

# Interview

For other uses, see [Interview \(disambiguation\)](#).

An **interview** is a conversation between two or more people where questions are asked by the interviewer to elicit facts or statements from the interviewee.<sup>[1]</sup> Interviews are a standard part of qualitative research. They are also used in journalism and media reporting (see [Interview \(journalism\)](#)) and in various employment-related contexts.

The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say. Interviewing, when considered as a method for conducting qualitative research, is a technique used to understand the experiences of others.

## 1 Characteristics of qualitative research interviews

- Interviews are completed by the interviewer based on what the interviewee says to be conformed.
- Interviews are a far more personal form of research than questionnaires.
- In the personal interview, the interviewer works directly with the interviewee.
- Unlike with mail surveys, the interviewer has the opportunity to probe or ask follow up questions.
- Interviews are generally easier for the interviewee, especially if what is sought are opinions and/or impressions.
- Interviews are time consuming and resource intensive.
- The interviewer is considered a part of the measurement instrument and has to be well trained in how to respond to any contingency.
- Interviews provide an opportunity of face to face interaction between 2 persons; hence, they reduce conflicts.

## 2 Technique

When choosing to interview as a method for conducting qualitative research, it is important to be tactful and sensi-

tive in your approach. Interviewer and researcher, Irving Seidman, devotes an entire chapter of his book, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, to the import of proper interviewing technique and interviewer etiquette. Some of the fundamentals of his technique are summarized below:

**Listening:** According to Seidman, this is both the hardest as well as the most important skill in interviewing. Furthermore, interviewers must be prepared to listen on three different levels: they must listen to what the participant is actually saying, they must listen to the “inner voice”<sup>[2]</sup> or subtext of what the participant is communicating, and they must also listen to the process and flow of the interview so as to remain aware of how tired or bored the participant is as well as logistics such as how much time has already passed and how many questions still remain.<sup>[2]</sup> The listening skills required in an interview require more focus and attention to detail than what is typical in normal conversation. Therefore it is often helpful for interviewers to take notes while the participant responds to questions or to tape-record the interviews themselves to as to be able to more accurately transcribe them later.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Ask questions (to follow up and to clarify):** While an interviewer generally enters each interview with a predetermined, standardized set of questions, it is important that they also ask follow-up questions throughout the process. Such questions might encourage a participant to elaborate upon something poignant that they’ve shared and are important in acquiring a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, it is important that an interviewer ask clarifying questions when they are confused. If the narrative, details, or chronology of a participant’s responses become unclear, it is often appropriate for the interviewer to ask them to re-explain these aspects of their story so as to keep their transcriptions accurate.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Be respectful of boundaries:** Seidman explains this tactic as “Explore, don’t probe,”<sup>[2]</sup> It is essential that while the participant is being interviewed they are being encouraged to explore their experiences in a manner that is sensitive and respectful. They should not be “probed” in such a way that makes them feel uncomfortable or like a specimen in lab. If too much time is spent dwelling on minute details or if too many follow-up questions are asked, it is possible that the participant will become defensive or unwilling to share. Thus, it is the interviewer’s job to strike a balance between ambiguity and specificity in their question asking.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Be wary of leading questions:** Leading questions are

questions which suggest or imply an answer. While they are often asked innocently they run the risk of altering the validity of the responses obtained as they discourage participants from using their own language to express their sentiments. Thus it is preferable that interviewers ask open-ended questions instead. For example, instead of asking “Did the experience make you feel sad?” - which is leading in nature - it would be better to ask “How did the experience make you feel” - as this suggests no expectation.<sup>[2]</sup>

Don't interrupt: Participants should feel comfortable and respected throughout the entire interview - thus interviewers should avoid interrupting participants whenever possible. While participants may digress in their responses and while the interviewer may lose interest in what they are saying at one point or another it is critical that they be tactful in their efforts to keep the participant on track and to return to the subject matter in question.<sup>[2]</sup>

Make the participant feel comfortable: Interviewing proposes an unusual dynamic in that it often requires the participant to divulge personal or emotional information in the presence of a complete stranger. Thus, many interviewers find it helpful to ask the participant to address them as if they were “someone else,”<sup>[2]</sup> such as a close friend or family member. This is often an effective method for tuning into the aforementioned “inner voice”<sup>[2]</sup> of the participant and breaking down the more presentational barriers of the guarded “outer voice” which often prevails.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 3 Strengths and weaknesses

