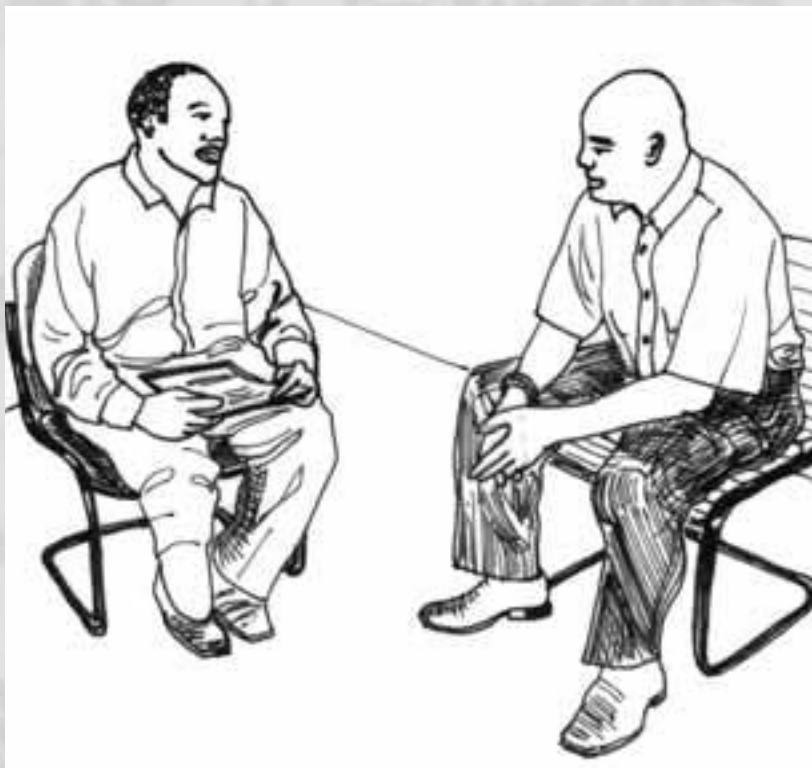


# Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

## Module 3

### **In-Depth Interviews**



# In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are one of the most common qualitative methods. One reason for their popularity is that they are very effective in giving a human face to research problems. In addition, conducting and participating in interviews can be a rewarding experience for participants and interviewers alike. For participants – whether members of the study population or someone related to the population in a professional capacity – in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to express themselves in a way ordinary life rarely affords them. Many people find it flattering and even cathartic to discuss their opinions and life experiences and to have someone listen with interest. For their part, interviewers engaged in in-depth interviews are offered the privilege of having people who are virtually strangers entrust them with a glimpse into their personal lives.

This module covers the basics of using in-depth interviews in applied research projects, including:

- Overview of In-Depth Interviewing
- Ethical Guidelines
- Logistics of Interviewing
- How to Be an Effective Interviewer
- Suggested Readings
- Case Study Samples
- Interview Steps
- Interview Checklist

## Overview of In-Depth Interviewing

### What is an in-depth interview?

The in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic. During in-depth interviews, the person being interviewed is considered the expert and the interviewer is considered the student. The researcher's interviewing techniques are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the research topic. Researchers engage with participants by posing questions in a neutral manner, listening attentively to participants' responses, and asking follow-up questions and probes based on those responses. They do not lead participants according to any preconceived notions, nor do they encourage participants to provide particular answers by expressing approval or disapproval of what they say.

In-depth interviews are usually conducted face-to-face and involve one interviewer and one participant. When safety is an issue for the interviewer, the presence of two interviewers is appropriate. In these situations, however, care must be taken not to intimidate the participant. Phone conversations and interviews with more than one participant also qualify as in-depth interviews, but, in this module, we focus on individual, face-to-face interviews.

## What can we learn from in-depth interviews?

In-depth interviews are useful for learning about the perspectives of individuals, as opposed to, for example, group norms of a community, for which focus groups are more appropriate. They are an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. They are also an opportunity for us to gain insight into how people interpret and order the world. We can accomplish this by being attentive to the causal explanations participants provide for what they have experienced and believe and by actively probing them about the connections and relationships they see between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs. Interviews are also especially appropriate for addressing sensitive topics that people might be reluctant to discuss in a group setting. Table 4 below summarizes some of the strengths of in-depth interviews in comparison to focus groups.

**Table 4. Strengths of in-depth interviews versus focus groups**

	<b>Appropriate for</b>	<b>Strength of method</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	Eliciting individual experiences, opinions, feelings Addressing sensitive topics	Elicits in-depth responses, with nuances and contradictions Gets at interpretive perspective, i.e., the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs
<b>Focus groups</b>	Identifying group norms Eliciting opinions about group norms Discovering variety within a population	Elicits information on a range of norms and opinions in a short time Group dynamic stimulates conversation, reactions

## What form do interview data take?

Interview data consist of tape recordings, typed transcripts of tape recordings, and the interviewer's notes. Notes may document observations about the interview content, the participant, and the context.

## How are interview data used?

Typed transcripts are the most utilized form of interview data. During the data analysis phase of the research, after data collection, transcripts are coded according to participant responses to each question and/or to the most salient themes emerging across the set of interviews.

