Preparing and conducting interviews to collect data

Article *in* Nurse Researcher · May 2013

DOI: 10.7748/nr2013.05.20.5.28.e327 · Source: PubMed

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Cite this article as: Doody O, Noonan M (2013) Preparing and conducting interviews to collect data. Nurse Researcher. 20, 5, 28-32.

Date of submission: April 2 2012. Date of acceptance: June 18 2012.

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Peer review
This article has been subject to double-blind review and checked using antiplagiarism software

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Abstract

Aim To describe three styles of interviews and discuss issues regarding planning and conducting interviews.

Background Interviews are probably the approach most used to collect data in studies. They are particularly useful in uncovering the story behind a participant's experiences. Researchers can follow a line of questions to gain information about a topic, or further explore responses or findings. But the researcher needs to plan and decide the format of the interview before collecting data.

Review methods The authors included papers on structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews published in a peer-reviewed journal and in English.

Discussion Interviews are one of the most common methods of data collection in qualitative research. However they require the researcher to have a sound understanding of their use and appropriateness. The ability to conduct interviews is one that develops over time and to aid the researcher in developing their interview skills they should consult with other researchers, seeking comments and advice and, critically, to appraise audio recordings.

Conclusion This article aims to support students who are undertaking research modules as part of their academic studies, writing a research proposal or novice researchers who are about to use interviews as a means of data collection..

Implications for research/practice To conduct a successful interview, researchers need to develop their interview technique, choose the right method and carefully plan for all aspects of the process.

Keywords Structured interview, semi-structured interview, unstructured interviews, interview guide

Introduction

AN INTERVIEW is a method of collecting data in which quantitative or qualitative questions can be asked. Quantitative questions are closed, whereas qualitative questions are open-ended, with participants responding in their own words. Interviews are the most frequently used method of collecting data in qualitative research and their popularity is related to their being perceived as 'talking' and talking is natural (Griffee 2005). In qualitative research, the researcher aims to understand people's lives as they are lived (Schwandt 2001, Lambert and Loiselle 2008, Schultze and Avital 2011).

Interviews generate deeply contextual accounts of participants' experiences and their interpretation of them (Schultze and Avital 2011). The interaction that takes place during interviews between researchers and participants may be beneficial for the participants and provide them with the opportunity to explore events in their lives (Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

There is a range of formats from which to choose, including structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The research design determines the method most likely to generate the data to answer the research question. As with other methods of data collection, interviews, have advantages and disadvantages to their use (Box 1).

Structured interviews

In structured interviews, each participant is asked the same questions using the same wording and in the same order as all the other participants

(Corbetta 2003). This is done with the assistance of an interview schedule that contains the set protocol of questions and 'probes', and is adhered to throughout the interviews (McKenna *et al* 2006, Ryan *et al* 2009).

The strengths of a structured interview are that it is efficient with regards to time, it limits researcher subjectivity and bias, and the researcher controls the topics and format of the interview, making it easier to code, compare and analyse data (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). Nurses are also familiar with the process, because of the structured questionnaires used in assessment and admission. However, while a structured interview ensures that comparable responses are gathered from each participant, it can be like a spoken questionnaire, leaving no room for elaboration (Berg 2009). Holloway and Wheeler (2010) suggested that qualitative researchers should only use a structured interview to elicit sociodemographic data.

Unstructured interviews

An unstructured interview often starts with a broad, open question concerning the area of study, with subsequent questions dependent on the participant's responses (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). The term 'unstructured' is misleading in the sense that no interview is entirely devoid of structure; if this were so, the data gathered may not be appropriate to the research question (Britten 1995). So, while the interview is non-directive and flexible, the researcher does follow an interview guide, comprising themes rather than specific questions. This enables the participant's thoughts and interests to be explored in depth, which, in turn, generates rich data (Ryan *et al* 2009, Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

Processing data from unstructured interviews can be difficult and time-consuming because it involves bringing together similar statements from different participants and links are often difficult to make. Researchers need to ask questions carefully, consider what to ask and how to phrase it appropriately, and know when to prompt participants and probe responses. They have to listen actively and note any new or interesting data the participant provides. This requires them to be good communicators and to possess good facilitation skills.

