

Hello! I want to welcome everyone to the presentation on qualitative interviewing. In this presentation, I will introduce you to qualitative interviews as a data generation method. Interviewing is one of the most common methods of generating qualitative data used within and outside scholarship.

### **Learning Objectives**

I have several goals for this presentation. I've listed them here as learning outcomes. By the end of this presentation, you will be able to:

- Understand some of the various formats of qualitative interviews
- Gain familiarity with designing qualitative interview studies
- Compare and contrast good and bad interview techniques
- Comprehend each step in the process of conducting and preparing qualitative interviews for analysis

### **Qualitative Interviews**

Interviewing has a long-standing history within and outside of research situations. Interviews can be short and personal, such as when you visit medical offices trying to find a new doctor. Interviews also occur in business settings or pop culture on radio and TV. Think about famous pop culture interviewers like Jon Stewart and Oprah. Interviewers generally seek to elicit stories and descriptions of personal experiences from their interviewees. Interviews can be formal and structured or have a casual feel and seem more like a conversation between those involved. How you conduct an interview depends on who is interviewing, who is being interviewed, and the purpose of the interview.

Interviews as research are used in a variety of fields. For education and the social sciences, we can look back to anthropologists who were interested in people's stories as a "way of understanding their culture" and interviewing is now a widely accepted method of collecting data for research (Seidman, 2006). Interviews are both a method of generating data and a methodology in themselves. Researchers may conduct "interview studies." You may also see these studies referred to as basic qualitative studies or descriptive qualitative studies. In these studies, researchers would collect data solely through qualitative interviews, but wouldn't have a specific methodological focus like those that come with other methodologies.

Other qualitative methodologies rely primarily on interviews for their data sources. For instance, to conduct a phenomenological study, researchers often use a series of 3 interviews with each participant to gather as much information about the experience under study. Narrative researchers use a narrative interviewing format to elicit long narratives and stories from their participants related to their phenomenon of interest. Grounded theorists also primarily use interviews as their data generation method.

Interviews are also often used in conjunction with other data collection methods such as questionnaires or observations. For example, qualitative case studies most often use observations, interviews, and documents as their data sources. Ethnographies primarily rely on observations, but often researchers will conduct interviews to better understand the culture under

study. Overall, interviews are one of the most common data generation methods in qualitative research.

### **Interview formats**

Interviews in qualitative research generally follow three primary formats: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Brinkmann, 2018).

Structured interviews “are employed in surveys and are typically based on the same research logic as questionnaires: Standardized ways of asking questions are thought to lead to answers that can be compared across participants and possibly quantified” (p. 579). If completing a structured interview, you would either send it out in questionnaire form, or, if completing it in a face-to-face format, remain strictly focused to the questions on the interview guide without deviation in the form of prompts or follow up questions.

Unstructured interviews “highlight the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons” in a participant’s life surrounding the phenomenon of interest (p. 579). “After the opening request for a narrative, the main role of the interviewer is to remain a listener, withholding desires to interrupt, and occasionally asking questions that may clarify the story” (p. 579). Unstructured interview guides often have only a lead question and then let the participant determine the trajectory of the interview conversation from then on.

Semi-structured interviews are a common format of qualitative interviews. At times, people use the terms “semi-structured interview” and “qualitative interview” interchangeably and some researchers understand qualitative interviews as only semi-structured interviews. These interviews “make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee, and the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide” (p. 579). Semi-structured interview guides have several main or lead questions and the researcher factors in time for follow up questions and prompts that are determined by the content of the interview.

### **Interview Style**

Kathy Roulston wrote *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice* in 2010. In her first chapter she discusses some key aspects of what makes “good” interviews, how to format your interview questions so that they’re open and not closed questions, and she examines common structures of interview talk and reviews structured, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews.

She also discusses how researchers may follow different interview styles. Different interview styles depend on several aspects. In your study, your interview style must align with your purpose, your research questions, and your methodological paradigm. For instance, if you’re working on a narrative study from a feminist paradigm, the confrontational interview is not an appropriate style to use in your study.

She presents 6 common types of qualitative interviews. This list is by no means meant to be exhaustive as there are other interview styles. Much of what I describe next is from Roulston's text.

### **Phenomenological Interviews**

In phenomenological interviews researchers work to gather detailed, and in-depth information about a particular experience. Researchers will develop questions that focus on gathering the details of the experience, the participant's response to the experience, and their reflections on the experience. Roulston (2010) gives this example of a good introductory interview question for a phenomenological interview: "Think of a time when you experienced \_\_\_\_ and describe that in as much detail as possible" (p. 16). Thus, it is essential that researchers identify participants who have experienced and are able to examine that lived experience in an interview for this type of interview. These interviews can be open and unstructured with one or two questions to guide the interview from the outset or follow a semi-structured format. Seidman (2013) describes a series of 3 interviews that are phenomenological in which the interviewer breaks down the experience into specific segments to examine in each interview.

### **Ethnographic Interviews**

Ethnography is a methodology that examines culture and how people make meaning in their lives from their cultures. In ethnographic interviews, researchers attempt to understand how people make meaning from the actions and events in their cultural world as expressed in their own words. In ethnographic interviews researchers attempt to gain descriptions of "key aspects related to the cultural world of which he or she is part – that is space, time, events, people, activities, and objects" (p. 19). These interviews are often unstructured and very conversational. A researcher relies on their ongoing analysis of the data they generated through fieldnotes from their other fieldwork to inform the trajectory of the interview.

