Qualitative Interview Questions: Guidance for Novice Researchers

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Abstract

This article, aimed at the novice researcher, is written to address the increased need to develop research protocols or interview guides to meet the requirements set by IRBs and human subjects review committees. When data collection involves conducting qualitative interviews, the instruments include the researcher and the interview questions. The value of the data collected during a qualitative interview depends on the competence of the researcher and the strength of the interview questions. For this reason, it is important to ensure that the interview questions used by novice researchers are appropriate and capable of supporting their efforts to reach their goal of acquiring a detailed answer to the research question. This article expands upon the ideas presented by various authors about the topic of developing robust qualitative interview questions. It provides guidelines that can be used to develop an interview guide that adds structure to the interview process, as well as provides transparency of methods to human subjects review committees and IRBs, while at the same time allows flexibility within the interview process. Various types of interview questions are described and working examples are included.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Qualitative Interview, Interview Guide, Interview Questions

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Qualitative Interview Questions:
Guidance for Novice Researchers

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This article, aimed at the novice researcher, is written to address the increased need to develop research protocols or interview guides to meet the requirements set by IRBs and human subjects review committees. When data collection involves conducting qualitative interviews, the instruments include the researcher and the interview questions. The value of the data collected during a qualitative interview depends on the competence of the researcher and the strength of the interview questions. For this reason, it is important to ensure that the interview questions used by novice researchers are appropriate and capable of supporting their efforts to reach their goal of acquiring a detailed answer to the research question. This article expands upon the ideas presented by various authors about the topic of developing robust qualitative interview questions. It provides guidelines that can be used to develop an interview guide that adds structure to the interview process, as well as provides transparency of methods to human subjects review committees and IRBs, while at the same time allows flexibility within the interview process. Various types of interview questions are described and working examples are included. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Qualitative Interview, Interview Guide, Interview Questions

Background

From this stance, the processes of phenomena of the world should be described before theorized, understood before explained, and seen as concrete qualities before abstract quantities. (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 15)

Anthropologists have long appreciated the value of learning from listening and writing down the stories shared by others about historical events and using these accounts to make sense out of what transpired (Seidman, 2013). In fact, this type of dialogue started to be referred to as an interview in the 17th century. Journalistic interviews date back to the 19th century and were considered a means for obtaining and publishing knowledge or acquiring a historical account of an event (Silvester, 1993). By the 20th century qualitative interviews were being conducted in the social sciences by both anthropologists and sociologists; the goal being to collect information and increase knowledge in these areas (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Qualitative interviews have also proven useful in the field of education and health sciences. In psychology, interviewing was at first used as a therapeutic technique, and means to gather knowledge about mental processes during the course of therapy (Freud, 1963). Today interviewing is used to gather knowledge in various disciplines including, "education, psychology, anthropology, sociology, media studies, human geography, marketing, business, and nursing science" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 15).

Qualitative interviews have also been used as a means to collect data in research for decades. Piaget (1930) used interviews while developing his theory about child development.

Inspired by the work of Piaget, Janet, Freud, and Jung, as well as the therapeutic interview, Roethlisberger and Dickson conducted the Hawthorne studies which included over 21,000 interviews exploring industrial supervision (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Qualitative interviews have also been conducted within focus groups to better understand the motivations of consumers (Dichter, 1960). Dichter's (1960) use of focus group "depth interviews" was based upon the interview techniques used in psychanalysis and nondirective therapy (Rogers, 1945; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Although the format aligned with short survey interviews, the Chicago School of Sociology utilized the qualitative interview to acquire insight into the experience of living in Chicago (Warren, 2002). These are just a few examples of how interviews have been used over time in various settings to collect qualitative data for various purposes.

In the social sciences, Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced the use of qualitative interviews as a research method and are considered pioneers for this technique within the context of qualitative research. Since then quite a few books have been written focusing on the use of interviews in qualitative research including Spradley's (1979) book *The Ethnographic Interview* and Mishler's (1986) book *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Research interviewing was then described more broadly in four volumes by Fielding in *Interviewing* (2003). Another overview of methods can be found in the *Handbook of Interview Research* (edited by Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012). Specifically, as it applies to qualitative research, interviewing is addressed in Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. The rationale for the continued focus on interviews as a method for capturing qualitative data aligns with the intention and goal of qualitative research, and the belief that an, "interview is the main road to multiple realities" (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Over the past two decades, numerous books and articles have been published about qualitative research and qualitative methods, including the qualitative interview, in an effort to provide guidance on strategies, techniques, and best practices (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Creswell, 2013; deMarrais, 2004; Thomsen & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2013).

These resources provide valuable tools to guide the qualitative research process. However, to be effective the appropriate tools need to be developed and used in the appropriate manner. Developing effective qualitative interview questions and interview protocols takes experience and providing resources for novice researchers that support this type of learning not only supports skill development, but also reduces the likelihood of making mistakes. Novice researchers can derail the interview process by asking lengthy, closed, vague, or leading questions (DeMarrais, 2004). They can take control and forget not only their role, but also the purpose of the study, by asking questions that steer the interview in the direction of confirming their personal suspicions, thereby guiding the process in a way that validates their personal expectations instead of capturing the research participants' perspective (Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015). For this reason, authors and researchers have paid attention to the various issues associated with conducting qualitative research with the intention of providing sources of reference for beginner researchers (Chenail, 2011; Gesch-Karramanlidis, 2015; Jacob & Ferguson, 2012; Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013; Turner, 2010). Novices and sometimes even seasoned researchers can inadvertently negatively impact the data collection process and therefore the value of the findings. The information contained in this article provides additional insight into this topic and acts as another point of reference for novices.