While data is still being collected, researchers use expanded interview notes:

- during interviews, to remind themselves of questions they need to go back to, where they need more complete information, etc.
- during debriefing sessions with other field staff and investigators
- during transcription of interview recordings, to clarify and add contextual details to what participants have said

## Ethical Guidelines

### How do I explain the purpose of the interview?

You should explain the purpose of the interview to study participants within the broader context of the research study. In doing so, it is important that you be truthful and straightforward about the study objectives and the anticipated risks and benefits to the individual participant and the community, and that you identify the organizations involved in the study. It is also important not to create false expectations in order to obtain a participant's cooperation. Be cautious about making even small promises, such as saying a staff member can give a participant a ride home after the interview, unless you know for certain that they can be fulfilled.

### What should I say about confidentiality?

Assuring participants that what they say will be kept in confidence is important for earning their trust and thus for eliciting good data. You should understand the procedures outlined in the study protocol for protecting participants' privacy and be able to explain those steps clearly. If the participant raises concerns about confidentiality that you cannot address, offer to postpone the interview until you can respond to the stated concerns. You might also refer the participant to the study officials whose contact information is provided on the informed consent form.

You should also show how you will protect confidentiality by stating that you will not reveal anything you learn to other participants or members of the community. It is very important to adhere to this commitment. During the interview or in casual conversation

#### Modeling respect for confidentiality

##### Do not say:

"You know, I always promise to keep what people tell me confidential, so I can't tell you what Mary told me when I saw her yesterday. However, I hope you appreciate that I also will not be able to tell her what you tell me."

##### Do say:

"You know, I always promise to keep what people tell me confidential, so I can't tell you who else I have seen or what anyone has said. This also means that I will not be able to tell anyone that you and I had this interview, nor will I talk to anyone about what you tell me today."

#### Obtaining informed consent before an in-depth interview

1. For less literate populations, read the consent form aloud to the participant. Be sure you are using the appropriate language version of the form. Speak slowly. Ask the participant often whether he or she understands what you are saying, and explain any terms or sentences in your own words as necessary. For more literate populations, give the participant time to read the form. Then review each section with him or her and check for comprehension.
2. Once you are satisfied that the participant fully understands the research and his or her rights as a participant, ask for his or her consent to be interviewed. In some studies, a comprehension and evaluation tool may be used to ensure that participants understand the information explained to them. If the research presents greater than minimal risk, then the study team needs to consider additional options for ensuring that the participants understand the risks as well as their rights, especially if they are illiterate. This may include the use of witnesses or advocates, as is commonly done in biomedical research that presents greater than minimal risk.
3. If the study protocol requires you to obtain written consent, ask the participant to sign the consent form. After the participant signs the form, sign it yourself.
4. If the study protocol requires you to obtain oral consent, you should sign the consent form to document that you, the interviewer, have obtained oral consent from this participant.
5. Offer the participant a copy of the informed consent form. This document should always list the contact information for study officials to whom questions about the research may be directed.

beforehand or afterward, be careful not to make incidental comments about other people you have interviewed, as this behavior may suggest that you cannot be trusted. As with participant observation, people may test you by seeing if you will tell them what others have said; your refusal to disclose any information about others will reassure them about your commitment to protecting confidentiality.

### **How should informed consent be handled for an interview?**

Before asking any interview questions, you must obtain informed consent in accordance with procedures specified for the study. For in-depth interviews, informed consent is often oral and tape-recorded, but some studies may require participants to sign a written informed consent document. If the documents exist in multiple languages, be sure you use the version in the appropriate language for the participant.

In addition to informing participants about the voluntary nature of the study, a key purpose of informed consent is to ensure that they understand the risks and benefits entailed in participation. As noted in the *Qualitative Research Methods Overview* module, page 10, informed consent documents should also provide participants with information on how the interview data will be used, who will have access to the data, and whom they may contact for questions.

## **Logistics of Interviewing**

### **What are my responsibilities as an interviewer?**

The interviewer is responsible for fulfilling the following roles, tasks, and obligations before, during, and after the interview:

#### *Prepare for the interview*

- Recruit participants according to the recruitment strategy outlined in the work plan (if interviewers are involved in recruitment).
- Set up recording equipment and the physical space where interviews will take place.
- Become knowledgeable about the research topic, including anticipating and being prepared to answer any questions participants may have about it.
- Be reliable. To get participants to take the interview seriously, you need to demonstrate your own commitment. Arrive on time, equipped with the recording equipment, interview guide, and notebooks. Be both mentally and psychologically prepared to conduct the interview. Keep all promises you make to participants.

#### *Interview participants thoroughly*

- Obtain informed consent from each participant before the interview.
- Address all questions or topics listed in the interview guide.

#### **Anticipate questions**

Brainstorm about questions participants could ask and think about how you would answer them. You might be asked to explain how a given contraceptive method works, how HIV is transmitted, or the known efficacy of an investigational product. If you do not know the answer to a question, you should tell the participant that you will research the matter and get back to him or her with a response. Then be sure to follow up on this promise, in order to maintain your credibility.

- Ask follow-up questions (some of which may be scripted in the interview guide) in order to elicit participants' complete knowledge and experience related to the research topic.
- Probe participants for elaboration of their responses, with the aim of learning all they can share about the research topic.

#### Document participant behaviors

Note if the participant seems distracted, becomes emotional over a particular question or topic, or seems reluctant to discuss a subject area. Also make a note if you suspect the participant is not being truthful and why you think this.

#### Document the interview

- Record the interview using an audio (and sometimes video) recorder.
- Take backup notes.
- Observe and document participants' behaviors and contextual aspects of the interview as part of your field notes.
- Expand your notes as soon as possible after each interview, preferably within 24 hours, while your memory is still fresh.

