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How I Learned to Design and Conduct Semi-structured Interviews: An Ongoing and Continuous Journey

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Abstract

Qualitative interviewing is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience. Learning to conduct semi-structure interviews requires the following six stages: (a) selecting the type of interview; (b) establishing ethical guidelines, (c) crafting the interview protocol; (d) conducting and recording the interview; (e) crafting the interview protocol; and (f) reporting the findings. A researcher's personal journey in crafting an interview protocol to interview HIV researchers is summarized. She highlights that training and experience are crucial and identifies some readings that can help in the process.

Keywords

Semi-structured Interview, Qualitative Interview, and Qualitative Methods

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How I Learned to Design and Conduct Semi-structured Interviews: An Ongoing and Continuous Journey

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Qualitative interviewing is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience Learning to conduct semi-structure interviews requires the following six stages: (a) selecting the type of interview; (b) establishing ethical guidelines, (c) crafting the interview protocol; (d) conducting and recording the interview; (e) crafting the interview protocol; and (f) reporting the findings. A researcher's personal journey in crafting an interview protocol to interview HIV researchers is summarized. She highlights that training and experience are crucial and identifies some readings that can help in the process. Key Words: Semi-structured Interview, Qualitative Interview, and Qualitative Methods

There is no doubt that qualitative interviewing is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experiences. I am always fascinated when I read articles and books that make use of the interviews to convey findings, messages, and the views of participants regarding a research topics and everyday situations. Since I have encountered increasing number of studies in the health field in which interviews are used, I decided to learn about the art and skills needed to use this powerful tool to explore and investigate the topics that are relevant to my line of research. Currently, I am involved in training and supporting the development of HIV junior researchers. Mentoring, the development of research competencies and working collaboratively are the three major components of the project. Pursuing a research career within the context of this project is a very intense experience. The junior researchers have many “stories to tell” and “learning to share” about their journey as researchers in a sensitive field. As a researcher myself, I would like to capture their voices and give meaning (or interpret) to their experience. I decided to use “interviews” as a tool and window to their stories. Here is my own ongoing journey of how I am learning to design and conduct semi-structured interviews.

Stage 1- Selecting the kind of interview: Why semi-structure interviews? When I decided to use interviews, I proceeded to find a good reference to place the selected method within the larger qualitative framework. I looked for existing literature that expressed the pros and cons of the interview. Some of the writings that I found were posted in the internet as resources for graduate students of different field and disciplines. I made a list of the pros and cons and of the recommendations that I though applied to me. I printed a lot of the list of advices and do's and don'ts. I will probably be referring to them in the future. However, I needed to read the more conceptual and theoretical discussions. I wanted to know about the historical evolution. I came across a chapter

written by Andrea Fontana and James Frey in the second edition of the book *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2005). I highly recommend reading this chapter. It introduced me to many possibilities under the category of qualitative interviewing. This contributed to inform my decision.

I selected the semi-structured interview because I was able to narrow down some areas or topics that I want to ask to the junior researchers. A completely un-structured interview has the risk of not eliciting from the junior researchers the topics or themes more closely related to the research questions under consideration. There are some specific topics that I would like to cover, but at the same time I want to hear their stories. Consequently, I will use the format of an opening statement and a few general questions to elicit conversation. I will have some additional questions designed to probe for information if it does not come up.

Stage 2 - Establishing the ethical guidelines: I soon learned that entering the lives of other, especially the lives of colleagues, had to take into consideration ethical and moral issues. The chapter entitled, "Ethical Issues of Interviewing" in Kvale's *Doing Interviews* (2007), provided an excellent guideline and a useful list of aspects to consider throughout the different stages of the interview. I used these points to discuss my project with co-investigators and consultants that will conduct the project with me. Approaching the more advance stages of research design from a moral and ethical stance will facilitate my interaction with the interviewees. Issues of purpose, consequences, consent, identity, relationships, confidentiality and protection became central early in the process. I feel confident that I will approach my colleagues in a fair and ethical way.

Stage 3 - Crafting the interview protocol: This stage is the most time consuming of all the stages. Many books and articles will tell how to approach this stage. From my readings I learned that the interview protocol has two important components: (a) how do you (meaning the interviewer) introduce yourself to the person being interviewed and (b) what are the questions to be asked. The first component is very important to establish rapport, to create an adequate environment, and to elicit reflection and truthful comments from the interviewee. Once again, online we can find many lists of what to do and what not to do. However, this opening statement has to be carefully crafted by the researcher to establish the line of communication that will elicit the "stories." I revised many drafts and come across some very good examples, but nothing is better than one tailored made for a particular study. When introducing yourself, the protocol should include statements of confidentiality, consent, options to withdraw, and use and scope of the results.