The Qualitative Interview

Qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight. (Charmaz, 2008, p. 29)

Within the scientific community, qualitative researchers are considered naturalists because of their view that reality is ever changing and subjective, and their belief that knowledge should be obtained indirectly through the perceptions of and as interpreted by others (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because of their stance on what can be known and how knowledge can be obtained, qualitative researchers explore complex situations or processes by asking others, "How did everything unfold?" and "How are the involved variables interacting with one another?" It is assumed that we can learn from others and that by interacting, reflecting, and reconstructing what was experienced, we can reach shared meanings and understandings, and therefore acquire insight into the complexities of specific aspects of life (Schutz, 1967; Seidman, 2013). The qualitative interview, therefore, provides a means, through dialog, to work toward making sense of and determining the meaning of specific events, experiences, or phenomena (Seidman, 2013; Vygotsky, 1987).

If a researcher desires to understand the subjective perspective of the research subject about what they encountered in life (Schutz, 1967), then interviewing is considered a fitting strategy (Seidman, 2013). Conducting qualitative interviews gives researchers, "privileged access to people's basic experience of the lived world." (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 32). This type of interview is a structured and purposeful conversation (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015), that is conducted, "to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). The goal is to acquire an understanding of the meaning and experience of the lived world from the perspective of the participant, communicated in their own words, and described in very specific detail to a researcher that is open and can set aside what they think and know about the experience being described. In other words, the goal of a qualitative interview is to capture the subjective point of view of the research participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

During the interview process the researcher assumes that the meaning research participants assign to their experiences is filtered through context and interpreted according to past experience and biases (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In other words, it is assumed that all humans take in and make sense of their world by drawing on what they know and what they have experienced in the past. The act of recalling and reconstructing what occurred, and then sharing the experience during the interview, provides the research participant with the opportunity to reflect on what that occurrence meant and choose which aspects are important within the experience (Thelen, 1989), and provides the researcher with the opportunity to understand another's perspective (Schutz, 1967), as well as the context within which it occurred (Mishler, 1979, 1986). Researchers also assume that the research participant's interpretation of their experience can change and be altered by subsequent knowledge, including what occurs within the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In fact, Rubin and Rubin (2012) have even suggested that the interviewer and interviewee work together within the interview to answer the research question.

Researchers identifying as naturalists, that assume that experiences are interpreted through our past experiences and knowledge, are considered constructionists and believe that, "knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 4). The process is considered active, and provides the research participant, or interviewee, with the opportunity to think more deeply about what occurred, clarify, justify, and rationalize, so that they can describe what occurred in a meaningful manner. The idea is that by participating in the process, research participants are provided with the opportunity to freely explore and validate their experience, and it is through participating in the interview that knowledge is produced (Brinkmann 2007). Within research that is conducted from this perspective, the research participants are viewed as a research partner (Rubin &

Rubin, 2012) and what is captured in the interview is "a reality constructed by the interviewee and interviewer" (Rapley, 2001, p. 304).

Throughout the interview, the interviewer and research participant work as a team to construct knowledge (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Research participants describe their experiences and provide a rationale for how they responded (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Researchers, on the other hand, are tasked with eliciting an active response from the participants and actively engaging the participants in the interview process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). They support the participants' efforts to figure out what it all means by probing for a more detailed response, as well as additional information in an effort to increase understanding, seek clarification, and most importantly determine what to ask next. The researcher also provides the structure and has the job of maintaining focus throughout the interview (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Seidman, 2013). Success when using this type of interview requires the involvement and active participation of both the researcher, as the interviewer, and the research participant, as well as a lot of thought and planning.

Although it might sound simple to conduct a qualitative interview, this activity (or process) is neither natural (Briggs, 2007) nor simple (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). "Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 645). In other words, novice researchers that want to contribute knowledge that is substantial to the field cannot just pick up a digital recorder and start conducting interviews. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) go so far as to communicate that qualitative interviewing, "requires a high level of skill on behalf of the interviewer, who needs to be knowledgeable about the interview topic and familiar with the methodological options available, as well as have an understanding of the conceptual issues of producing knowledge through conversation" (p. 19). Skills have to be acquired, methods have to be determined, and interview questions or an interview guide/protocol has to be crafted that aligns with the overall methodology, goal, and purpose of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This pertains to everything from the overall structure of the study, which depends on the researcher's methodological approach, to the strategies that are used during the course of the study, such as the manner in which the interview is conducted, as well as the structure of the questions posed within the interview. For example, the interview and the questions that are asked depend upon what the researcher wants to know; concrete experiences, underlying meaning of a specified phenomenon, perceptual experiencing, etc.

Without proper preparation, experience, and oversight, novice researchers conducting qualitative research risk obtaining findings that are merely a reflection of current common attitudes and opinions about a specific topic, and disseminating findings that could be based on personal bias and prejudice (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Gesch-Karramanlidis, 2015; Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). The outcome is that nothing new is added to our current knowledge base. Successful interviewing, "rests on the practical skills and the personal judgments of the interviewer," and the, "quality of interviewing is judged by the strength and value of the knowledge produced" (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 20). In this way, the strength of the interview along with the level of skill of the interviewer relate directly to the outcome and value of the study. This idea is not new, and in fact, past researchers such as Piaget underwent extensive training prior to conducting research interviews, and studies such as the Hawthorne study valued and utilized well-trained interviewers (Kvale, 2003). Just as a carpenter without a blueprint or lacking the appropriate materials will be incapable of producing a quality home, qualitative research requires forethought, planning, and strategies capable of fulfilling the goal of the study.