### How do I recruit people to interview?

Recruiting participants is often a challenge, for a variety of reasons, including the often delicate nature of working with vulnerable populations; possible stigmatization of participants resulting from affiliation with the study; the high mobility of some populations; participants' concerns about confidentiality; and misinformation, lack of information, fear, or rumors about the study.

The work plan for each site should outline policies and strategies for recruiting participants. However, it is common for realities in the field to necessitate creative revision of these strategies. When developing a recruitment strategy, it can be helpful to consult with local people who are active in or have connections to the study population. They may be able to offer ideas about how to gain access to the population, how best to approach people, and possible obstacles to recruitment.

### Why and how would two people co-conduct an interview?

Typically, only one investigator conducts the interview, but sometimes it is appropriate to have two interviewers. For example, when interviews are not being recorded for some reason, an extra interviewer is needed to take notes while the other person conducts the interview. Safety concerns may also call for two interviewers, as may adhering to local norms regarding proper interactions between men and women.

When two field staff are present, they should decide on their roles before the interview. One person should take the role of conducting the interview (interviewer), while the other concentrates on taking notes (note-taker). (The interviewer can also take brief notes.) The note-taker should not interrupt or intervene in the interview unless invited to do so by the interviewer or asked a question by the participant.

Once finished with the questions, the interviewer should ask the note-taker if any points require clarification before the interview comes to a close. Both staff members should then debrief with each other (that is, discuss what happened and what was learned) either immediately after the interview or within a day. The note-taker should take detailed notes during the debriefing. These notes may then be reviewed and supplemented by the interviewer.

### **Where should I conduct the interview?**

Ideally, interviews should be conducted in a private location with no outsiders present and where people feel that their confidentiality is completely protected. Finding such a location may be difficult in some settings, but every effort should be made to protect participants' privacy to the greatest extent possible. One way to do this might be to rent a space in which to conduct interviews. Interviewers who will move among communities will need to find suitable locations on an ad hoc basis. Inviting participants to suggest a location where they would feel comfortable may also be a viable option.

When selecting a location for interviews, be sure to consider local implications of male-female interactions. For example, it would probably be inappropriate for a male field worker to conduct an interview alone with a female participant in her room at a women's boarding house.

### **How should I present myself to interview participants?**

The relationship between the interviewer and the participant begins at first contact, with the participant's first impression of the interviewer based on a variety of factors such as the greeting, manner of speaking, clothing, and body language. All of these should be appropriate for the specific culture and setting and convey respect for the participant. Cell phones should be turned off and placed out of view so as not to imply that the participant's testimony is of secondary importance.

### **What do I say in the interview?**

When conducting an in-depth interview, researchers ask mostly open-ended questions – that is, questions that encourage a detailed response rather than “yes,” “no,” or one-word answers – to elicit unstructured talk from participants about their experiences and opinions. Later, researchers analyze what participants say for insights into the person's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions.

The questions you should ask during the interview will be suggested or specified in an interview or question guide created in advance by the research team. The interview can be conducted with varying degrees of structure, however, depending on what the project calls for. For example, some interview guides specify the exact questions researchers should ask, along with follow-up questions and probes. Other guides simply contain a list of topics to be covered over the course of the interview, leaving the wording and order of questions up to the individual researchers.

It is common to conduct in-depth interviews with several different categories of people as part of a single study. This often involves a separate question guide for each category. For example, in a study about maternal health practices, in-depth interviews might be conducted with health care providers, pregnant women, and women who have given birth within the last year. Some questions in the three guides may overlap, but each guide will be tailored to elicit information specific to the category of participants being interviewed.

### **How long should the interview last?**

On average, in-depth interviews last from one to two hours. As you begin the interview, consider how much time you will likely have with the participant. Set realistic goals for covering all of the questions in the interview guide accordingly. It is a good idea to record the start and end times of each interview in your notebook. Interviews should be tape-recorded, if possible.

Ideally, the interview will flow like a conversation and end naturally, but this is not always the case. Be aware of signs of impatience, annoyance, and boredom from the participant. These are cues that the interviewer needs to be more attentive and engaging, or that it is time to wrap up the interview. It may also be appropriate to take a break, which may actually result in the participant providing additional information. Even though the tape recorder may be turned off during the break, you can take brief notes that you expand later.

### **What if the interview is interrupted?**

It sometimes happens that a participant interrupts the interview to attend to another matter. For example, a health care provider might be called to take an important telephone call, or a mother may need to tend to her child. Be patient and understanding if a participant needs to stop the interview temporarily to attend to personal responsibilities.

When an interruption occurs, stop the tape recorder and note the time in your field notes. While you wait for the participant to return, review your notes, consider what other questions you would like to ask, and note observations. When the participant returns, resume recording and again write down the time. You may want to prompt the participant to resume the discussion by recapitulating the last point and then asking a question about it.

If repeated interruptions make it difficult to keep the discussion going, you might ask if there would be a more convenient time or place where you could talk more privately. Offer to reschedule the interview if necessary.

### **What if a participant does not complete the interview?**

Sometimes participants elect not to complete an interview. If this happens and you would still like to use the interview data collected up to that point, ask them if they are willing to let you do so. Assure them that confidentiality will still be maintained. If they agree, manage the data as you would for any other interview. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.) If they do not agree, destroy the tape, interview guide, and any notes you have made related to the interviews and participants in question.