The second important and central component of this stage is the development of the questions and follow-up probes. Nothing is more important for this stage than a good grasp of the subject matter. Existing literature and previous work are the best resources. I have read more than 50 articles directly and indirectly related to my area of interest. I developed the draft of a protocol. To further refine the quality of the interview protocol I can seek out consultation from experts in the field and also experts in qualitative researchers who have used interviews to provide me with feedback and guidance. I can also pilot the interview to help improve my instrumentation. Other than paying close attention to the relationship between the questions asked and the content produced during the interviews, I also need to reflect on whether or not the questions are perceived by the interviewees as being respectful and culturally sensitive.

This stage is crucial to assure the quality. A well planned protocol should have a positive impact in the next three stages of the interview process. Kvale's *Doing Interviews* (2007) was also a great resource for this stage in that he provides not only a helpful overview, but also includes further readings as guidance.

Stage 4 - Conducting and recording the interview: There are many ways of recording interviews. The most commonly used are notes written at the time, notes written afterwards, audio recording, and video recording. The literature recommends audio recording above all the other methods. In reading about this stage, I came across a number of issues that seem common but one that I would not have necessarily taken into account. These include: the quality of the recording equipment and its electronic capabilities, the actual setting, the gender of the interviewer, the familiarity between interviewer and interviewee, among others. Issues like this made me aware of the importance of attending to these details in my pre-interview planning. As was the case for the previous stage, Kvale's *Doing Interviews* (2007) can be great resource for this stage too.

Stage 5 - Analyzing and summarizing the interview: I believe that this is the area in that I need more help. I know that I will be overwhelmed by the amount of "conversation" or "data" collected in the interviews. Managing and organizing it will be a challenge for me. I am not at this stage yet. So far, I am in the process of identifying good sources of information. I have developed a plan to develop my skills which include: evaluating existing qualitative data analysis software, meetings with researchers who have analyzed semi-structured interviews, practicing with existing interview data that my colleagues have agreed to share, and reading more about this stage.

Stage 6 - Reporting the findings: I am not at this stage yet; however, I have been preparing for it. I have read a vast amount of articles related to my topic of interest in which qualitative methods have been used. Some of these authors have used interviews while others have used personal histories or reflections. The experiences in the pursuit of a research career seem to have some commonalities that I am starting to see in those articles. I believe that knowing the qualitative body of knowledge about the topic will help me in the final stages of writing and reporting findings.

I am aware of issues such as disclosure, consequences and trustworthiness when reporting the findings. In order to systemically and formally learn about and address those issues, I recommend reading the following: Wolcott's 2001 book *Writing Up Qualitative Research* and Gilgun's 2005 article "Grab and Good Science: Writing Up Results of Qualitative Research."

In summary, I have delineated the six stages that I believe that should be followed when learning about conducting semi-structured interviews. For each stage I provided at least one reference that I used to learn more about the selected method of data collection. It should be noted that consulting with experts in the field and practicing became essential to my learning. As I advance through the stages, it has become very evident to me that this is a continuous journey. Good qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews relies on the knowledge, skills, vision and integrity of the researcher doing that analysis. Training and experience are crucial for this endeavor (Dingwall, Murphy, Watson, Greatbatch, & Parke, 2002).

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Author Note

Dr. Silvia E. Rabionet received her Doctor of Education Degree from Harvard University Graduate School of Education (2002). She joined NSU-College of Pharmacy in November 2007 as an associate professor in the Socio-Behavioral and Administrative Pharmacy Department. Prior to joining Nova Southeastern University College of Pharmacy (COP), she was an associate professor in health education and health promotion and the University of Puerto Rico-Graduate School of Public Health. She still maintains her affiliation to the University of Puerto Rico. At NSU, she has been part of a faculty team responsible for developing a research unit, infrastructure and scholarship in socioeconomic and behavioral factors related to medication access and use. She is mainly involved in three areas of scholarship: HIV/Health Disparities Research Development and Mentoring, Socio-behavioral Aspects of Pharmacy, and History of the Health Sciences. Currently, she directs the Investigators Development Component of the Puerto Rico Comprehensive Center for the Study on HIV Disparities funded by NIH-RCMI and the Puerto Rico Mentoring Institute for HIV and Mental Health Research funded by NIHMH. These initiatives provide comprehensive support to junior researcher, including: mentoring, methodological skills development, and multi-institution networking. NSU is a partner in this initiative. She can be contacted at Nova Southeastern University, 3200 South University Drive, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33328-2018; Phone: 954 262-1095; Email: rabionet@nova.edu

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