The strengths of such interviews are that they do not restrict the questions that can be asked and are useful when little is known about a topic or in collecting background data (Ryan *et al* 2009). However, they can be unsuitable for the novice researcher and are prone to researcher bias, which can result in inappropriate questions being asked. Participants may also talk about irrelevant issues, making it difficult to code and analyse the data.

Box 1 Advantages and disadvantages of interviews as a method of collecting data

Advantages	Disadvantages
☐ They are useful to gain insight and context. ☐ They help participants describe what is important to them. ☐ They are useful in generating quotes and stories. ☐ They enable the researcher to develop a rapport. ☐ They give the researcher the opportunity to observe as well as listen. ☐ They enable more complex questions to be asked. ☐ The researcher can explain the purpose of the research and answer any questions the participant may have about the study. ☐ The researcher can probe the participant's responses and seek further clarification. ☐ Participants can seek clarification of a question. ☐ They help the participant to give detailed responses. ☐ Can explore participants' reasons for acting in a certain way or their interpretations of events. ☐ They are more appropriate for certain groups, such as those with reading or writing difficulties. ☐ Interviews can be a rewarding for participants as they stimulate self-exploration and discovery. ☐ Personal benefit: the telling of one's story.	☐ They may seem intrusive to the participant. ☐ They are time-consuming, not only in terms of conducting them but also in relation to arranging them, travelling to the venue, post-interview transcription and analysis of the data. ☐ They can be expensive compared with other methods. ☐ Interviews on a personal and/or intimate subject can evoke strong feelings and these feelings need to be handled with great sensitivity. ☐ They are susceptible to bias, which may include: – The participant's desire to please the researcher. – Saying what they think/feel the researcher wishes to hear, such as giving an official point of view rather than their personal view. – The desire to create a good impression may lead to participants not answering honestly. – There is a tendency to say something rather than nothing if the participant cannot answer a question or has nothing to say on a topic. – The researcher's views can influence the participant's responses by expressing surprise or disapproval.

Effective use of unstructured interviews includes Moyle's (2002) study with participants who had a major depressive illness, and McCann and Clark's (2005) study with participants who had schizophrenia. These suggested that researchers using this type of interview should ideally follow the direction of the participants' storytelling and that this can be loosely guided by aides-memoires or agendas. The studies also provided good examples of how to conduct an interview in response to the participants' needs; the interview questions took into consideration the cognitive effects of schizophrenia and the effects neuroleptic medications may have on participants' memory and concentration.

Semi-structured interviews

The most common type of interviews used in qualitative research are semi-structured interviews (Holloway and Wheeler 2010) and involve the use of predetermined questions, where the researcher is free to seek clarification. An interview guide is developed to collect similar types of data from all participants and create a sense of order (David and Sutton 2004, Bridges *et al* 2008, Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

The interview can be flexible, with open-ended questions and the chance to explore issues that arise spontaneously (Berg 2009, Ryan *et al* 2009). The researcher is free to vary the order and wording of the questions (Power *et al* 2010), depending on the direction of the interview, and to ask additional questions (Corbetta 2003).

The researcher can explore new paths that emerge during the interview that may not have been considered initially (Gray 2004). He or she is able to word questions instinctively and develop a conversational style during the interview that focuses on the topic (Patton 2002). One drawback is that novice researchers are often unable to identify where to ask prompt questions or probe responses, so some relevant data may not be gathered.

Hand (2003) and Dearnley (2005) found that the open nature of the questions encouraged depth and vitality, which helped new concepts to emerge. This increased the validity of the study, by assisting them in collecting rich data for analysis. Buus *et al* (2011) also highlighted the use of semi-structured interviews in obtaining psychiatric nurses' reflections on participating in clinical supervision groups.

