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Article in *The Clinical Teacher* · October 2018

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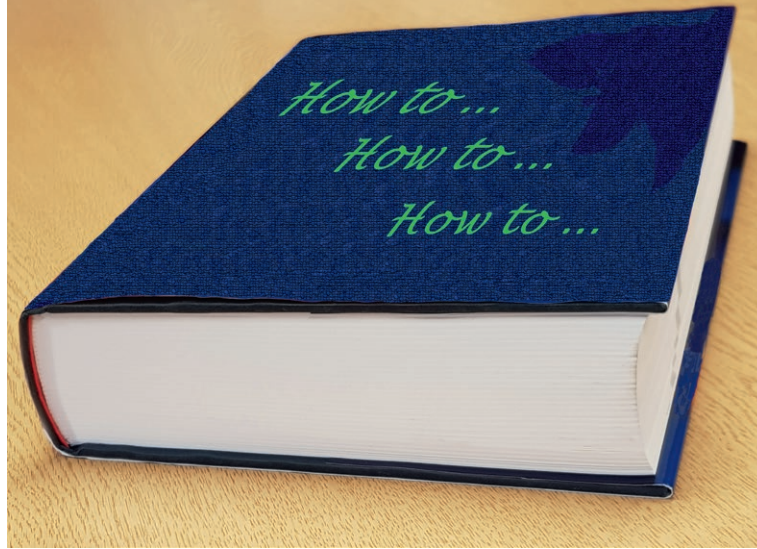


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How to...



How to...do research interviews in different ways

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SUMMARY

This article is the next instalment in our 'How to...' series about qualitative research, and focuses on interviews. In many ways, conducting research interviews can be compared with talking to a patient or a student, yet there

are specific elements to consider if you want the interview data to be useful for a research study. In this article, we will reflect on what a 'good' research interview is. We will provide an overview of different types of interviews, both much used and more

adventurous. Finally, we present a list of dilemmas and frequently asked questions, with tips, tricks and suggestions. This practical and concise article will be helpful when starting a qualitative research project using interviews.

Getting access to participants' inner worlds is the real trick to acquiring rich data

Show respect,
be curious and
– perhaps most
importantly
– listen.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of interviewing individuals or groups of people might be daunting for some, but clinical teachers are by no means amateurs when it comes to interviewing. Most clinical teachers will master the skill of interviewing in the context of medical history taking. At the same time you might be very familiar with asking questions in educational settings, and teasing out students' dilemmas and thought processes. Conducting a *research* interview, however, is a different task with a different goal.^{1,2} As a next step in our series on conducting qualitative research, we now present some considerations, hints and tips that will help you to develop your research interviewing skills.

THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Conducting interviews is a common way to gather data for qualitative research, and can be defined as a systematic way of talking and listening to people. Interviews are also commonly used in mixed-method studies, combined with surveys: interviews may be conducted to identify themes around which to build the survey (exploratory design), or may be used to provide a more in-depth understanding of survey findings (explanatory design).³

So, what is a 'good' interview? The obvious response is: a good interview gives you data to help answer your research question.⁴ It generates data that allow for thorough analysis or description, and are aligned with the research goal and theoretical framework.⁵ The less obvious, but more salient, answer is that a good interview unlocks insights into people's experiences, viewpoints, opinions, thoughts and feelings. Truly hearing your interviewees' voices, whether they be patients, colleagues or students, is very important when collecting

interview data with an aim to improve health professions education or practice. Getting access to participants' inner worlds is the real trick to acquiring rich data.

In our experience, the quality of an interview is heavily dependent on how comfortable the interviewee feels. Building rapport is of key importance in creating the circumstances for a good research interview: this requires optimal communication skills from the researcher. So, connect with your interviewee by finding out what they deem to be important, explicitly appreciate their input, show respect, be curious and – perhaps most importantly – listen.

COMMON TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

One-to-one interviews

The most common interview is the one-to-one interview, in a few variations. An interview can be structured, meaning that the questions are exactly the same, and posed in the same order, for each interviewee. An open interview starts with a question, but the course of the interview is very dependent upon the answers of the interviewee. A semi-structured interview lies somewhere between these two approaches, using a few questions to address predetermined themes, but leaving more room to follow the interviewee's own line of thought and for possible follow-up questions.⁶ Semi-structured interviews are common in health professions education research; they guarantee that the same topic is dealt with in each interview, but leave open space for personal interpretations and associations from the interviewee. Narrative interviewing, in which the aim is to help each participant to tell his or her story, is also a specific skill requiring the interviewer to focus the interview on drawing out those stories.⁷

Group interviews

Depending on your research question, you could choose to interview people in groups. One approach is to ask each person in the group to respond individually to each question (sometimes called a group interview). Another option is to conduct a focus group, in which members of the group respond to one another. A focus group has the advantage of getting the input from multiple people (with a maximum of 12, but most commonly including seven people), and might provide interesting data when these people elaborate on each other's viewpoints, or when they disagree.⁸ Depending on your research questions, however, some issues may be considered too sensitive to discuss in a group, and are therefore better suited for individual interviews. There is also a risk that individual differences or opinions are not voiced in a group setting.