### **What if a participant knows little about the research topic?**

Some participants may turn out to have little knowledge about the research topic. If you discover this to be the case during the interview, do not be afraid to bring it to a close. Otherwise, there is the risk that participants will fabricate responses in order to please you or to avoid appearing ignorant. If there is a reimbursement associated with the interview, you should still provide the full amount.

### **How should I handle reimbursements?**

Policies on reimbursements vary from study to study. In accordance with local practices and with approval from relevant ethics committees, some studies provide financial compensation to participants. When this is the case, researchers should not refer to this compensation as “payment” or “incentive” for participation. Instead, use the term “reimbursement,” which acknowledges that the participant has taken time away from other obligations and may have incurred expenses – for transportation or child care, for example – to meet with you.

Note that all participants should be provided with the full reimbursement sum, regardless of whether they complete the interview. This includes:

- participants who arrive for the interview and decide not to participate after all
- participants who choose not to answer some questions
- participants who decide to withdraw from the study before or after they have completed the interview
- participants who turn out to have no knowledge about the interview topic



Procedures for documenting reimbursement dispersal are study-specific and usually outlined in the informed consent form. Commonly, in studies that require only verbal (and not written) informed consent, the interviewer signs a statement certifying that each participant was given the cash reimbursement. In studies that require written informed consent, participants may be asked to sign a receipt.

Note that accounting personnel are not always aware of the confidentiality issues related to research studies. The local principal investigator should be prepared to inform accounting personnel if the established reimbursement procedures risk compromising confidentiality, so that alternative procedures may be created. These procedures should be worked out by the on-site principal investigator before interviews begin and must comply with the ethics committee's approved protocol.

### **How do I document the interview?**

Documenting the interview consists of making tape recordings, writing field notes, and later expanding those notes. (See the tips on page 44.) When you cannot tape-record an interview, take notes that are as extensive as possible. Plan to expand those notes immediately after the interview. Before setting up any interviews, find out who is responsible for providing recording equipment and other materials, where they will be stored, and how to get access to them. Make sure to practice using the recording equipment before the interview.

### **What if the recording equipment fails?**

If the recording equipment fails, the notes you will have taken during the interview and later expanded will serve as backup documentation. Check for equipment failure immediately following the interview, and expand notes within 24 hours if a failure has occurred.

### **What should I do with my interview recordings and field notes?**

The module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, provides detailed guidelines for handling your recordings and field notes. In brief, the procedure is to label all materials according to the same convention, place them together in one large envelope, expand field notes, and type them into computer files. Then transcribe the tapes directly into a computer file or first by hand and then into a computer file. A sample transcript is included on page 47.

Interviewers should check the typed transcripts for accuracy if transcription has been performed by other staff members.

### **When should I share my data with the research team?**

At the local level, interviewers should debrief each other, as well as the local site coordinator or principal investigator, directly after the interview, at scheduled staff meetings, or according to some other arrangement. At the sponsor level, all electronic files are typically sent to a designated sponsor-affiliated staff member once the interviewer has reviewed them for accuracy.

### **How to Be an Effective Interviewer**

A productive interview is one in which participants relate a richly detailed, sincere account of how the research issues occur in their daily lives. Obtaining superior data requires that the interviewer be well prepared and have highly developed rapport-building skills, social and conversational skills specific to the capacity of interviewer, and facility with techniques for effective questioning.

The following steps will help you become comfortable with the interview process:

- *Be familiar with research documents.* An effective interviewer knows the research material well and is practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for an in-depth interview, become thoroughly familiar with the informed consent documents. Although you will read the form to or along with participants, you should also be able to explain its contents in your own words. Be prepared to address any questions participants may have about the content of the consent form, the terminology used, whom to contact for further information, the purpose of the research, and so on.  
Next, become thoroughly familiar with the interview guide. During the interview, you should not have to search through the guide for the next question. It is important to understand not only the purpose of each question, but also the purpose of the research as a whole. Depending on how structured the interview is, you may be called on to rephrase questions that are unclear to participants, or to spontaneously think of follow-up questions and probes. You should be able to recognize when a participant has provided a response that fulfills the intent of the question, when a response contains information that addresses a separate question or a scripted follow-up question, and which probes to use to elicit needed information that was absent in a participant's initial response. If the protocol permits you to ask questions out of order, being familiar with the guide also enables you to use it flexibly, taking advantage of natural shifts in the conversation. It is a good idea to review the interview guide before every interview.
- *Practice interviewing.* It is also helpful to practice interviewing techniques. This is best done through role-playing exercises with other researchers and study staff, using the actual interview question guides. (Some suggested exercises are provided in the Exercises for Training Data Collectors appendix, page 93.) You might also conduct pilot interviews with people in the community who are not participating in the study. In that case, however, you must obtain informed consent, just as you would from someone who was participating in the study. Informal practice sessions – such as with friends, family, or support staff or other researchers – do not require informed consent.

- *Practice using the equipment.* Finally, practice using the recording equipment and checking it before the interview. Equipment failure is all too common, but you can sometimes avoid it by being familiar with how the recorder operates. Before beginning an interview, check the batteries, test the microphone, and make sure that the tape is turning. Know how to use features like pause and high-low recording. We do not recommend using the voice activation feature because it may not record the entire dialogue.



### What are important skills for interviewing?

The interviewer's skills have an important influence on the comprehensiveness and complexity of the information that participants provide. The interviewer must be able to lend a sympathetic ear without taking on a counseling role; encourage participants to elaborate on their answers without expressing approval, disapproval, judgment, or bias; keep track of the questions yet let the conversation develop naturally; and manage the interview while still respecting the principle of participant-as-expert. The core skills required to establish positive interviewer/participant dynamics are rapport-building, emphasizing the participant's perspective, and accommodating different personalities and emotional states; these skills are described in Table 5 below.

