

CONDUCTING SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

WHY MASTER THIS SKILL?

Semi-structured interviews are a widely used technique in development research. Unlike formal interviews, which follow a rigid format of set questions, semi-structured interviews focus on specific themes but cover them in a conversational style. They are often the best way for learning about the *motivations* behind people's choices and behaviour, their *attitudes and beliefs*, and the *impacts on their lives* of specific policies or events. And they often provide valuable information that wasn't anticipated by the researcher. Whether you are interviewing a ministry official, a farm worker, or a head teacher, there are tips and techniques for getting the most from the conversation.

HOW TO CONDUCT A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. Identifying the right people to interview

- Who you should talk to will depend on your research topic.
- Are there key informants you should meet (e.g. the village chief, the head of the women's union, an influential trader, a government official)? If so, it's best not to meet with the key informant first: speak to others, and use what you learn to focus your questions for the key informant.
- Are you seeking the testimony of members of the community? Make sure that you do not only gather cases that fit what you expect to find: seek diversity. In order to widen your contacts, use the 'snowballing' technique: ask each interviewee to suggest other people you could talk to. The risk here is that you only meet people within one social network, so ask interviewees to suggest diverse people (older/younger people, more men or women, from richer or poorer households, from different ethnic groups, etc).
- Don't assume that all farmers, traders, teachers, etc, are men. If you find yourself introduced only to men, actively ask to hear women's perspectives. Through meeting one woman, you can meet many more by using the snowballing technique. Likewise, don't assume that the 'head of the household' can answer for all the household's members – each person will have a different perspective to give.
- Take the advice of colleagues and partners on local customs, for example meeting first with the village head to get his or her consent to your presence in the village. But don't let a 'gatekeeper' determine who you speak to – use snowballing to widen the net – and make sure that no-one is forced to speak to you (see 'Undertaking research with ethics' for more advice on this).

2. Setting up an interview

- Introduce yourself and your purpose. If relevant, explain that you are not bringing a project or immediate change, but are hoping that, by learning more about the situation and reporting it, we can help create change. Repeat this as you leave: your presence will create expectations that you must manage honestly.
- Consent and confidentiality. Each interviewee must give their informed consent, however informal the conversation (see 'Undertaking research with ethics'). Agree clearly on the level of confidentiality of the interview: will it be confidential? Off the record? Reported anonymously? Or in their name?
- Location? Wherever is convenient and comfortable for the interviewee. If it is in their office or home, on their farm plot, or at their market stall, you can gain a lot of extra information from observing and asking questions about the surroundings.
- Timing? Schedule the interviews around times that suit the interviewees. How long should an interview be? A good rule to follow is one hour. Tell them how long the conversation will take and stick to it.
- Translation? If you are working with a translator, ask them to play the role of a channel that you speak through, so you ask questions as if directly to the interviewee (*'How long have you lived here?'* not *'How long has she lived here?'*) and the translator replies in the very words of the interviewee (*'I've lived here for nine years'*, not *'She has lived here...'*). This is the best way to ensure that the translator simply translates instead of paraphrasing when interpreting.
- Record or write? Using a tape or digital recorder means you can concentrate on what is being said, but may inhibit the interviewee and takes a long time to transcribe later. Writing notes as you listen captures the most relevant information, but can distract you from good listening and you must write up your notes the same day!

3. Skills for listening, understanding and questioning

Listening and understanding: Give the interviewee your full attention (turn off any mobile phones!). Listen for their statements of facts, but also for their attitudes and beliefs. Try not to show any visible judgement of what is being said, especially if you disagree with, or are shocked by, what you hear because your reaction may affect what else you are told. If you are unsure whether you have understood what the interviewee is saying, try paraphrasing their main point, asking *'So, are you saying that...?'* and get them to confirm or correct it.

Questioning: There are many ways to vary the questions you ask:

- Starting the conversation: Begin by asking about something visible or tangible (*'How long have you farmed this land?'*). Then come to the more abstract and more sensitive questions later.
- Open probe: Ask the 'wh' questions: who, what, when, where, why, how?
- Compare and contrast: Prompt the interviewee to think about similarities and differences between things – especially before and after key events. (*'How has your ministry's work been changed since the new policy began?'*)
- Impact: Ask how an event affected the interviewee and their family, including their health, education, income, security, etc.
- Imagining: Any question that invites the interviewee to imagine 'what if' in an alternative reality. (*'If you could afford to send your daughter to school, how do you think that would affect her chances in life?'*; *'What precious items would you save if a flood was coming?'*)
- Sensitive topics: Get local advice on how to phrase difficult or personal questions.
- Avoid asking multiple questions as one: *'How much does it cost to grow this crop and how do you think those costs will change?'* You will either confuse the interviewee, or confuse yourself with their answer. It is better to go step by step.