Planning interviews

Successful interviews start with careful planning that considers the focus of the research question. Developing an appropriate interview guide or structured interview can help to achieve a comfortable interaction with the participant. This, in turn, will enable the participant to provide a detailed account of the experience at the focus of the study (Smith *et al* 2009). The process involves identifying a broad area in which the researcher hopes to hear from the participants, then thinking about the topics that the interview will cover. Following this, the topics can be organised into a logical sequence. In unstructured or semi-structured interviews, the order of the questions may change (Bryman 2012).

Developing a guide requires planning for any difficulties that may arise (Smith *et al* 2009). These include: the phrasing of complex questions, discussions of sensitive topics, ways to refer to therapeutic support, and participants who are reserved. An important step is to discuss the interview guide with a potential participant, co-researcher or supervisor (Smith *et al* 2009). The responses to the interview questions should provide the researcher with an opportunity to answer the research question (Smith *et al* 2009).

Questions in qualitative interviews are open-ended, clear, neutral and sensitive in nature. Patton (2002) said questions can be based on:

- Behaviour or experience.
- Opinion or value.
- Feeling.
- Knowledge.
- Sensory experience.
- Demographic or background details.

Generally, it is best to start with questions the participant can answer easily and then move onto more difficult or sensitive topics. Comprehensible language that is relevant to the interviewees should be used and leading questions avoided (Bryman and Cassell 2006). Most participants are willing to provide information, but they require guidance about the amount of detail required.

Probes or prompts can be used to encourage elaboration or explanation (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). Probes are a way for the researcher to clarify a participant's response to a question using focused follow-up questions. Probes such as: 'How did you feel about that?' and 'Can you tell me more about that?' enable a greater understanding of interesting or important points that have been discussed. Smith *et al* (2009) suggested that prompts are only required for more complex or abstract questions.

Novice researchers need to develop their skills over time. One way to do this is to listen back to an interview and transcribe it before the next one. This provides the opportunity for them to identify when they could have responded to answers and probed responses. It will also identify if any questions are confusing or are being misinterpreted

by participants, and determine if any changes are required to the interview guide. In addition, seeking comments and advice from supervisors and/or other researchers will assist the novice to develop his or her interview skills.

Participants should be prepared so that they understand what an interview is, that it will be audio-recorded and the time commitment involved. The information sheet and consent form can provide this. Some researchers may opt to give a copy of the interview schedule to participants before interviews (Smith *et al* 2009). The main principles governing the interview can be summarised again before it begins.

Interviews take place in a social context and this affects the relationship between the interviewer and participant. The site of the interview is an important consideration and may affect data collection. Interviews should always be conducted at a time and place of the participant's convenience, in a comfortable setting that is safe and free from interruptions. Interviews that take place in the participant's home may be more relaxed and place the participant in some position of control (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). However, household obligations and family commitments may result in distractions and interruptions so a neutral venue can be more appropriate (Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

The interview schedule or guide should be learned before the interview, as it may be distracting for the participant if the researcher refers to it during the interview and it may affect the flow of the interview. A well-prepared researcher is more likely to be engaged, listen attentively and respond appropriately in the interview (Smith *et al* 2009).

Conducting interviews

The researcher should first explain the type of interview to be conducted, its nature and the general format the interview will take. He or she should state that there are no right or wrong answers and that the aim of the interview is to hear the participant's experiences. The researcher may identify his or her role in the interview, and the participants should be informed that they can take their time in thinking and talking throughout the interview (Smith *et al* 2009). If the researcher wants participants to ask questions, this needs to be specified. The researcher should address whether the participants should ask questions as they arise or wait until the end of the interview. The researcher should also indicate how long the interview should take and provide the participant with details for questions related to the study.

