

# 15

## Interviewing

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### Introduction

Many forms of development research include an interview of some kind. For some researchers, interviews are the main channel of information-gathering, while for others, interviews are used as a starting point or background to support other forms of data collection. In this chapter, I will outline some of the main types of interview and what issues you should consider before embarking on interviews.

### Types of interview

While the concept of an 'interview' often implies something rather formal, in reality 'interviews' can range from a rather unstructured conversational style to a much more rigid question-and-answer format. There is no one right way to conduct interviews. Rather, as with all research, you need to think about the research topic, the person you are

interviewing and the context. For example, interviewing a government official about water provision in a shanty town is different from interviewing shanty-town residents about their access to clean water.

Interview types are often divided into 'structured', 'semi-structured' and 'unstructured', although the differences are sometimes difficult to distinguish. 'Structured' interviews follow a pre-set list of questions which are often standardized across interviewees. 'Semi-structured' interviews follow a form of interview schedule with suggested themes, but there is scope for the interviewees to develop their responses. Finally, 'unstructured' interviews provide the interviewees with the opportunity to take the discussion in whichever direction they choose. Such interviews are often more 'conversational' in that they are not directed by the interviewer and may cover topics which are completely unexpected.

The choice of interview style depends largely on the nature of the research (see

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below). Structured interviews may be appropriate if you want to standardize across interviewees, or are short of time, but they provide no scope for allowing unforeseen topics or interpretations to be introduced. They are therefore similar to some forms of questionnaire (see Chapter 17 on questionnaires). Unstructured interviews may be an excellent way of finding out about key issues within a community when developing a

research question, but if you have limited time and need information to address a particular research question, this method may not be appropriate. Because of these factors, semi-structured interviews are usually the most popular. By doing this, you can ensure that the areas you think are important are covered, but you also provide the interviewees with opportunities to bring up their own ideas and thoughts (see Box 15.1).

### Box 15.1 Interview schedule

This was part of a study of women's paid and unpaid work in Oaxaca City, Mexico, looking at similarities and differences between socio-economic groups and the importance of social networks within women's working lives. All women interviewed had already completed a household questionnaire, including basic data about household membership, employment patterns, social networks, domestic chores and community organisations. Interviews were conducted in women's homes and took from 30 minutes to 2 hours.

- 1 Introduction to the research, confidentiality, taping, etc.
- 2 General conversation about household, house, neighbourhood.
- 3 Paid work – choice of employment, how job was secured, opinion of work, future plans, difficulties. If not in paid work at moment discuss paid work in the past, reasons for not being in paid work, future plans.
- 4 Domestic tasks – types of activity, time taken, help provided, opinions on domestic work.
- 5 Community activities – community organizations, church, work-based groups: reasons for involvement/non-involvement; nature of involvement.
- 6 Socializing – meetings with friends/family; *compadrazgo* (fictive kin); neighbours; feelings of belonging/isolation.
- 7 Other questions?

*Source:* adapted from Willis (2000)

Of course, the context of the interview and the preferences of the interviewees should also be considered. If you are using an interpreter (see Chapter 18 on the use of interpreter), unstructured interviews are more challenging (Devereux and Hoddinott, 1992). Having an interview schedule can help save time because interpreters get to know the basic patterns of interviews and how to express particular ideas, so you do not repeatedly have to explain. For some

interviewees, particularly so-called 'elite' interviewees such as government officials, company managers or local chiefs, the degree of formality which a structured or semi-structured interview can provide may be viewed more positively and encourage involvement. Elizabeth Francis worked on the impact of labour migration in Kisumu District, western Kenya. She explains her choice of semi-structured interviews was partly a response to local expectations:

I had initially hoped to collect a great deal of this sort of information [beliefs, attitudes and strategies] informally, but I found that one consequence of people's understanding that I was a 'student' who was 'studying' their way of life was that they expected me to carry out formal interviews. Out of courtesy, people tended to stop what they were doing when I arrived at their homes and sit expectantly, waiting for me to start questioning them. (Francis, 1992: 92–3)

She chose to adopt a life-history approach which encouraged respondents to discuss their life stories and changes they had observed within a more structured interview framework.

### Why do interviews?

Interviews are a commonly used method in development research because of the range of information that can be obtained. When selecting the type of interview, the questions and the interview arrangements, you should think carefully about why you think an interview is an appropriate method for your particular research questions.