Adopt a Qualitative Attitude

> A researcher preoccupied with his or her own predispositions regarding the research question shuts himself off from the informant's experience. (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013, p. 12)

Novices need to take steps to ensure that they approach their research, and maintain throughout the study, the right attitude (Seidman, 2013). They must keep in mind that the purpose of a qualitative interview is not to get the informant to answer the interview questions. Rather, the purpose is to listen to their stories so that they can acquire an understanding of how their experiences unfolded, and the meanings that they associated with these experiences. Novice researchers that approach their research as if they already know the answer to the research question are in danger of guiding the interview in a way that leads informants to provide responses that support their predetermined expectations (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). For this reason, novice researchers need to make the shift to an "informant-centered" attitude and embrace the idea that the informant is the expert on their experiences. The informant alone possesses the knowledge necessary to answer the research question. Skilled researchers intuitively use self-reflection as a tool to question their motives, thought processes, and initial interpretations, and to remain aware of subjectivity and personal bias (Bettie, 2003; Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Novices conducting research may require support in their efforts to adopt an open stance, as well as oversight to remain aware of their personal biases and approach each interview with an attitude of discovery (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). In order to facilitate and support this type of open discovery within the interview, open-ended interview questions have to be created, and it takes awareness, knowledge, "training and practice to write open-ended questions; the hallmark of a qualitative interview" (Sofaer, 2002, p. 334).

Structure of Qualitative Interview Questions

> An interview question can be evaluated with respect to both a thematic and a dynamic dimension: thematically with regard to producing knowledge and dynamically with regard to the interpersonal relationship in the interview. A good interview question should contribute thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to promoting a good interview interaction. (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 157)

Developing an initial set of interview questions is part of the research process and requires thought and planning about what to ask and how (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). First, the structure of the interview questions depends upon the researcher's expertise and prior knowledge about the subject matter. The actual interview questions will be very broad if the researcher is not knowledgeable about the topic they plan to investigate. Rubin and Rubin (2012) identified these initial questions as tour questions because the interviewee provides the interviewer with a tour of the topic. The interview questions might start off broad and then become more focused as the researcher acquires additional knowledge about the topic of interest. The interview questions might even become more developed and focused during the course of the study based upon the research participant's responses to the tour questions. The initial or touring questions might be worded as follows: I'm interested in… Can you tell me about…? Sometimes, mini-tour questions are used to become more familiar with parts of the whole and allow researchers to become more familiar with the various parts that are involved within the overall experience or phenomenon being studied.

Qualitative research questions also typically focus on why an event, experience, or phenomenon occurred, how it unfolded, what it was like, and/or what it meant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this reason, the interview questions need to be capable of eliciting an in-depth response relevant to the topic of interest (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Asking questions that fall outside of this experience or questions focused on what the researcher has predetermined to be important would be inappropriate at best and at worst could derail the research. This would be similar to collecting demographic information that is not necessary. Asking interview questions that are unable to provide anything of value toward answering the research question could not only leave the researcher with a lot of unusable data, but also be considered a waste of the research participant's time and energy. The same applies to asking interview questions that cause the research participant to focus on concepts or aspects of the experience predetermined to be important by the researcher. The researcher is then directing the course of the interview and therefore, in a sense, predetermining the results. The bottom line is that asking irrelevant or leading interview questions reduces the credibility of the findings.

In addition to being aligned closely with the research question, the interview questions must align with the purpose and goal of the study (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). The goal of the research study will influence everything from how the interview questions are put together to how many are developed. Researchers that simply want the research participant to tell them a story about a particular experience might directly ask the research participant to tell them a story that stands out for them about the topic of interest (Seidman, 2013). Then, if the research participant neglects to describe in detail who, what, where, when, and how this occurred, the researcher might follow-up by asking questions about who was influential or influenced, what happened, or how it unfolded, in addition to asking for a description of the context, including any and all influential factors. For example, a narrative study might start the interview with one question that allows the research participant's story to unfold and then follow with probes for additional insight into episodes and characters. On the other hand, a grounded theory study might make use of interview questions that target specific aspects of the beginning, middle, and end of a process related to an event, experience, or phenomenon (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Researchers should be clear about the goal of their study and familiar with the methodological approach prior to developing the interview questions or protocol.

The interview questions should be carefully worded in a way that is easy to understand and framed in a way that allows the research participant to share freely (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This means that the questions that are asked should be broad enough that they do not limit or bias the research participant's response. They should ask questions that explore what is unknown, rather than leading the course of the interview through the tone or structure of the questions that are posed (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1989; Richardson, Dohrenwend, & Klein, 1965; Seidman, 2013). Questions should be free of assumptions, allow for complex answers, and convey that the researcher is open to all aspects of the experience; both positive and negative. The interview questions should be structured so that they are focused on the topic of interest, but not framed in a way that limits the focus to one portion of the experience. They must be worded in a way that allows the research participant to identify what they feel is important, and focus on their personal experience instead of asking them to interpret the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perspectives of others (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Although it may seem as if the researcher's choices are limited, researchers have many options when developing the structure of their interview questions. The interview questions can be direct, indirect, or even hypothetical. Rubin and Rubin (2012) propose using a hypothetical example to begin a discussion about an experience familiar to the interviewee. Another option would be to ask about highlights, turning points, comparisons, and various dimensions (most, least, best, and worst). One thing to keep in mind when choosing how to

word the interview questions is that the strategy that is chosen to elicit rich, vivid, and detailed research participant responses will depend on the research question and end goal of the study. The goal, when creating interview questions, is to develop open and broad questions, capable of capturing a detailed account of the participant's perception of their experience that the researcher can use to answer the research question.

