviews, or which areas to pursue, etc.

**THE END**

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