Interviews are an excellent way of gaining 'factual' information, such as details of NGO policies and government initiatives. However, you should make sure that you cannot obtain this information from other sources. Many organizations and governments now make information available on the internet (see Chapter 28 on using the World Wide Web) or in paper form. If this is the case, do not expect someone to give up

their time to provide you with factual information available elsewhere. In such situations, it may be more useful to arrange an interview to find out more about the ways in which particular policies were devised, or how different groups have responded to certain initiatives. By preparing well in advance by reading all the available material, you should be able to get more out of the interview. Interviews may, therefore, be an opportunity to examine processes, motivations and reasons for successes or failures.

These qualitative dimensions are a key reason why interviews are a very popular methodology. While questionnaire surveys can provide you with data on employment, agricultural yield, migration patterns and household structure, for example, surveys are limited in the degree to which they can provide explanations for patterns or consider attitudes and opinions. Elizabeth Francis (see above) collected basic information from all her informants, such as education level, landholding patterns, crop production and children's activities, and how these had changed over time. All this information could have, in theory, been collected through a questionnaire survey. However, 'it was also important to try to get behind the bare outlines of reported behaviour to the underlying beliefs, strategies and constraints which had shaped that behaviour' (Francis, 1992: 92). Using the interviews allowed her to do this because she could tailor the questions to the particular individual, but she also found that this approach allowed her to develop greater rapport with interviewees, and understand the processes of change in detail (see also Box 15.2).

#### Box 15.2 Water management techniques in Tunisia

Jennifer Hill and Wendy Woodland used semi-structured interviews in their work on the sustainability of water use in agriculture in Southern Tunisia to supplement their physical geography data collection in the region. They interviewed 24 farmers to find out

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about their agricultural techniques, but also to examine why they chose particular methods and how these had changed over time. The interview format was ideal for finding out about farmers' motivations and also to investigate their understanding of water management techniques. By using interviews, Hill and Woodland were able to find out the details of rainwater harvesting, such as the use of earth and stone bunds on hill-sides, and how these practices were decided upon and organized. The importance of indigenous knowledge in relation to the local environment was revealed in these interviews. Farmers were also able to highlight potential problems, including the impact of out-migration on the maintenance of rainwater harvesting systems.

*Source:* adapted from Hill and Woodland (2003)

### Recruiting interviewees

When deciding who to interview, you need to think carefully about what kind of sample your research questions require. If you want to find out about a particular organization, such as an NGO, the NGO president or chair may not be the most appropriate person to deal with. In a large organization they may be removed from the day-to-day activities in which you are interested. In addition, you may have problems accessing key individuals because of their busy schedules. When designing your research make sure that the success is not reliant on talking to certain people as this is a decidedly risky strategy.

If you are using interviews to find out about people's attitudes and perceptions, you need to consider the population from which you will be selecting interviewees. This may be a geographically limited group, such as the residents of a village or urban district, but it may also be a group defined by activities, such as city-centre informal traders or participants in an NGO project. While the aim of interviews is not to gain statistically significant results, you do need to make sure that you have targeted a diverse range of people who might have different opinions or perceptions based on their own experiences and context.

If you are combining your interviews with a questionnaire survey of some sort, you may use this route to recruit interviewees. For example, the questionnaire results may show certain patterns such as differences by age group or ethnicity. If this is the case, you can then select interviewees from each category. Alternatively, at the end of the questionnaire you can ask people to indicate whether they would be willing to be interviewed. If you followed this route you would need to consider whether self-selecting interviewees were all from a similar group.

In many research situations there are 'gatekeepers' whose permission is needed to access the research site. This may be a village elder, an NGO president, school headteacher or a community leader. Given their position, you may want to follow their advice as to the recruitment of interviewees. However, the use of gatekeepers in this way is problematic. They will guide you, not always intentionally, towards particular individuals, so leaving out certain sections of the group or community (Valentine, 1997). In addition, interviewees may feel forced to cooperate with you if you are introduced in this way. For ethical reasons, you should always try to ensure that individuals can refuse to participate in the research. Finally, being closely associated with the

gatekeeper may result in interviewees answering your questions in particular ways, depending on their views of the gatekeeper involved, so biasing the findings in a certain direction (see the section below on accuracy).

The 'snowballing' technique is often used to recruit interviewees. This is when one contact suggests other possible interviewees who in turn suggest others, so the list of potential interviewees get longer and longer. This can be the only way to find out about potential interviewees when there is no clearly bounded group, such as village residents, or records of group members, as with organizations. When using snowballing it is advisable to try to start with as many contacts as possible to maximize the diversity of the interviewees, rather than following one person's network. In addition, you should keep reflecting on the nature of your interviewees and try to get greater diversity if and when it is possible or appropriate. For example, if you are studying informal traders and all your interviewees to date have been young women and men, then you might want to ask specifically if any of your interviewees know any older men or women who might be interested in talking to you.