**Table 5. Key skills for in-depth interviewing**

Skill	Includes	Rationale	Tips
Rapport-building	The ability to quickly create interviewer/participant dynamics that are positive, relaxed, and mutually respectful	Participants will talk freely, openly, and honestly about the research topic only if they: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-feel comfortable in the interviewer's presence</li> <li>-trust the interviewer</li> <li>-feel secure about confidentiality</li> <li>-believe the interviewer is interested in their story</li> <li>-do not feel judged</li> </ul>	Learn culturally-specific styles and techniques for building rapport. Suggestions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-be friendly</li> <li>-smile</li> <li>-use a pleasant tone of voice</li> <li>-use relaxed body language</li> <li>-incorporate humor</li> <li>-be humble</li> <li>-do not patronize</li> <li>-do not scold, coerce, or cajole participants</li> <li>-be patient</li> </ul>

Table 5. Key skills for in-depth interviewing (contd.)

Skill	Includes	Rationale	Tips
Emphasizing the participant's perspective	<p>Treating the participant as the expert</p> <p>Keeping the participant from interviewing you</p> <p>Balancing deference to the participant with control over the interview</p> <p>Being an engaged listener</p> <p>Demonstrating a neutral attitude</p>	<p>The interviewer's perspective on the research issue should be invisible. This avoids the risk that participants will modify their responses to please the interviewer instead of describing their own perspectives.</p>	<p>Remember that the purpose of the interview is to elicit the participant's perspective; consider yourself a student.</p> <p>If a participant asks for factual information during the interview, write down the questions and respond after the interview is over.</p> <p>If a participant asks what you think, deflect the question. Let the participant know that you consider his or her point of view more important.</p> <p>Don't overcompensate for perceived status differences by giving the participant too much control over the interview.</p> <p>Pay attention to what participants say and follow up with relevant questions and probes.</p> <p>Be aware that what you say, how you say it, and your body language can convey your own biases and emotional reactions. Use them instead to convey neutrality and acceptance.</p>
Adapting to different personalities and emotional states	<p>Being able to quickly adjust your style to suit each individual participant</p>	<p>Every participant has a unique character and demeanor. By adopting an appropriate demeanor for each individual, the interviewer can help the participant be comfortable enough to speak freely about the research topic.</p>	<p>Different interviewing styles may be needed for different participants – for example, be able to retain control of a conversation with a dominant personality and to animate a shy participant.</p> <p>Know how to tone down heightened emotions, such as when a participant starts crying or becomes belligerent.</p> <p>Adapting to each individual may require softening the way you broach sensitive issues, adjusting your tone of voice to be more sober or upbeat, or exhibiting increased warmth or social distance.</p>

## What does managing the interview involve?

Managing the interview effectively involves clearly explaining to participants the purpose and format of the interview. Bear in mind that this may be the first time that many individuals have ever participated in one. You should also set ground rules.

Taking the time to explain how an interview works can go a long way toward ensuring a smooth and fruitful interview. It will be up to you to decide the best way to do this according to the cultural context and study population. You might start by explaining that, although an interview is a type of conversation, it is different from typical conversations. You could then explain that you have a list of questions to which the participant should respond, that the participant should speak freely in response to each question, and that you will be directing the conversation in such a way as to ensure that all questions in the interview guide are addressed.



Clarifying roles can also be useful. Explain that while you are ultimately responsible for making sure that all questions in the interview guide are addressed during the interview, the participant will play the role of expert and you, the interviewer, will be the student. Explain that you are there to gain from the participant's own knowledge about the research topic, not to dispense advice.

Assure the participant that there are no right or wrong answers; it is his or her personal opinion and perspective that are of interest to the study.

It is important to emphasize the voluntary nature of the interview. Remind participants that they are not obligated to respond to any question. If the interview guide includes questions that may be of a personal or sensitive nature, explain this to participants in advance. You should emphasize that you would like for participants to respond to all questions as fully and honestly as possible, but only to the extent that they feel comfortable doing so.

Another important aspect of managing the interview is working within time constraints. Before beginning the interview, ask participants about any time limitations they have. When you know the time available, you can pace the interview in order to cover all the questions in the guide. One way to keep track of the questions you have asked or that have been addressed is to check them off in the guide. This is especially practical when you ask questions in a different order than they appear in the guide or when a participant's response applies to a question you have not yet asked.

If the instrument design allows, it can be advantageous to let the interview conversation proceed more or less naturally, as long as you can redirect the focus if necessary. Adapting the flow of the interview may involve recognizing when a participant has already addressed a particular question in a previous response, rephrasing a question, or asking questions in a different sequence from how they are organized in the interview guide (unless the research design requires a specific order). Again, this emphasizes the need for familiarity with the guides.

Because it is important to focus on eliciting the participant's perspective, you should not correct factual errors during the interview. Afterward, however, the interviewer is free and in some instances ethically obligated to provide the participant with relevant factual information. For

example, if a participant expresses the belief that mosquitoes transmit HIV, you should relay scientifically correct information about how HIV is transmitted. However, you should speak only on subjects about which you are well informed. Include these misconceptions and clarifications in your field notes for the interview.