Interview Guide

> Proposed interview questions must be sufficiently detailed to convince evaluators that no harm will befall research participants yet open enough to allow unanticipated material to emerge during the interview. A well thought-out list of open-ended questions helps. (Charmaz, 2008, p. 29)

Although within in-depth interviews the research subject is asked to reconstruct a specific experience, and the interview questions typically follow from what the research subject verbally communicated within the interview, researchers can develop an interview guide (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Interview guides are being used more frequently due to the requirement of IRBs and human subjects review committees that research projects follow a prescribed protocol within human subject interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Although required, researchers have alternatives as far as what to include within the interview guide. They can include a list of main questions directly related to the research question, potential follow up questions and probes, or simply an outline of topics or themes that will be addressed within the interview (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2018). Developing an interview guide might be particularly well suited for novice researchers because it helps keep both the interview and the subject focused and facilitates a deeper response from research participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interview guides are useful within both semi-structured and in-depth interviews of individuals or groups (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), and can be used to introduce the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) or to provide both structure and focus to the interview process (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin 2018). They can also be used as a reference of what needs to be addressed within the interview (Seidman, 2013) or provide the researcher with prompts to facilitate more in-depth sharing (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2018). Novice researchers might feel more comfortable having a guide to refer to during the interview and find it particularly useful to boost momentum in the interview, especially with research participants that do not share freely (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The questions within the guide can be developed in a manner that helps the research participant think more deeply about the topic being explored as the interview progresses. The guide could also be used as prop to assure participants that the researcher is prepared; it could even be shared with participants to reduce stress and make the process more transparent (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Even the process of putting together the interview guide can be valuable. Researchers, who invest time and energy into developing an interview guide are honing their skills in developing open ended questions and learning how to explore a topic openly (Charmaz, 2014). This exercise provides the researcher with the opportunity to deeply consider the types of questions that need to be asked in order to answer the research question(s). While considering what to ask within the interview guide, researchers might opt to review the literature to assist in the identification of possible concepts to explore in the beginning stages of the study. Reviewing the literature while developing the interview guide can also sensitize researchers to the main concepts associated with a particular topic, which can be helpful when analyzing the

data later in the research project. Preparing an interview guide also helps researchers identify potential problems that could arise within the course of the interview, making them more prepared (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) goes so far as to state that a well-planned out protocol increases reliability.

It is important to stress that while putting together an interview guide, researchers should be mindful of the wording of the interview questions. The questions in the guide need to align closely with the topic being explored. They have to be broad, open ended, nonjudgmental, open to unique interpretations of experience, and invite the participant to provide a detailed description of the topic being explored (Charmaz, 2014). It is also very important that the predetermined questions are worded in a way that they do not manipulate the process or the research subjects' response (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Participants should feel that they can share their experience freely without being told what aspects of the experience to focus on and share (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Of course, relying on an interview guide does not mean that the interview process is a step-by-step, one-size-fits-all approach to interviewing (Seidman, 2013). The questions included in the guide are not always posed in a strict sequence, especially the follow-up questions, and they may change during the course of the study.

Currently most human subjects review committees and IRBs require the use of an interview guide even when following approaches like the grounded theory method that adhere to a more flexible design (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), however, the interview questions can be revised as the research progresses. The researcher in this scenario simply needs to secure approval of the revisions to the interview guide before using the revised interview guide within the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This allows researchers the flexibility to alter the questions based upon the analysis of the initial data set. This process does require more time and effort, but it is manageable if the intention is to conduct a study using a qualitative approach such as grounded theory in the appropriate manner (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The interview guide can then evolve over time to include new concepts or areas of interest communicated early on within the interview process by research participants that are relevant to the study and/or may require further exploration (Seidman, 2013). Resubmitting interview guides for review provides researchers with one way to remain in alignment with certain qualitative approaches and at the same time satisfy review boards and committees. Another option is to develop one interview guide that can be followed throughout the research project that includes several main questions and a few follow-up questions, but to stipulate within the materials submitted for review to IRBs and human subjects review committees that the process will be flexible.

While researchers associated with the various approaches to qualitative research make use of unique investigative strategies, they appear to be in agreement that qualitative interviews require a certain amount of flexibility (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Fetterman, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Several qualitative researchers argue that although qualitative interviews might need a certain amount of structure, the interview also has to flow freely, giving the research participant the freedom to describe things from their own perspective without manipulation from the researcher (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2018). Therefore, although a study might be guided by an approved interview guide, the interview process itself should remain flexible and allow the researcher to ask follow up questions based upon what the research participant communicates within the interview (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). The interview guide can serve as a baseline and be used to continue the exploration until a rich description is obtained, but it does not need to be followed strictly (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Researchers that decide to make use of an interview guide should still allow for flexibility, engage in the process, and develop follow-up questions according to what the interviewee communicates in real time within the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). They

should consider the list of questions to be a "guide" that can be used if needed. The researcher should refrain from interrupting the research participant for the purpose of moving on to the next question or in order to fit all of the questions into the timeframe allotted for the interview. There should not be any pressure to interrupt a research participant that is doing well on their own to provide an account of their experience. As much as the guide provides structure, the researcher needs to keep in mind that there is also freedom to explore more than what is included in the guide. Questions should be posed that follow from what the research subject communicated within that moment (Seidman, 2013). Researchers also have the freedom to simply listen while the research participant shares their experience.