### **Feminist Interviews**

Feminist interviews are characterized by their "open-ended, intensive, unstructured" nature. Researchers attempt to set a foundation of reciprocity and intimacy between researcher and participant. They are open and often self-disclose throughout the interview to share as the participant is sharing. Researchers are also willing to engage in relationships after the close of the study in this approach to research. There have been lots of good writings on feminist research and feminist interviewing in particular, but in this type of interview researchers will have an interview context in which researchers promote an "egalitarian relationship among women researchers and women participants with the aim of producing knowledge about previously unknown and unstudied facets of women's lives" (p. 21).

### **Oral History Interviews**

Oral history interviews attempt to gather narratives from average people to chronicle their lives and past events. Audio and video recordings of these interviews will often be archived. This is

contradictory to how many researchers will destroy recordings of interviews at the end of a study in other types of research. Researchers use the narratives from the oral history interviews to “construct realist accounts” of the participant’s lives and the events they describe (p. 24). At times, these interviews can be used to help document public history as well.

### **Life History Interviews**

Life history and oral history interviews are similar in many ways. The main difference is that life history interviews can be performed in fields other than history and that they have other purposes than the production of oral history archives. In this type of interview, participants will often provide a narrative of their entire life, from their earliest memories to the present day. Life history interviews take a great deal of time to conduct and studies that utilize them will typically only have a small number of participants. Such is not the case with oral histories.

### **Confrontational and Dialogic Interviews**

Generally, interviewers attempt to have an amicable relationship with their interviewees and be seen as someone that the interviewee is comfortable with and has a good rapport. Occasionally though, researchers will take on a confrontational role in an interview. This is not common and researchers will have a very specific purpose for doing so in a study. Roulston explains that there are limited benefits to this style of interviewing as researchers rely on the good will of their participants to gather data. However, she writes that some researchers have “discussed how participants resist the interviewer’s role by ‘fighting back’ and disagreeing with assumptions embedded in interview questions” (p. 26). At this point, the interviewer may strive to take a confrontational role to instigate dialogue. Researchers intentionally have a role of being a challenger to the participant during the interview.

### **“Good” Interviews**

Ensuring they conduct a “good” quality interview is a primary focus of researchers using this method. One way to ensure quality is in your interview guide. Review it to be sure you don’t ask closed ended, leading, or manipulative questions. You will want to create a guide that fits with the subject matter and timing you’ve set for the interview itself.

Your goal as an interviewer is to listen, obtain the information pertinent to your study, be open to the unexpected, and interpret your interviewee’s answers the way the interviewee meant them (this is why follow up questions are so important). This means you must learn to be present in the interview, focus on what the interviewee is saying in that moment and not on what you might say as a follow up, and allow the interviewee to dominate the conversation. An interviewer shows active listening and this can be done through both body language and words (if you do this verbally, remember there’s a fine line between showing active listening and interrupting)!

A good interviewer tries to develop rapport with their participant so the interview is comfortable. This means opening the conversation with something light and meant to put the interviewee at ease within the setting. Developing rapport can take time and is something that takes effort on

the part of the researcher and the interviewee. It is also something that can start before interviews even begin, for example it can begin with when you contact your participant for the first time.

There are several formats of qualitative interviews, but determining which one to follow in your own study isn't all that simple. Each aspect of a research study's design builds on and supports the others, creating one coherent project. This includes the research questions, literature review, epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, and methods. So, however you incorporate an interview into your study, you must consider each area of your research design carefully.

### **Mechanics of Interviewing**

Interviewers generally follow a specific pattern when conducting interviews.

First, researchers will create interview guides. Interview guides help ensure that each interview is as similar as possible and a researcher asks the same questions of each participant. How many questions are on the guide depends on structure, format, and timing of interviews.

They will then audio record the interview which is something they'll get specific permission to do from each participant in the consent form. You can still interview someone if they do not give you permission to audio record, you'll just have to rely on your fieldnotes rather than an audio recording for analysis.

The audio recording is then transcribed. Transcription can take a good deal of time and anyone planning on doing interviews for a study needs to consider this when planning their data generation period. In general, transcribing 1 hour of audio can take 5-8 hours, depending on how fast you type. I always use a foot pedal and the program Express Scribe to help with my transcriptions but I know people who prefer to use hotkeys or the program Inqscribe. These programs are play-back programs, they allow a researcher to determine the speed at which the recording plays and they give researchers controls like rewind, pause, and fast forward while they're transcribing. Alternatively, you can pay for your transcriptions. I've had good success with the program Transcription US and there are also automated programs such as Trint or Temi. These are just some example, there are innumerable transcription services. Beware this option though, many researchers feel that transcription is the first stage of the analysis and researchers should make every effort to transcribe their own interviews.

Once an interview is transcribed, a researcher will listen to the interview again and check the transcription for accuracy.

They will then perform their analysis largely on the interview transcript itself rather than the audio recording. How accurately you transcribe an interview depends on the type of analysis you're doing. For instance, for thematic analysis, transcribing pauses or utterances such as "um" or "uh", repetitions, or stuttering is not as important as if the researcher were conducting conversation or narrative analysis. How detailed you make your transcription is one of the first analysis decisions you make as a researcher.

### **References**

Interviews are a very helpful way for researchers to learn from the experiences of the participants in their study. They are appropriate for a variety of research designs and topics. Are they right for you?

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2018). *Doing interviews*. SAGE.

Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing*. SAGE.

Seidman, I. (2019). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.