### **Where and when to interview**

While in many cases you will not have a choice about where to conduct the interview, you need to think very carefully about how the location may affect the material gathered, the dynamics of the interview and also the way in which you present yourself to your potential interviewees. When choosing the location you clearly want to make sure that it is somewhere the interviewee will feel comfortable, such as in their own home. Conducting interviews in this environment may provide important insights into your research. For example, it may give you a chance to see living conditions and also, potentially, dynamics within the household.

However, there are other dimensions to interviews within the home. For example, the interviewee may be distracted by the presence of other household members. When conducting interviews with women in low-income settlements in Oaxaca City, Mexico, I found that interviews were often interrupted by children wanting attention from their mothers, or husbands wanting to know what was going on. In addition, loud music, television or chatter from other household members made it impossible to tape record the conversations. Despite these issues, I was happy to continue interviewing in these environments. Women were clearly happier talking to me 'at home' rather than in a more public or supposedly 'neutral' environment, while I found the opportunity to see inside women's homes very important to inform my understandings of women's lives in the settlements.

You should also be aware of how the interview location can be interpreted by the interviewees or others in the community. When conducting 'elite interviews' it is often a good idea to carry out the interviews in the workplace. By dressing appropriately, you can present yourself as a 'serious researcher' who is not out of place within that environment. The interviewee is then more likely to take you seriously and answer your questions appropriately.

While you want to make sure that your interviewee is comfortable with the location, make sure that you do not put yourself in potentially dangerous situations or agree to locations where your motives could be misconstrued. Sarah Howard (1997), in her research into indigenous land rights on the Atlantic Coast, Nicaragua, warns against assuming that arranging interviews in 'informal' settings such as bars will be interpreted in the same way by your interviewee as yourself. This is particularly the case for women researchers wanting to interview men. Gender also plays a part in interviews within the domestic realm. Male researchers should be wary of trying to arrange interviews with

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women at home as this may be frowned upon and could have unwanted repercussions on the researcher and/or the female interviewee.

The timing of interviews can be very important. There may be some key individuals to whom you want to speak as part of your research. While it may be reassuring to interview them at the start of the research, in some cases it may be better to wait until you are more familiar with the research material and can, perhaps, use your interview with them to discuss some of your findings or initial conclusions. If you are able to arrange such meetings at both the beginning and the end of the fieldwork, then this would be an ideal solution, but in many cases it is impossible to do this and you just have to fit around people's schedules. If you are working in a particular community, it may be a good idea to spend time getting to know the area and the people before launching into more formal interviews. This will make people feel more comfortable with you and may also help you frame your interview schedule in a more appropriate way.

### Asking questions

Interviews vary considerably and you will find that some people are easier to talk to about particular topics than others. However, if you think about the ways in which questions can be asked, you can help set your interviewee at ease and also gain the kind of information required for your research. Before starting the questions, make sure that the interviewee knows what the research is about and they have been assured of confidentiality and the tape recorder (if used) has been switched on. You should also establish how long the interviewee has for the interview and stick to that time.

Remember that an interview is not an interrogation and you should try to be as unthreatening as possible in your questioning. Even if you have a pre-set list of questions, try

not to fire them at the interviewee. Give them a chance to develop their ideas and also to ask for clarification if necessary. In the first few interviews you may feel nervous and rely greatly on your interview schedule, but as you become familiar with the material, you should be able to relax further and really engage with the process. Even if you are nervous, make sure that you listen to the responses. This may alert you to a new area of discussion and will also stop you asking a question to which the interviewee has already provided the answer.

Do not launch into complicated and sensitive questions at the start of the interview. Instead, open the interview with some uncomplicated, more factual questions. For example, in the Oaxaca City study (see Box 15.1) I opened by asking women about their houses and how long they had lived in the neighbourhood. When framing your questions, try to make them as open-ended as possible. This prevents very short answers and gives the respondent the chance to develop his/her own ideas on the topic. When dealing with sensitive topics be prepared to move on to another issue if the interviewee is clearly very uncomfortable with the direction of the interview. Finally, at the end of the interview, you should provide the interviewee with an opportunity to ask you questions (McKay, 2002).

### Recording

How to record interviews is highly context-specific, depending on a range of factors, such as interviewee preference, logistics and language ability, as well as the nature of your research. Possible forms of recording are using a tape/mini-disc recorder, taking notes throughout the interview or writing up notes after the interview.