Orienting Questions

> If given the chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on. (Bertaux, 1981, p. 39)

Interviews might include a few minutes of talk to help put the research participant at ease. Instructions, paperwork or permissions may also need to be completed at this stage. Several methods could be incorporate into the interview process to help orient the research participant to the interview. These include showing interest in what is being shared, conveying that there are no expectations as far as how to answer the interview questions, showing respect for their role as expert, and making sure that the interview feels natural rather than an interrogation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In other words, researchers can set the stage for a qualitative interview by simply listening, displaying interest in what is being communicated, communicating understanding, and showing respect (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). For this reason, once introductions, paperwork, and permissions are complete and the research participant seems ready to begin the interview, the researcher might pose a question that orients them to the process. A good example is the question that Spradley (1979) presents to introduce an ethnographic interview, "I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way that you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?" (p. 34). This conveys to the research participant the researcher's expectations as well as respect for them and their role within the process.

Main Question(s)

> Your first question may suffice for the whole interview if stories tumble out. (Charmaz, 2008, p. 29)

The initial or main questions used within a qualitative interview should be broad, allowing the subject to answer freely and convey the aspects of the experience that they feel are important to them (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Main questions should be closely aligned to the research question and consistent with the structure of the interview. They should introduce the theme or main focus of the study. In their presentation of Kinsey's (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) interviewing methods, Shaffer and Elkins (2005) described what they called "introductory" questions as prompts used to get research participants to provide detailed descriptions of what they experienced in relation to the research question. These types of "introductory" or main questions ask the subject to tell the researcher what occurred and to describe their experience in as much detail as possible. When using certain qualitative approaches, these may be the only questions or even "the" only

question guiding the entire interview process (Giorgi, 1975; Moustakas, 1994). Any remaining questions asked within the interview would follow from the research participant's response to the main question(s).

A good example of a main question would be a "grand tour" question which invites the research subject to reconstruct their experience in vivid detail (Spradley, 1979). A question like, "Walk me through exactly how this unfolded in detail" could be considered a good main or grand tour question. Giorgi (1975) presents as a first question in a phenomenological study, "Could you describe in as much detail as possible…?" If a study focuses on exploring a process, the research participant might be asked to walk the researcher through the process and use prompts such was, "What happened first, next, or last?" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). If the researcher desires additional detail about a specific portion of an experience, they could also use "mini-tour" questions that ask the research participant to tell the researcher more about that specific part (Spradley, 1979). The number of main questions will vary according to the type of interview and the goal of the study, but in general qualitative researchers rely on only one or just a few broad main questions that relate to one another as well as the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

One technique when developing a good list of main questions is to break the topic up into its essential components. Then, develop one question to address each part (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Asking the research participant to provide multiple examples is another strategy that can be used to acquire a rich description of the event, experience, or phenomenon. One technique that is particularly useful is to rely on follow-up questions to elicit more detail.

Follow up Questions

Interviewers sketch the outline of these views by delineating the topics and drafting the questions. Interviewing is a flexible, emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview and interviewers can immediately pursue these leads. (Charmaz, 2008. p. 29)

First and foremost, after asking a research participant to share their experience, researchers have to listen to what the research participant has to say (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Giorgi, 1975; Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Probably, the most important skill of a qualitative researcher is "active listening" (Seidman, 2013). Researchers have to listen to what is said, for "inner voice" (Devault, 1990; Steiner, 1978), and pay attention to nonverbal communications, while at the same time remain mindful of the process and structure of the interview (Seidman, 2013). Dana Crowley Jack (1999) identified six forms of listening that she considered integral to her research on depression. These "ways of listening" included everything from attending to bodily reactions within the interview to noticing inconsistencies in the narrative. Learning how to actively listen is considered more important than getting through a list of predetermined questions within the interview, and well known researchers such as Rogers, Piaget, and Freud all relied on silence and active listening techniques within their research and in their quest for knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). After asking for a detailed description of what happened and listening to their response, researchers may need to use follow-up questions or probes to further explore the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the experience. Answers to these questions provide the researcher with a more holistic view of the event, experience, or phenomenon.

Developing an interview guide that includes potential follow-up questions facilitates sharing, helps novice researchers stay on track (Yin, 2018), provides IRBs with a sense for what the researcher plans to focus on within their interviews, and prompts the researcher to

investigate the topic being explored from every angle (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) Novice researchers might find it particularly useful to have a list of follow-up questions because they provide a safety net or prompts to elicit holistic descriptions of experience. In this way, follow-up questions are used to ensure that various dimensions of the experience are explored, so that researchers do not end up with a surface account of what transpired and how the phenomenon of interest was experienced. Using a guide to provide structure to the interview but not following the guide rigidly can make the interview both flexible and predictable, making the interview process balanced.