### What are some techniques for effective questioning?

Proficiency in techniques for asking effective questions is especially important for leading interviews in which participants speak liberally. This involves keeping track of which questions have and have not been asked and answered; knowing how to phrase questions that encourage participants to provide elaborate, detailed (rather than brief) responses; and asking questions that elicit the participant's own views and experiences as opposed to reflecting the convictions of the interviewer. Relevant techniques include asking one question at a time, verifying unclear responses, asking open-ended questions, avoiding leading questions, and using follow-ups and probes.

### What does it mean to ask one question at a time?

Be careful not to pose several questions at once without giving the participant an opportunity to respond to individual questions. This is especially apt to happen when questions are grouped together in the interview guide. When it does, participants are unlikely to address each of the questions in full. A better technique for getting answers to all the questions is to ask them one at a time, which gives you the opportunity to provide clarification or to rephrase each question.

### How do I verify unclear responses?

If you are unsure that you accurately heard what the participant said, verify the response before going to the next question. You might say, for example, "I'm sorry, could you repeat what you just said? I didn't quite hear you." Be careful not to imply that the response was somehow incorrect. Alternatively, you might use the mirroring technique, where you reflect the participant's answer back to him or her in question form. For instance, you might say, "So you told her that you think being in that study is a sign of having tuberculosis?"

### How do I ask open-ended questions?

Closed-ended questions are questions that may be answered with a single word or phrase or with a "yes" or "no" response. An example is, "Do you use condoms regularly?" It is difficult to glean much insight from these brief responses, because they usually do not indicate "why" or "how." A better technique for

#### It's not just what you say . . .

**Tone** refers to the volume and sound quality of a person's voice. It can reveal biases such as excitement, approval and disapproval, scorn, surprise, and disbelief. Remember that cultural context affects how tone of voice will be interpreted – what is moderate in one context may seem inappropriately loud in another. For example, depending on where you are, increasing the volume of your voice might indicate that you have become irritated or angered by a particular response, or it could be perceived as a fluctuation of the voice typical of everyday conversation. The age, gender, social status, educational background, and economic class of both you and the participant might also factor into which tone you should adopt. Generally, you should aim to use a friendly tone that will not betray your personal opinions or emotional state.

**Body language** is the culturally specific interpretation of what it means to move or position the body in a particular way. Facial expressions are perhaps the most obvious example, but gestures, posture, and constant movement can also be powerful indicators of a person's mood, opinion, and evaluative stance. Interviewers should be conscious of their body language at all times and be careful not to imply, for example, boredom, aggression, or exasperation. Instead, body language that indicates patience, pleasant mood, open attitude, and sincere interest will serve to encourage participants to express themselves without reserve.

**Table 6. Unbiased versus leading questions**

<u>Unbiased question</u>	<u>Leading question</u>
"I've heard some people in this community say that most smart people use a condom, and others say that they know smart people who don't use condoms. What do you think?"	"Most smart people in this community always use condoms, don't they?"
"Why did you want to use the female condom?" Potential follow-up question: "What were you trying to protect yourself from?"	"Was one reason that you wanted to use the female condom because you were trying to prevent sexually transmitted infections?"
"What do you think stops people in the school community from talking about sex and condoms?"	"Do you think people in the school community don't talk about sex and condoms because they might be stigmatized and seen as promiscuous?"

getting in-depth answers is to phrase questions as open-ended – that is, requiring more than a “yes” or “no” response. Open-ended questions set no limits on the range or length of responses, instead giving participants the opportunity to explain their position, feelings, or experiences. An example is, “Would you please describe your typical condom use?”

### **What are leading questions and how do I avoid them?**

Leading questions are questions that are worded in such a way as to influence participants’ responses – in other words, questions that lead participants along a particular line of thinking. Asking leading questions risks conveying your own value judgments and biases and imposing a perspective on participants. When asked a leading question, participants are likely to provide a response that accords with it simply because they are reluctant to contradict the interviewer. To avoid this, ask neutral questions free of preconceptions. Table 6 above provides examples of leading and unbiased questions.

### **What are follow-up questions and how do I use them?**

Follow-up questions (or sub-questions) are intended to ensure that participants provide the complete set of information each main question was designed to elicit. They prompt the participant to speak on some aspect not

#### **Examples of effective probes**

##### **Direct questions:**

- “What do you mean when you say ...?”
- “Why do you think ...?”
- “How did this happen?”
- “How did you feel about ...?”
- “What happened then?”
- “Can you tell me more?”
- “Can you please elaborate?”
- “I’m not sure I understand X... Would you explain that to me?”
- “How did you handle X?”
- “How did X affect you?”
- “Can you give me an example of X?”

##### **Indirect probes:**

- Neutral verbal expressions such as “uh huh,” “interesting,” and “I see”
- Verbal expressions of empathy, such as, “I can see why you say that was difficult for you”
- Mirroring technique, or repeating what the participant said, such as, “So you were 19 when you had your first child ...”
- Culturally appropriate body language or gestures, such as nodding in acknowledgment

mentioned in response to the original question. Sub-questions are often provided in the interview guide under each main question or topic, as cues for the interviewer. If a participant answers a sub-question in the initial response, it is not necessary to then pose that sub-question. Engaged listening will help you decide which follow-up questions to ask.

### **What are probes and how do I use them?**

Probes are neutral questions, phrases, sounds, and even gestures interviewers use to encourage participants to elaborate on their answers and explain why or how. Suggestions for probes are sometimes outlined in the interview guide, but they are also left to the discretion of the interviewer. The particular probe used depends on the response given by the individual participant. Probing therefore requires the interviewer to listen carefully to participants and to engage actively with what they say.