There are many methods. When considering what type of qualitative research method to use, Qualitative Interviewing has many advantages. Possibly the greatest advantage of Qualitative Interviewing is the depth of detail from the interviewee. Interviewing participants can paint a picture of what happened in a specific event, tell us their perspective of such event, as well as give other social cues. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language etc. of the interviewee can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question. This level of detailed description, whether it be verbal or nonverbal, can show an otherwise hidden interrelatedness between emotions, people, objects unlike many quantitative methods of research.<sup>[3]</sup>

In addition, Qualitative Interviewing has a unique advantage in its specific form. Researchers can tailor the questions they ask to the respondent in order to get rich, full stories and the information they need for their project. They can make it clear to the respondent when they need more examples or explanations.<sup>[4]</sup>

Not only can researchers also learn about specific events, they can also gain insight into people's interior experi-

ences, specifically how people perceive and how they interpreted their perceptions. How events affected their thoughts and feelings. In this, researchers can understand the process of an event instead of what just happened and how they reacted to it.

Another advantage of Qualitative interviewing is what it can give to the readers of academic journals and papers. Research can write a clearer report to their readers, giving them a “fuller understanding of the experiences of our respondents and a greater chance to identify with the respondent, if only briefly.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Now Qualitative Interviewing is not a perfect method for all types of research. It does have its disadvantages. First, there can be complications with the planning of the interview. Not only is recruiting people for interviews hard, due to the typically personal nature of the interview, planning where to meet them and when can be difficult. Participants can cancel or change the meeting place at the last minute. During the actual interview, a possible weakness is missing some information. This can arise from the immense multitasking that the interviewer must do. Not only do they have to make the respondent feel very comfortable, they have to keep as much eye contact as possible, write down as much as they can, and think of follow up questions. After the interview, the process of coding begins and with this comes its own set of disadvantages. First, coding can be extremely time consuming. This process typically requires multiple people, which can also become expensive. Second, the nature of qualitative research itself, doesn't lend itself very well to quantitative analysis. Some researchers report more missing data in interview research than survey research, therefore it can be difficult to compare populations<sup>[3]</sup>

### 4 How it feels to be a participant in qualitative research interviews

Compared to something like a written survey, interviews allow for a significantly higher degree of intimacy,<sup>[5]</sup> with participants often revealing personal information to their interviewers in a real-time, face-to-face setting. As such, this technique can evoke an array of significant feelings and experiences within those being interviewed.

On the positive end, interviewing can provide participants with an outlet to express themselves. Since the job of interviewers is to learn, not to treat or counsel, they do not offer participants any advice, but nonetheless, telling an attentive listener about concerns and cares can be pleasing. As qualitative researcher Robert S. Weiss puts it, “To talk to someone who listens, and listens closely, can be valuable, because one's own experience, through the process of being voiced and shared, is validated.”<sup>[6]</sup> Such validation, however, can have a downside if a participant feels let down upon termination of the interview relationship,<sup>[7]</sup> for, unlike with figures like therapists or

counselors, interviewers do not take a measure of ongoing responsibility for the participant, and their relationship is not continuous.<sup>[8]</sup> To minimize the potential for this disappointment, researchers should tell participants how many interviews they will be conducting in advance, and also provide them with some type of closure, such as a research summary or a copy of the project publication.<sup>[7]</sup>

On the negative end, the multiple-question based nature of interviews can lead participants to feel uncomfortable and intruded upon if an interviewer encroaches on territory that they feel is too personal or private. To avoid crossing this line, researchers should attempt to distinguish between public information and private information, and only delve deeper into private information after trying to gauge a participant's comfort level in discussing it.<sup>[8]</sup>

Furthermore, the comparatively intimate nature of interviews can make participants feel vulnerable to harm or exploitation.<sup>[9]</sup> This can be especially true for situations in which a superior interviews a subordinate, like when teacher interviews his or her student. In these situations, participants may be fearful of providing a "wrong answer," or saying something that could potentially get them into trouble and reflect on them negatively.<sup>[9]</sup> However, all interview relationships, not just explicitly superior-subordinate ones, are marked by some degree of inequality, as interviewers and participants want and receive different things from the technique.<sup>[9]</sup> Thus, researchers should always be concerned with the potential for participant feelings of vulnerability, especially in situations where personal information is revealed.