Researchers that desire structure can add to their interview guide a list of follow up questions. Follow up questions can keep the participant on track, talking, and focused on the topic being explored (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There are several types of questions that can help researchers come at the topic from several angles and acquire additional detail (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Specifying questions are used to help subjects provide more specific information within their answers, understand how the subject responded, explore any associations that might be involved, and inquire about bodily responses, thoughts, actions, and reactions (Kinsey et al., 1948; Shaffer & Elkins, 2005). Structuring questions are used to keep the subject on topic and focused on the topic being investigated or prompt a subject to move on to another topic, which is especially useful if the study is organized by specific concepts or themes. Examples of these types of follow up questions include: What else stands out that happened within and around this experience/phenomenon? What did you do, think, feel, or view as influential? Describe what that was like for you. What bodily sensations occurred? Describe that in more detail. How and when did this occur (or what else was happening at this time that might have influenced the experience/phenomenon)? What was communicated or what messages were understood? Who was involved? Does this remind you of anything or another memory? Walk me through this. Give me additional background on what happened. Is there anything else that you think is important to know?

When used flexibly within the interview, follow up questions follow naturally from what the research participant communicated and focus on highlighting words that seem to stand out as important, or the use of nods/sounds that signify to "go on" (Kinsey et al., 1948; Shaffer & Elkins, 2005). They reflect what the research subject communicated in the interview in response to the main question(s) (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This form of follow-up is used to get the subject to "dig deeper" and acquire a more detailed and complete response. Follow up questions are used when additional clarification or information is needed and to support further elaboration of what was experienced or occurred (Seidman, 2013). Researchers also follow up when a research participant's response seems unusual or unexpected, when key terms, concepts, or themes need to be further defined or explained, or when parts of a process (people, places or things) seem to be left out of the story or are not described in detail (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Following up on the research participant's response is done because researchers want to know not only the whole story, but every detail of that story.

That being said, there are no strict rules for what to ask or when to use specific types of follow up questions. Making use of follow up questions requires on the spot decisions made by the interviewer (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). As research participants are sharing their story, researchers have to determine when to follow up and inquire about context, meaning, related circumstances/factors, causal links, why, meaning of terminology, sorting out contradictions, clarifying ambiguities, alternative explanations or perspectives, evidence and examples, or personal insights (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). They have to decide when to ask, "What do you think about, or what exactly does it mean when you say, or under what circumstances, or what are your thoughts about?" This type of follow up can involve direct questions that investigate topics and dimensions brought up within the subject's account of their experience, such as, "You mentioned previously or pointed out…" or "You said that you felt…", indirect questions

that seek to understand the subject's experience by asking them to describe their take on the perception of others, as well as interpreting questions that range from asking subjects to rephrase their response to asking for clarification directly by asking, "Is it correct that….?" (Kinsey, et al., 1948; Shaffer & Elkins, 2005).

Probes

> Having an interview guide with well-planned open-ended questions and ready probes can increase your confidence and permit you to concentrate on what the person is saying. (Charmaz, 2008, p. 29)

Probes help the researcher manage the flow of the interview, and keep the interviewee engaged in the interview process as well as on topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). They can be used to keep the subject talking or for clarification of what was stated (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe three classifications of probes including those used for attention (convey to the interviewee that the interviewer is paying attention and engaged), conversational management (maintain focus, or acquire vivid, detailed, and clear responses), and credibility (assess the supporting evidence, accuracy of memory, or impact of bias). Probes can be nonverbal and involve the use of gestures, facial expressions, nods, body posture, and silence. Verbal probes like, "uh-huh," "Yes," "okay," "Go on," "Can you give me an example," or "That's interesting, could you tell me more," can also facilitate detailed descriptions and exploration (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 118). These types of probes are simple requests for additional information or detail (Kinsey, et al., 1948; Shaffer & Elkins, 2005). Probes can also be used; (a) to steer the interviewee back on track, "You were saying that…" or "Could you go back and tell me about…," (b) to summarize and reflect to ensure understanding, "You said that…," (c) to ask for clarification, "I did not quite understand," "Can you explain this to me in more detail," or "Are you saying that…," (d) to check for understanding, confirmation, or to facilitate communication, (e) as open requests to elaborate, "Sounds like…," or "That sounds…," and (f) as a check for credibility, "How exactly did that occur," "What happened that made it so," "What words were used when…," or "What exactly was going on at that time" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Consideration of Order

> An obvious first step in an interview study is to get straight the questions you want to ask people. (Karp, 2009, p. 40)

It is important to consider seriously the order in which the interview questions are presented. Researchers have to keep in mind that rapport, trust, and respect have to be developed and maintained within the interview in order to create a safe place to share personal insights and experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For this reason, Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest ordering the questions from easy to tough, first asking "what" and "how" questions that prompt a descriptive response. The initial questions that are used to elicit a description of the event, experience, or phenomenon could be as simple as asking what happened, what the research participant experienced, how it happened, or how they felt (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Starting the interview with one or a few simple questions allows time for the interviewer and interviewee to develop trust and reduces the likelihood that the questions will be perceived as threatening (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Researchers can order the questions so that they work up to more sensitive questions or "why" questions, and then allow the subject to destress before the end of the interview by going back

to asking less sensitive questions that call for descriptive answers. Asking the research participant a closing question like, "Now that you know what the research is about, is there anything that I should have asked but didn't?" provides them with the opportunity to wind down (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 112).