Group interviews require a whole new set of skills to manage, as there is the danger of the more vocal participants, or participants in a more senior position, dominating the discussion, with the others in the group not speaking up. Again, making people feel safe and comfortable is the most important thing; this is a challenge for a group, as the participants need to trust not only you as a researcher but also need to trust all of the other participants. Careful consideration is therefore needed when creating the group. Facilitating a group interview requires group management skills such as reading non-verbal communication, summarising and rephrasing, giving turns, and asking for agreement and disagreement.

New and emerging interview methods

As qualitative research gains popularity, so do newer ways of conducting interviews. Stimulated recall interviews, for example, combine observed

behaviour with the interviewees' ideas of why they behaved in a certain way.⁹ Asking interviewees to draw or visualise experiences, thoughts or feelings is a way to get richer data from interviews, resulting in a combination of visual and interview data.¹⁰ For meaningful conversations, it can also help to think beyond office spaces as locations to interview people: why not walk and talk at the same time?¹¹ There is also a special

style of interviewing that really encourages positive and useful solutions for dilemmas ('appreciative interviewing').¹² Finally, interviews can be part of studies aiming to find out a quantitative ranking of important issues (such as in the nominal group technique).¹³ In Table 1 we give an overview (by no means exhaustive!) of these different tools and techniques that might help get more informative data from an interview.

CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES

Setting up a research study requires making many choices. As with our previous papers, we will share a few practical and theoretical considerations and questions for your study. As always, ethical approval is necessary for any study of this kind, and you will specifically need to obtain consent to record interviews. And your choice of methods and

Why not walk and talk at the same time?

Table 1. Different types of interviewing: an overview

	Description	Example
Stimulated recall interviews	Stimulated recall interviews use video recordings of the interviewee acting in a specific situation or context. The interviewer explores the thoughts and considerations that the interviewee might have had in the event on the tape.	Vorstenbosch and colleagues videotaped and consequently interviewed junior doctors about their clinical reasoning when consulting with a (simulated) patient presenting with shoulder pain, to gain insight in the way anatomical knowledge is used in practice. ⁹
Visual methods, rich pictures	Rich pictures are drawings of complex situations, made by the interviewee. After the drawing exercise, the interviewee is asked to explain the drawing and elaborate on topics that are relevant to the research question. The visual element allows for exploration of aspects that can be tough to verbalise.	Helmich et al. asked medical trainees to draw both an exciting and a frustrating complex clinical situation. In combination with interviews, this led to insight into trainees' emotions and behaviour when confronted with complexity. ¹⁰
Walking interview	Walking interviews can be used to gather richer data on the respondents' context. The researcher can, for example, follow the interviewee in their daily routine and ask questions along the way, or a certain landscape or setting can be chosen as a prompt for the interview.	Dubé and colleagues explored how students described clerkship experiences as encountered in placements and living contexts, and went on guided walks lasting for 1–2 hours with each respondent. ¹¹
Appreciative inquiry	Appreciative inquiry methodology is an approach that focuses on the positive in people's experience, suggesting that this is more useful when trying to accomplish organisational change. This type of interview directs the interviewee towards positive thoughts, ideas and memories by asking specific questions about good examples, moments when the interviewee was happy or inspired, etc.	Quaintance and colleagues let students interview faculty members about professionalism, in order to let students gain insights about the concept. Using appreciative inquiry in the interviews, the study adds to previous work that caused 'meaningful and considerable changes in the culture of professionalism at their institution'. ¹²
Interviewing with nominal group technique (NGT)	NGT is a group interviewing technique that aids achieving consensus around complex issues. It consists of four steps: (1) each participant writes down ideas individually; (2) all ideas are read out; (3) a group discussion and clustering of ideas take place; (4) the ideas are ranked. The process leads to a democratic prioritisation of ideas and responses.	Kristofco et al. held NGT meetings with Continuing Medical Education (CME) leaders to 'identify key attributes of an ideal CME institution'. They found important shared themes that led to a shared definition of what good CME entails, and which aspects should be part of a CME programme. ¹³

Table 2. Potential questions, and matching tips and tricks, to help you execute a research interview