In order to combat such feelings of vulnerability and inequity and to make participants feel safe, equal, and respected, researchers should provide them with information about the study, such as who is running it and what potential risks it might entail, and also with information about their rights, such as the right to review interview materials and withdraw from the process at any time. It is especially important that researchers always emphasize the voluntary nature of participating in a study so that the participants remain aware of their agency.<sup>[9]</sup>

These aforementioned power dynamics present in interviews can also have specific effects on different social groups according to racial background, gender, age, and class. Race, for example, can pose issues in an interview setting if participants of a marginalized racial background are interviewed by white researchers,<sup>[9]</sup> in which case the existence of historical and societal prejudices can evoke a sense of skepticism and distrust.<sup>[9]</sup> Gender dynamics can similarly affect feelings, with men sometimes acting overbearingly when interviewing women and acting dismissively when being interviewed by women, and same-gendered pairs being vulnerable to false assumptions of commonality or a sense of implicit competition.<sup>[9]</sup> In terms of class, participants of perceived lower status demonstrate, in some cases, either excessive skepticism

or excessive submissiveness, and in terms of age, children and seniors may exhibit fears of being patronized.<sup>[9]</sup> In order to minimize these social group related negative feelings, researchers should remain sensitive to possible sources of such tensions, and act accordingly by emphasizing good manners, respect, and a genuine interest in the participant, all of which can all help bridge social barriers.<sup>[9]</sup>

Finally, another aspect of interviews that can affect how a participant feels is how the interviewer expresses his or her own feelings, for interviewers can project their moods and emotions onto those they are interviewing. For instance, if an interviewer feels noticeably uncomfortable, the participant may begin to share this discomfort,<sup>[9]</sup> and if an interviewer expresses anger, he or she is in danger of passing it on to the participant. So, researchers should try to remain calm, polite, and interested at all times.

## 5 Types of interviews

**Informal, Conversational interview** No predetermined questions are asked, in order to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the interviewee's nature and priorities; during the interview the interviewer "goes with the flow".

**General interview guide approach** Intended to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting the information from the interviewee.

**Standardized, open-ended interview** The same open-ended questions are asked to all interviewees; this approach facilitates faster interviews that can be more easily analyzed and compared.

**Closed, fixed-response interview** All interviewees are asked the same questions and asked to choose answers from among the same set of alternatives. This format is useful for those not practiced in interviewing. This type of interview is also referred to as structured.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 6 Household research

Research on households pose specific ethical problems of anonymity and consent among interviewees, and there is an ongoing controversy over whether spouses should be interviewed in personal, individual interviews or in couple interviews.<sup>[11]</sup>

## 7 Interviewer's judgements

According to Hackman and Oldman several factors can bias an interviewer's judgment about a job applicant. However these factors can be reduced or minimized by training interviews to recognize them.

Some examples are:

**Prior Information** Interviewers generally have some prior information about job candidates, such as recruiter evaluations, application blanks, online screening results, or the results of psychological tests. This can cause the interviewer to have a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward an applicant before meeting them.

**The Contrast Effect** How the interviewers evaluate a particular applicant may depend on their standards of comparison, that is, the characteristics of the applicants they interviewed previously.

**Interviewers' Prejudices** This can be done when the interviewers' judgement is their personal likes and dislikes. These may include but are not limited to racial and ethnic background, applicants who display certain qualities or traits and refuse to consider their abilities or characteristics.

## 8 Other types of interviews

- Cognitive interview
- Computer-assisted personal vs. telephone interviewing
- Ladder interview
- Mall-intercept personal interview
- Online interview
- Psychiatric interview
- Reference interview, between a librarian and a library user
- Repertory grid interview
- Structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interview
- Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV

## 9 Stages of interview investigation

- Thematizing, the why and what of the investigation
- Designing, plan the design of the study

- Interviewing, conduct the interview based on a guide
- Transcribing, prepare the interview material for analysis
- Analyzing, decide on the purpose, the topic, the nature and methods of analysis that are appropriate
- Verifying, ascertain the validity of the interview findings
- Reporting, communicate findings of the study based on academic criteria

## 10 See also

- Survey methodology
- Thematic analysis

## 11 References

- [1] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interview>
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## 12 Further reading

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