There are various ways of recording interviews: writing notes at the time can interfere with the interview process and notes written afterwards can miss details. In certain circumstances, written notes are preferable to audio-recordings, but most people will agree to be recorded, even though it may take them a little time to feel comfortable and speak freely. It is essential to use good quality equipment that has been tested and with which the researcher is familiar. The wishes of the participants in relation to the recording of the interview must remain paramount and they must be able to instruct the researcher to turn off the audio-recorder at any time or not to use it for the interview.

While note-taking can be distracting or interfere with the interview, it is generally the means by which notes are taken that is the influencing factor. Novice researchers may think that taking notes will ensure nothing is missed, but this can detract from their ability to listen actively to participants and probe answers. Therefore, they need to develop the ability to balance the volume of notes taken during the interview with these other factors. This is achieved by writing key words or phrases that will enable them to reflect on the discussion at the end of the interview, and elaborate on their ideas, feelings and memory of the discussion.

It is important to build trust and establish rapport, because the person needs to be comfortable answering questions honestly. A position of equality and mutual respect is central to the relationship between the researcher and participant (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). Smith *et al* (2009) suggested that if the interviewing style is clear and confident, participants will know that the researcher does not have a pre-determined agenda and is interested in hearing about their experiences.

A discussion with participants about the steps that will be taken to maintain confidentiality and anonymity will also help to build trust, as will listening to the participants' experiences and concerns, and recognising them as active partners in the interview (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). During the interview, the researcher needs to show empathy, listen actively and maintain eye contact. It is important that he or she does not exhibit strong reactions and maintains a neutral demeanour, as participants will not want to say things that they feel the researcher may disagree with.

Asking questions about the participant's current situation before questions about the past or future may help the participant to engage more easily with the questions. Questions should be as neutral as possible, asked one at a time and worded clearly. The use of 'why' questions may cause participants to feel defensive, which may inhibit their responses to the question and future questions.

The researcher should help participants to come naturally to the end of their response before asking further questions to explore the topics that arose during the conversation. He or she could summarise the participant's last statements to encourage more discussion. The final questions should be to help participants to provide any other information they think may add to the research and their impressions of the interview.

Good interviewing requires the researcher to accept that the course and content of an interview cannot be determined in advance (Smith *et al* 2009). He or she must also be cognisant of the effect the interview has on the participant. If the participant is uncomfortable with a line of questioning, this may become evident through non-verbal behaviour. The researcher needs to be able to respond by moving away from the topic, rephrasing the question or, in some cases, pausing or ending the interview.

After the interview, the researcher can make notes as a means of reflecting on his or her impressions of the interaction. Potential challenges include remembering the issues to return to, the effort required to remain focused and attentive during the interview, and being over-intrusive and excited about an issue and accidentally leading the participant. Smith *et al* (2009) contended that it is impossible to achieve a perfect interview technique, but that this will improve with practice.

In nursing research, the researcher has to be aware of the reactions and emotions of participants. Novice researchers may find Walls *et al*'s (2010) and Elmir *et al*'s (2011) discussions of interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics, and Mitchell's (2011) reflection on the emotional potential of qualitative interviewing useful guides in dealing with these challenges.

Conclusion

Interviews are used in research as a way to collect data to gain knowledge from individuals. The type of interview used will depend on the objectives of the researcher, who can choose from structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Interviews elicit narratives that can be more meaningful than interviews based on questions and answers, as they turn questions about a given topic into storytelling invitations (Hollway and Jefferson 1997). Before conducting interviews, the researcher must develop and pilot the interview guide, and consider carefully the location and equipment used. As interviews involve one-to-one interaction and sensitive issues often arise, it is important that the researcher considers all ethical aspects.

During interviews, the researcher needs to establish a rapport with the participants, actively listen and ask questions that fulfil the research objective. Nurses and midwives often feel that they possess the essential skills for interviewing and many of their skills are transferable. However, to conduct an interview successfully, researchers need to monitor and be aware of their interviewing technique. This can be achieved by critically appraising audio-recordings of interviews and asking others for their comments, and is essential at the early phase of the study.

Conflict of interest
None declared

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