4. Themes for discussion

Every interview depends on its purpose. But there is some must-have info, and some good approaches to follow, whatever the subject.

Must-have:

Basic information about the interview and interviewee, for example:

- Name of village / town and district (check spelling);
- Interviewee's name (check spelling), age and marital status;
- Interviewee's primary occupation or source of livelihood;
- Number of children and their ages (and are they in school?);
- Date of interview and full name and contact details of interviewer.

The basic information required will vary from one study and context to another, and if an interviewee has requested anonymity this should also be taken into account. In some situations it may be best to record the names and addresses of informants separately from interview notes.

The themes to cover in your interview guide or checklist will depend on your research topic. Brainstorm the key issues, getting input from others, to draw up a checklist, aiming for 5–7 major themes. Be clear in your own mind which ones are your top priority. Be sure to include questions that let the interviewee raise their own issues. Trial your guide in the first couple of interviews, then reflect on and revise it, adding or removing topics and making the order flow more naturally.

Talking money and measures

- Money: 400 baht. 20 shillings. How much is that? Only local people understand the value of local currency, so find ways to express it in other terms. Giving the US dollar equivalent helps, but how much is it worth to locals? Ask about costs and prices relevant in their lives: how much are your monthly sales? What is the price of a sack of rice? What does it cost to visit the doctor or send your children to school?
- Measures: Farmers often use local measures: in Zambia, for example, rice is traded by the tin can, by the bowl or by the sack. If you want to make calculations about prices, you need to know the weight in kg. Find out before or after the interview the kg equivalents of local measures (and record it as part of your interview notes), but talk with the interviewee in terms of local measures. Make sure that measures aren't being confused in translation (a common problem with acres and hectares in East Africa).

At the end of the interview:

- Ask the interviewee if they would like to ask *you* any questions. Leave ample time for this. Treat interviews as a mutual exchange of information, not a one-way extractive process.
- Repeat that you would like to report their experience as part of your research. Ensure that you have clarity about whether:
 - You can use their real name or should change it (and are there other details that need changing to disguise their identity?);
 - You can take a photograph or other records of them and use these with their testimony.
- Record what's agreed and relabel names, if needed, as you write up.
- As soon as you leave, write down the context of the meeting – how you met this person, where it took place, who was there, the atmosphere, anything odd you noticed, and any final comments that were made as the meeting finished (these are often the most insightful comments!).

5. After the interview

- Type up your notes as soon as possible (best to do it the same day). If your notes are written word-for-word, you can write up some of the interview as a first person narrative.
- Gather any extra information you need on local prices or local measures so you can do comparison calculations later on.

WHAT MIGHT GO WRONG?

The interviewee isn't there at the agreed time and place

This is common – so keep some flexibility in your interviewing schedule. They may just be late. Or could there be a reason: might they be nervous about / hostile to your issue? If you can, contact them to reassure them, explain what they might gain (putting their perspective across) and try to convince them to meet you later.

The person's experience isn't what you were looking for or expecting

Learn from the story you are hearing instead! It may provide an interesting counter-example, or an insight into the difference between people, or a view from an outsider. It may turn out to be one of the more insightful interviews you do. Afterwards, double check your assumptions about what is a typical experience in this context. It may be that the person just has little to say, but be polite and continue the interview for a respectful length of time.

The translator starts paraphrasing or interpreting the interviewee's words

This often happens half way through an interview: a clear sign of it is if the translator starts referring to the interviewee in the third person ('*She says*' / '*he thinks*'). You may find yourself doing it too: '*And what does she think about...?*' When you notice this has happened, point it out to the translator that you have both slipped and request to return to the format you had agreed earlier.

Other people turn up and listen in

This may not matter, if the topic is not sensitive. But it can be tricky, especially if they are in a powerful relationship to the interviewee (such as their husband or boss). The best way to avoid this is to let the interviewee choose the time and place to talk. If it happens, and there are two interviewers, one of you can ask the new arrival to be interviewed too, and take them to another location. Or, if feasible, you can suggest coming back at another time. But if the person stays during the interview, find out who they are and consider how they may have influenced what was said. Be sure to record it in your interview notes. In some cases other people turning up can be an advantage, if the interviewee is comfortable. They can appeal to others for confirmation and you can extend your interview to a wider group.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A comparison of structured and semi-structured interviews, with more tips:
www.cemca.org/books/chap10.htm

More suggestions on listening, understanding and questioning from the Chronic Poverty Research Centre's Methods Toolbox:
http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/toolbox-4.2.pdf

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