ECU Office for Faculty Excellence
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Formulating Qualitative Interview Questions

*In-Depth Qualitative Interviews: A Lopsided Conversation with a Purpose*

**Preliminary considerations**

- **Research question**
- **Theoretical orientation**
- **Interview timeframe** (typically 1 to 1.5 hours)
- **Interview type** (structured, semi-structured (interview guide), unstructured)
- **Number and language of interview participants**
  - Individual, couple, focus group: generally, the higher the number of participants, the fewer the questions
  - Native language
- **Interview setting** (ideally, free of noise, distractions, and disruptions)
- **Interview modality** (face-to-face, telephone, Internet)
  - In telephone and internet interviews it may be more difficult to establish rapport but these modes may be helpful in addressing sensitive topics
- **Research study consent (interviews in sequence?)**
  - Time for full consent process in initial interview
  - Time for re-consent process in subsequent interviews
  - Time to obtain follow-up contact information at end
- **Interviewer experience**
  - Use of probes, prompts: topical, motivational

**Qualities of Good Questions**

Sound conversational
Use words participants would probably say
  - Cultural considerations example: “being with a stomach” rather than pregnancy (Hennink et al., 2011)
Easy for you to say
Clear and usually short
Communicate one idea
**OPEN-ENDED** (Open-ended questions, “*beg for explanations, descriptions, or illustrations*”)
  (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 41)

**Qualities of a Good Questioning Route** (source: Krueger & Casey, 2000)

- **Opening: Ease into it** (warm up) (small talk then neutral question to help participant find voice)
  - Natural flow with the evolving conversation
    - Ideally, general to more specific but doesn’t always flow that way
  - Enough time for all to participate
- **Closure: Fade out of it** (Hennink et al., 2011)
  - What is the most important (or one important) thing you would like me to remember?
  - What have we not talked about that you think might be important for me to know?
  - What other insights would you like to share about (the topic)?
Developing and Using an Interview Guide

- **Purpose:** facilitator’s memory trigger
- **Handful of key questions**
  - Identify an “on-the-spot” question in case participant must leave interview
  - All open-ended
  - Jot topic probes—just key words--to address if participant does not address these sub-topics
- **Use:** flexibly (wording and order can change)
  - Avoid numbering the questions
- **Format:** one page, large size font, research question at top

Resources that may be of Interest:

- Monique Hennink: Associate Professor, Hubert Department of Global Health, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University.
- Inge Hutter: Professor Demography, Population Research Centre, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Netherlands
- Ajay Bailey: Post-Doc fellow, Population Research Centre above.

- Richard Krueger: Professor, Program Evaluation; Senior Fellow, Organizational leadership, Policy, and Development, Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota
- Mary Anne Casey: consultant in research design

- Steiner Kvale: Professor, Educational Psychology, Director of Centre of Qualitative Research, University of Aarhus University, Denmark
- Svend Brinkmann: Professor, Communication, Aalborg University, Denmark

- Excellent chapter on interviewing
- Michael Quinn Patton: Independent consultant in evaluation. Former Professor, Evaluation, Union Institute and University Graduate School; former Professor, U. Minnesota. (PhD in Organizational Development & Sociology)

- Kathryn Roulston: Professor, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy, College of Education, University of Georgia

- Irene Rubin: Professor Emeritus of Public Administration, Northern Illinois University
- Herbert Rubin: Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Northern Illinois University