Direct recording has a number of benefits. It allows you to concentrate completely on the interview without having to worry about taking notes or remembering points to write up

later. This can be particularly important if you are conducting interviews in a language in which you are not completely confident. Having a recording of the interview allows you the opportunity to check the meaning of words and phrases that you may have missed during the interview itself. Direct recording is also very important if your research is examining forms of discourse. By having the actual words and forms of expression, you will be able to have much greater source material for this form of analysis. However, some interviewees feel rather inhibited by the presence of a recorder, or may be reluctant to provide sensitive information if they feel it could be traced back to them. In addition, very noisy environments mean that recording is often difficult or impossible. Finally, it must be stressed that transcribing taped interviews is very time-consuming and this should be factored into any research of this sort.

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Taking notes during the interview may be an appropriate compromise, but it requires great skill to be able to note down the appropriate material, while also paying attention to the interviewee and thinking about your next question. Your interviewee may also be influenced by your note-taking, in that he/she will be able to see when you are taking notes furiously and interpret this as being what you are most interested in. Taking notes is often easier when you are using a translator because you are able to write up when they are asking the next question, but it is important that you still appear to be engaged with what is going on. By taking notes throughout the interview you can also jot down observations about interviewee behaviour or the surroundings which may help to contextualize your analysis later.

Writing up notes after the interview is a strategy that relies on a very good memory, but also time and space to record the notes as soon as possible after the interview. I have adopted this approach in my research in Mexico and found that scribbling down notes while sitting at the bus stop meant I was able

to cover the main topics discussed. I would then review the notes at the end of the day and write them up so they were legible and would add any additional material as appropriate. Where I have tape-recorded interviews, I have often added my own comments on coming out of the interview in terms of the location, non-verbal communication during the interview, or comments made once the tape recorder was switched off. This was a particularly effective strategy in China, where I often went from interview to interview in taxis. I would sit in the back of the taxi dictating into the tape recorder.

### Accuracy

Issues around the accuracy of interview material frequently cause researchers concern. These concerns revolve around the two main issues of representativeness and accuracy. While these are debates in all forms of research, they are often applied to qualitative research more frequently. When using a small selection of interviewees to discuss wider trends in a group or community, researchers need to consider how representative their interviewees are of this wider group (see above). If there are obvious biases, then these should be identified in the writing up of the research.

In terms of accuracy there are a number of debates about interview material. There are issues of whether interviewees are telling 'the truth' or whether they are telling the interviewer what they think is the 'right answer' (in relation to what they think the interviewer wants to hear or what they think will present them in the best light). For example, in research on NGO effectiveness, interviewees may dwell on the positive outcomes of NGO projects if they feel the interviewer is closely allied with that organization. Your positionality and the way it will be interpreted by interviewees must always be considered (Skelton, 2001).

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Another aspect of accuracy relates to household interviews. Interviewers should not assume that all household members know about the activities of the other members. Garry Christensen (1992) conducted research on live-stock and credit in Burkina Faso. Because of local norms about male status in these matters, most of his formal interviews were conducted with male household heads. However, through living in the community for some time, Christensen began to realize that there was a whole network of transfers and transactions involving women and adult siblings, of which male household heads were either unaware or decided not to mention in the interview. Finally, research which involves participants describing events and activities in the past may be less accurate because of recall problems.

When considering the accuracy of interview material, it is important to realize that in most situations there is no one correct response. Rather, all answers are partial and reflect the context in which they are given. Thus, it is important to be reflexive and consider the ways in which the material that

interviewees give you will be framed by the research process itself. In terms of assessing factual information, within the interview you may be able to ask for clarification when there are contradictions. In addition, the use of multiple methods may be helpful. For example, you may be able to supplement interview material with observations and questionnaires. Again, if there are discrepancies in the information, then you can discuss these sensitively with appropriate individuals.

## Conclusions

Interviews can be a very valuable source of information for development research. In this chapter I have discussed some of the different forms of interview and some of the issues you need to be aware of when designing and organizing your interviews. Because of the interpersonal nature of interviewing it can be a very rewarding research method, allowing insights into individuals' lives which go beyond observations and questionnaires surveys.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the differences between unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews and when each form is most appropriate.
2. How does a researcher's positionality affect the interview process?
3. What factors should be considered when deciding on an interview location?
4. How can interviewee recruitment strategies affect the research process?
5. What factors should be taken into account when assessing the accuracy of interview material?

## Further reading

Devereux, S. and Hoddinott, J. (eds) (1992) *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Skelton, T. (2001) Cross-cultural research: Issues of power, positionality and 'race', in M. Limb and C. Dwyer (eds), *Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers*, London: Arnold, pp. 87–100.

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