You should use probes when the participant's response to your question is brief or unclear, when the participant seems to be waiting for a reaction from you before continuing to speak, or when the person appears to have more information on the subject. As much as possible, probe for more detail about what the participant thinks, feels, and experiences in relationship to the research topic. Do not assume that you understand the intent of a brief response. Instead, use probes to further or confirm your understanding and to encourage more explanation. Be careful, however, not to use probes to excess. Balance knowing when to probe with knowing when to go to the next question. If responses are repetitive or lacking in substance, or if the participant becomes annoyed or upset about lingering on a particular topic, it is best to advance to the next question.

Probing is probably the most important technique in qualitative interviewing, but also the hardest to master. It requires practice, thorough knowledge of the interview guide and research objectives, and a solid understanding of what kind of information each question is intended to elicit. It also requires patience and sensitivity, effective time management, and good interpersonal skills.

### **What are indirect probes and how do I use them?**

Indirect probes are verbal and physical expressions that indicate that the interviewer is listening attentively. It is important to note that the appropriateness and effectiveness of indirect probes vary from culture to culture. The box on page 42 offers examples of effective probes, including both direct questions and indirect probes.

### **How do I take field notes?**

Interviewers must take notes during the interview, regardless of whether it is being tape-recorded. These notes serve as a backup when recording fails and to capture nonverbal information. They are also valuable when a participant asks the interviewer to turn off the tape recorder during discussion of particularly confidential information.

Interviewers write their notes on the question guide or in a notebook as they are leading the interview. Because you are actively engaged in the interview, your notes will be less detailed than those of, say, a focus group note-taker. The tips on page 44 offer some suggestions for formatting and writing interview notes. (See also the Case Study Samples, page 46.)

## TIPS

### Tips for taking interview notes

**Begin each notebook entry** with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.

**Leave space** on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section on “How do I expand my notes?” on this page.)

**Take notes strategically.** It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes.

**Use shorthand.** Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.

**Write on the interview question guide.** Save time by writing notes directly in the question guide under the relevant question. If it is not possible to record direct quotations, write down key words and phrases.

**Distinguish clearly between participant comments and your own observations.** You could use your own initials or “MO” to indicate “my observation.” For example: “MO – embarrassed by empty beer bottles in room.” This documents the researcher’s observation that the participant seemed embarrassed about the empty beer bottles in the room.

**Cover a range of observations.** In addition to documenting what people say, note as well as you can their body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; and other information that could be relevant.

### How do I expand my notes?

Following each in-depth interview, data collectors need to expand their notes into rich descriptions of what they have observed. (See the Case Study Samples, page 46.)

This involves transforming your raw notes into a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations, a task most conveniently done using a computer. If no computer is available within a day or so, you should expand your notes by hand. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format, as discussed in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes*, preferably within 24 hours of the interview. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as data collection, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook to expand the notes you wrote in the interview guide. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.

- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words.* A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a descriptive narrative describing what happened and what you learned. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.
- *Identifying questions for follow-up.* Write down questions about participant responses that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research.
- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.

## Suggested Readings

Kvale S. *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications, 1996.

Rubin HJ, Rubin IS. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. London: Sage Publications, 1995.

Spradley JP. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.

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For additional information on this topic, refer to Chapter 4. Collecting Qualitative Data: The Science and the Art in these companion guides:

*Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research*

*Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health*

Sample Interview Guide with Field Notes

**Family Planning Service Provider Interview Guide**

Archival #: CCIISP01  
 Site: Morning Star Clinic  
 Interviewer: Beatrice B.  
 Date: 7-6-04  
 Start: 10:00 am  
 End: 11:10 am

(Question 1)  
 What family planning methods do you provide in the clinic?

all - LT, perm  
 - Norplant  
 - inject  
 - condoms

(Question 2)  
 Describe the process of how you provide family planning services.

① Show all, ② counsel  
 ③ Choose  
 Exam, checkup appt

(Question 3)  
 Describe any challenges you face in promoting condom use.

Could wk w/ training  
 Rumors likely  
 (tone neg)

(Question 4)  
 How popular are condoms as a family planning method?

Stigma (#s)  
 Prob w/ confidentiality

Sample Expanded Field Notes

Archival #: CCIISP01  
 Site: Morning Star Clinic  
 Interviewer: Beatrice B.  
 Date: 7-6-04  
 Start: 10:00 a.m.  
 End: 11:10 a.m.

This interviewee has been a nurse at the Morning Star FP Clinic in Capital City for 2 years.

At this clinic they offer all methods including long-term, permanent, pills, injections, Norplant, condoms, coil. Clients are free to choose the method they want to use. The typical procedure is that when the client comes to the clinic, the nurse shows them (explains?) all the methods, counsels them on how they are used (also whether particular ones better suited to the individual?), and allows them to select their preferred method. The person is then examined and fitted with or given the method of their choice. Clients are required to make a checkup appointment (for how long afterwards?) to make sure everything is going well for them in relationship to the method. (How many people really come back for the checkup? Is there a charge for the checkup? How often are methods like BC pills supplied to the client, i.e., are they required to come back to the clinic to be examined if they want to continue using the method?)

