Designing and Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews for Research

Prepared by Ted Zorn
Waikato Management School

The most useful interview format for conducting qualitative research is often "semi-structured" (sometimes called "moderately scheduled"). This means the interview is not highly structured, as is the case of an interview that consists of all closed-ended questions, nor is it unstructured, such that the interviewee is simply given a license to talk freely about whatever comes up. Semi-structured interviews offer topics and questions to the interviewee, but are carefully designed to elicit the interviewee's ideas and opinions on the topic of interest, as opposed to leading the interviewee toward preconceived choices. They rely on the interviewer following up with probes to get in-depth information on topics off interest. Two underlying principles of the following suggestions are (1) strive to avoid leading the interview or imposing meanings, and (2) strive to create relaxed, comfortable conversation.

Following are some suggestions for designing such interviews:

1. Carefully plan the interview, even though it is to be only semi-structured. Write down the topics and questions you might conceivably want to ask and consider various ways of arranging them.
2. If it is your first interview with the interviewee, provide an overview of your purpose, your intended uses for the interview data, and the measures you've taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Also, discuss and get permission for tape recording or note-taking.
3. If it is your first interview with the person, ask a few background questions first, such as the interviewee's job title and responsibilities, time with the organisation, etc. These often provide necessary information and serve to "warm up" the interviewee; that is, they're easy to answer and allow the interviewee to get in the interviewing mindset.
4. Focus on developing rapport and establishing a relaxed, comfortable climate. Be aware of your nonverbal communication: e.g., smiles, seating position, open/closed body posture, eye contact. In general, be yourself (authentic), positive about the interview, and confident.
5. The questions that focus on the topic(s) of interest should be broad, open-ended questions that allow the interviewee latitude in constructing an answer. Usually, qualitative researchers want to understand the interviewee's language and meanings, and open-ended questions encourage this. For example, if the focus of the interview is an event or episode such as a meeting, you could ask a question such as "Tell me the story of this meeting, beginning when you first heard of it." Often such a question, followed by probes, may lead to a 30-40 minute response.
6. Prepare, and save until later in the interview, questions on specific facts or other items of interest.
7. If the interview follows up on observation, you may want to ask about specific messages or exchanges. Again, try not to be leading in your questioning. For example, ask "What did you mean when you said…." rather than "When you said…did you mean….?"
8. Use probes carefully to get more in-depth answers or to follow up on points of interest. Many interviewees talk in generalities, so use probes such as "Can you give me an example of that?" or "What did he say?" If the focus is communication, try to elicit the language and specific meanings involved.
9. Sometimes silence is the best probe. Being silent once interviewees pause can encourage them to continue. Also, you may want to avoid interrupting a good story and instead make a note to probe a particular point later in the interview.
10. Think carefully about how to end the interview. It's often a good idea to ask "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?" near the end. This can be especially powerful if done once the tape recorder is turned off. It's also often a good idea to ask if you can contact the interviewee later in case you have additional questions.
11. Immediately after the interview, take time to test your recorder to see if you recorded the whole interview, fill in the gaps in your notes, and write down your impressions.