Putting thought into the timing of the interview questions is essential for researchers, especially those who may have only one opportunity to interview a research participant, and therefore have to rely on developing trust within and throughout the span of one interview. It is also noteworthy to mention that although the questions might be presented in a specific order, each question should be explored thoroughly using follow up questions and probes before moving on to the next question. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 163) provide the following as a general guide:

- Can you describe it to me? What happened?
- What did you do? How do you remember it? How did you experience it?
- What do you feel about it? How was your emotional reaction to this event?
- What do you think about it? How did you conceive of this issue?
- What is your opinion of what happened? How do you judge it today?

This list is not presented as a hard and fast rule for what to ask within all qualitative interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The authors not only recognize that the follow-up questions have to align with the purpose and goal of the study, but they also present what they identify as "second questions" and emphasize the need to follow the subject, as well as the flow of the interview. Second questions align directly with what the subject has communicated and require that the interviewer be capable of being sensitive, intuitive, immersed in the interview, and not strictly focused on the interview guide. These types of questions include prompts like, "Can you tell me more," "Can you provide examples," "Can you describe more fully," or "Can you specify how." These examples and guidelines are presented with the idea of "flexibility" throughout the process. In other words, the interviewer has to be able to follow along and explore what is being communicated in a way that results in a detailed answer to the research question.

Testing

One of the advantages of conducting a pilot study is that it might give advance warning about where the main research project could fail, where research protocols may not be followed, or whether proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated. (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001, para. 1)

If it is feasible, researchers can conduct preliminary interviews to review the effectiveness of each interview question, as well as ask the interviewees for feedback (Chenail, 2011). They can then make changes or revisions based on this feedback and the experience of the "practice interview." This also provides novice researchers with the opportunity to hone their interviewing skills. If this type of pilot study is not feasible, novice researchers can conduct a mock interview within which they assume the role of research participant, and either interview themselves or have their supervisor or chair assume the role of investigator/interviewer (Chenail, 2011). During this exercise, the novice researcher should record the interview, review the recording, take notice of what worked and didn't, think about the responses, evaluate the effectiveness of questions and follow ups, and make modifications. Working with a supervisor or chair provides the opportunity for those with experience to intervene, share their expertise, and provide support. Either way, testing the effectiveness of

the interview questions prior to conducting the study offers novice researchers the chance to learn from mistakes, strengthen skills, and identify as well as manage potential biases. Completing this step could also support the novice researcher's efforts to adopt an attitude that is open and oriented toward discovery, uncover hidden agendas, and open the researcher up to possibilities instead of a desire to acquire evidence in support of predetermined expectations.

Debriefing

> At the end of an interview there may be some tension or anxiety, as the subject has been open about personal and sometimes emotional experiences and may be wondering about the purpose and later use of the interviews. (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 154)

A detailed review of debriefing, reflecting and recognizing the role of the researcher is beyond the scope of this article, but it would be an oversight not to mention the value of each within the context of qualitative research. When participating in research, participants give a lot more than they receive (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Research participants may experience stress or anxiety and may need time to debrief after the interview is over. The research partner/subject provided their time and energy for the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), and researchers should value and protect them, and remain sensitive and responsive to their needs by incorporating a plan to debrief into their research design (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Research participants may want to talk about new insights that occurred during the course of the interview, and researchers can provide an opportunity for this type of sharing by summarizing what was "learned" and asking the subject if they have anything more to add. Researchers can also allow time to discuss the research participant's experience of the interview, inquire about any worries or concerns regarding the interview or what was shared, or address questions that might have come up either about the study or how the information shared will be used.

Time for Reflection

> Perhaps the most important thing is to insist on ample time and space immediately following the interview to prepare the facsimile and interpretive commentary. (Stake, 1995, p. 66)

After the interview, researchers should take some time to reflect and write about their experience of the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Stake, 1995). Doing this provides the researcher with the opportunity to acknowledge and reflect on what transpired during the interview, including body language, noteworthy interactions or moments, ideas about themes and connections. At this time, researchers can free write a summary of the interview and highlights of what was learned, unexpected themes, emotions, or happenings. Researchers can also document their thoughts about potential biases, first impressions, relevant contextual information, and outside forces that could have impacted the interview, or even the flow of the interview. It might be beneficial to also document things like whether or not the participant seemed able to share or connect with the researcher, or any challenges that occurred within the interview that could provide additional insight when analyzing the data.

Recognizing Researcher Influence

> When interviewers ask what something was like for participants, they are giving them the chance to reconstruct their experience according to their own sense of what was important unguided by the interviewer. (Seidman, 2013, p. 88)

Last but not least, throughout the research process, from designing the study to writing up and presenting the results, qualitative researchers have to remain cognizant of their role and influence. The interviewer, as a data collection instrument, actively engages in the process, proficiently responds to the research participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and recognizes their impact on both the process and outcome (Patton, 1989). Recognizing their role includes identifying their personal assumptions about the topic under investigation, and keeping these assumptions in check so that they do not influence the interview questions, and as a result influence the interview, data collection and analysis, and findings (Charmaz, 2008). A researcher's worldview can have a significant impact on the outcome of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For this reason, qualitative researchers have to avoid having an effect on how the research participant describes their experience. "The interview becomes a research instrument for interviewers, who need to learn to act receptively in order to affect as little as possible the interviewee's reporting" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 52). In order to accomplish this, throughout the interview, qualitative researchers avoid leading the interview when responding to what the research participant communicated, because they are aware that their responses could be considered reinforcements or affirmations that manipulate the research participant's responses, and therefore the course of the interview (Seidman, 2013).