The interviewee said that increasing women's opportunities for HIV testing and counseling by offering those services at the clinic could work if providers were given the proper training, but her tone of voice was doubtful. She really did not seem convinced. She cited rumors in the community as a potential barrier. Other people know who comes to the clinic and how often. It was not clear to me whether men played a role in the rumor problem or not – she only mentioned women talking about other women criticizing them for going to get so many condoms. People at the clinic (employees? or other clients?) talk about who they have seen there, evident because clients find that people they have not told know. Thus, confidentiality appears to be a problem already. (Right now it starts rumors that frequent clients are having a lot of sex, but with HIV services the repercussions could be more significant.)

## Sample Interview Transcript

### Family Planning Service Provider Interview (page 1)

Archival #: CCIISP01

Site: Morning Star FP Clinic

Interviewer: Beatrice B.

Transcriber: Beatrice B.

Translator: Samuel D.

Typist: Samuel D.

Date: 7-6-04

Start: 10:00 a.m. End: 11:10 a.m.

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent

I: Do you consent freely to participate in this tape-recorded interview?

R: Yes, I consent freely.

(Question 1)

I: As a family planning provider, what do you do or which methods do you provide in this clinic?

R: We provide all methods, some of them being the pills, injection, Norplant, coil, condoms and the permanent family planning methods.

(Question 2)

I: How do you go about that?

R: Usually when a client comes, we counsel them on all the methods, how they work, how they are used, and then the client chooses which method she feels she can use.

I: Ehee ...

R: Then you go ahead and examine and evaluate if she is eligible for the method, we then give it and then we give a return date, and if she has any problem, she can come and we check it out.

I: Ehee ...

R: And we are there to assure them of confidentiality, giving instructions and the methods how they are used, the likely side effects, and how they can deal with them. So that they are free to make their own choices on family planning.

(Question 3)

I: If VCT was to be brought into this clinic, is there anything that makes it very difficult to say promote the condom or convince someone to use the condom? Is there something?

R: If you are seen everyday coming for the condoms, people may wonder, "Are you sexy that you cannot even refrain even for a month (laughter) why are you finishing my condoms?" (Laughter)

I: Who will complain about condoms being finished?

R: Now the attitude, if you feel the sisters will see you being given 200 condoms.

I: So there are some clients who fear to come for condoms because they feel they will be seen?

R: I think the client service provider relationship is not really very confidential with all the providers, with some providers. Because some women, if they feel somebody will know about the services they come for, they will not come for it. So maybe she will come for a condom then she hears somebody say, "I heard that you came here for condoms, I was told." You see this client will say I was only with X, so why did Y also know? Which means they talked about it. So clients will fear – also fear people knowing they came for the HIV testing.

I: Okay.

R: Because confidentiality is not guaranteed.

I: What can be the solution to that?

I: Privacy, confidentiality, they are some of rights of the client, so if the service provider doesn't know that those are the rights of the clients, he/she can just play around with them, but if you know them, you know how to go about it.

## Interview Steps

### Preparing for the Interview

#### *Getting familiar with the instruments:*

- 1 Study the interview guide.
- 2 Study the informed consent document.
- 3 Practice with a partner.

#### *Day of the interview:*

- 4 Using a checklist, verify that you have all the equipment. (See the Interview Checklist, page 49.) If the instruments and consent forms exist in more than one language, be sure you have the appropriate ones for that participant.
- 5 Label all data documentation materials with an identical archival number, including tapes, notebooks, and question guides. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, for how to create archival numbers.)
- 6 Arrive early at the interview site to set up equipment.
- 7 Test your recording equipment.

### Conducting the Interview

- 8 Greet the participant in a friendly manner to begin establishing positive rapport.
- 9 Briefly describe the steps of the interview process (informed consent, question and answer, their questions, reimbursement).
- 10 Obtain informed consent.
- 11 Turn on the tape recorder and verify that it is working.
- 12 Verify informed consent orally with the tape recorder on.
- 13 Conduct the interview according to the interview guide.
- 14 End the question-asking phase of the interview.
- 15 Give the participant the opportunity to ask questions.
- 16 Reconfirm the participant's consent while the tape recorder is still on.
- 17 Turn off the tape recorder and thank the participant.
- 18 Clarify any factual errors expressed by participants during the interview.
- 19 Reimburse the participant in accordance with study procedures.

### After the Interview

- 20 Check the tape to see if the interview was recorded. If it was not, expand your notes immediately.
- 21 Punch out the re-record tab.
- 22 Make sure all materials are labeled with the archival number.
- 23 Debrief with other field staff.
- 24 Assemble all materials into one envelope. Double-check that you have completed all forms and that all materials are appropriately labeled. Note and explain any missing materials on the archival information sheet. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.)
- 25 Expand your notes within 24 hours if possible.

## Interview Checklist

### Make arrangements for

- Private setting for interview site
- Transportation of staff to interview site
- Transportation of participant to interview site
- Refreshments for participants (if applicable)

### What to take to the interview

#### *Equipment*

- 1 tape recorder (plus 1 extra, if available)
- 2 blank 90-minute cassette tapes per interview
- Spare batteries
- Field notebook and pens

#### *Interview packet*

- 1 large, heavy-duty envelope
- Archival information sheet with archival number
- 1 copy of interview guide (in the appropriate language for participant)
- 2 informed consent forms (1 for interviewer, 1 for participant, in the appropriate language)
- Participant reimbursement (if applicable)
- Reimbursement form (if applicable)

### What to place in the envelope after the interview

- Completed archival information sheet
- Signed informed consent form (signed only by interviewer if oral, by participant and interviewer if written)
- Labeled interview guide with notes
- Field notes
- Labeled cassette tapes, re-record tabs punched out
- Signed reimbursement form (if applicable)