Problem	Tips and tricks
How do I make a good interview guide?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with your own curiosity: what do you really want to know? • Make a mind map of topics/themes that form your area of interest • Use theory: look at concepts in the literature, let questionnaires inspire you • Consider the order of questions carefully, it may be helpful to start with some 'warm up' questions, such as 'how long have you worked here' • Test the questions carefully (see below)
I have never held a research interview – how do I practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try the interview schedule with yourself: can you answer your own questions? • People tend to interpret questions in different ways: let a colleague, friend or student look at your questions and discuss them, what kinds of answers do they think the questions will provide? • Do at least one pilot interview, record it and transcribe it. Evaluate your interview skills. Consider the type of answers that you received – is this what you hoped to get? Reflect on what the respondent is saying – do you understand it? Do you feel that you would like to go back and ask follow-up questions? • As a result of the actions above, adapt your questions, and add/remove cues, etc
How do I make sure that I treat each interviewee the same?	<p>Using a checklist will help you to be as consistent as possible, with tick boxes for the following items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Things to take to the interview (consent form, recording device, pen, paper, etc.) • Things to say at the start of the interview (purpose of the study, data handling and privacy, encourage people to be honest, length of interview, etc.) • Things to say after the interview is over (thanks for participating, contact person for questions or withdrawal, etc.)
I got very short answers that don't lead to useful and interesting data to analyse and answer my research question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at your questions: could they be more open? • Review your questioning style with a peer or another author after the first one or two interviews • Add examples of follow-up questions and probes to your interview guide • Ask the respondents if you can contact them for follow-up questions if need be • Use educational or clinical communication skills, such as empathic listening, paraphrasing the respondent's words, summation and interpretation • If it suits your research question, use questions in which you invite people to express extreme opinions: invite them to elaborate on dreams ('in an ideal world, what would you do?') and nightmares ('what's the worst that could happen?') • Use visual aids or vignettes • Ask for examples from their own experiences
The person I am interviewing seems to want to 'please me' in their responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider your research question carefully and your relationship with the respondents: are you the most suitable person to conduct these interviews? • Be clear about what you want, both in the information letter and in person. If you want honest answers, say so explicitly • Be clear regarding the capacity in which you are conducting the interview if you also hold other roles, such as being a clinician or a teacher • In establishing rapport, make them feel that you want to know what the interviewee thinks • Explicitly invite counter-arguments or criticisms • Consider aids for discussion: vignettes, or extreme statements in which interviewees can agree or disagree

(Continues)

Table 2 (Continued)

Problem	Tips and tricks
How do I make sure to get good recordings of the interview?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check the batteries on the recording device • Bring a spare recording device • When making an appointment with a potential interviewee, make sure that they do have enough time before and after the interview to avoid stress and rush. Also make sure they are fully available (i.e. they will not be called away) • Ask for telephones and other possible disturbances to be switched off • If necessary, systematically label the data to be able to recall relevant information, before anonymising and storing the data safely
	NB: please consider privacy policies for storing data and ask for consent!

sampling will be determined by your question.

When is interviewing suitable?

As mentioned above, interviewing is particularly appropriate and useful if you are seeking personal experiences, viewpoints, feelings and thoughts. In other words: aspects that are hard to gather in any of the other methods frequently used in research (questionnaire, observations or data in administrative systems).

How to recruit your interviewees? Do you choose a homogeneous group of respondents, or do you want variation in your sample? In qualitative research, power calculations do not apply, and the commonly used concept of 'saturation' is not always applicable.¹⁴ The idea of 'information power' suggests that the number of respondents needed is based on: the aim of the study, the sample specificity, the use of established theory, the quality of the data and the analysis strategy that will be used.¹⁵ A strategic or purposive sample is one in which you choose respondents based on the parameters that you deem relevant for your research question: for example, years of experience, gender or professional background. Other options are a convenience sample (invite an accessible group of people, such as everybody in your class) or a snowball sample (ask the first respondents to suggest further respondents, etc.). Also consider

how you might approach the potential participants: by e-mail or in person?

Who should be the interviewer? Consider when being an insider (e.g. a clinical teacher interviewing other clinical teachers) is of benefit, and also when it may hinder the process. Always consider any power dynamics – both obvious and less obvious – prior to conducting the interviews. If you are a clinical teacher interviewing your own students about their perceptions of a new educational initiative, are you likely to get honest answers from them?¹⁶ On the other hand, understanding the context may be pertinent for asking the best questions. Reflexivity, or how you articulate this position and its potential influence on your study and its participants,⁷ is important when reporting these choices. In an interview, knowledge is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee: the act of interpretation does not only occur when conducting the data analysis but also during the data collection.

How to align the interview with other aspects of your research design? Make sure to choose the type of interview depending not only on your research question but also on the planned method of analysis: for some approaches, you may need the interview to be very open,

with lots of narration; for others, a semi-structured individual interview is best. Also consider whether all interviews should be conducted before the start of the analysis, or whether interviews and analysis happen in an iterative process. Should a set number of respondents be used or should this number be decided along the way? So, consider both your research question and your method of analysis in developing your interview study.

When starting with your interview study, you might have more difficult questions. We have summarized a few of them in Table 2, including tips and tricks on how to resolve issues that might arise in an interview study.

CONCLUSION

There are a lot of choices when deciding to use interviews as a way to gather research data. It requires some thorough thinking and preparation, yet we find it a very personally enriching way to do research. By holding interviews, you can be surprised, shocked and moved. An interview study could be the perfect reason to finally take the time to talk to people in depth about a certain topic. As with all things in life, practice makes perfect. So take on that curious stance, start, learn and let yourself be surprised by how powerful a good interview can be.

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Funding: None.

Conflict of interest: None.

Acknowledgements: None.

Ethical approval: Not applicable.

doi: 10.1111/tct.12953