Since researchers bring their own assumptions into their research, they have to be aware of the impact of these assumptions and develop a plan to reduce the impact (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest several techniques that can be used to reduce the impact of researcher bias. One strategy involves simply writing about personal assumptions and potential biases in a journal. This strategy can be used during every step of the research process, including while developing the interview guide. They recommend that researchers reflect on what made them decide to include the set of questions in their interview guide. Consideration and thought should be invested into exploring what it was that made them think that these questions would be capable of answering the research question(s). During the interview, researchers can continue to keep their influence in check by keeping in the forefront of their mind the reciprocal influence at play: how they are influencing the course of the interview and what the interviewee shares, as well as how they are being impacted by the interviewee (actions, words, non-verbal cues, etc.). Keeping things like this in mind throughout the course of the study will help to reduce the impact the researcher has on the study.

Recommendations

Below is a graphic summarizing the recommendations presented within this article. Using the ideas communicated in this article or drawing on techniques such as the Interview Protocol Refinement Framework (IPR), during the developmental stages of research would be beneficial to novices. This article presents the following recommendations to novice researchers: (1) adopt a qualitative attitude, (2) craft interview questions judiciously and with support from a supervisor or chair that possesses methodological expertise, (3) develop an HSR-approved interview guide or protocol that can be used as a guide and support within the interview, (4) test out the interview questions and practice interviewing strategies, (5) take time to review and reflect on the effectiveness of the interview questions and interviewing techniques, and (6) use what is learned within this period of reflection and review to strengthen

the interview process, including the questions asked within the interview. This review and reflection also provide the opportunity to gain awareness of biases and personal agendas and can help novice researchers further develop and foster their qualitative attitude. This cycle can then be repeated if necessary.
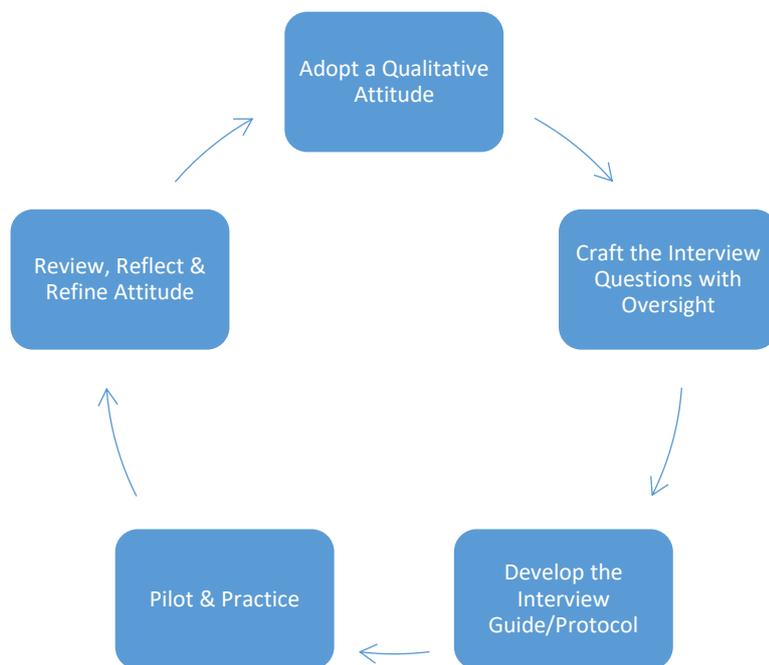
These ideas align with the Interview Protocol Refinement Framework (IPR) (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The IPR framework suggests that researchers complete four phases when creating their interview protocol. The first phase is used to ensure that the interview questions align with the overall research question(s). During the second phase, researchers take steps to ensure that the interview protocol feels like a conversation but at the same time remains on track as far as obtaining the information needed within the study. Milagros Castillo-Montoya describes this as establishing a "balance between inquiry and conversation" (p. 813) and the author provides a lot of helpful techniques that can be used to achieve this type of balance. Similar to what is recommended within this article, phase three of IPR includes acquiring feedback on the interview protocol (p. 824). As is also suggested in this article, in the last and final phase of IPR, Milagros Castillo-Montoya recommends a pilot interview. Using these types of techniques will prepare novice researchers for the interview process, support their efforts to remain open to discovery, and improve the effectiveness of the instruments that are used within the context of conducting qualitative interviews.

Summary

In the spirit of constructing knowledge, this article builds upon the work of others and continues the dialogue about crafting open-ended, strong, and relevant interview questions. Facilitating interest and sharing ideas within this area provides a means to identify areas of overlap and agreement, and a chance to work together to support the efforts of novice researchers in a way that enables the acquisition of findings relevant to the field, and promotes the value of qualitative research. Starting the process of consolidating what is being communicated and locating areas of convergence will hopefully lead to the establishment of general guidelines that can be used to support novice researchers. Although determining whether or not a particular research strategy is appropriate depends on the methodology as well

as the research question(s), this article supports the idea that an interview guide can be developed that aligns with the assumptions that underlie most of the qualitative methods, and at the same time provides the participant with the opportunity to freely relay their experience, and the interviewer the flexibility to follow up and probe for more detail. First and foremost, the initial interview question should be directly and closely aligned with the research question, as in, "Tell me about your experience…" Then, interview techniques can be used to keep the interviewee talking and explore what is being communicated. Potential follow up questions and probes can be developed and used if needed to support the researcher's efforts to obtain a rich and detailed description. Developing an interview guide that is both transparent and flexible should satisfy human subjects review committees and IRBs.

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