

Interviews and Focus Groups

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Interviews and focus groups

- Interviews and focus groups let you dive deep into a topic
- Much more time consuming and costly than surveys
- But information content per respondent is higher



When to use interviews and focus groups

- When you are trying to answer a *qualitative* question - i.e. not how much, how far, how different, etc.
- When you want to dig into causes and motivations
- When there is a poor existing understanding of a subject
- When you want topics to emerge organically



Interviews

- Generally one-on-one interactions with participants
- Varying levels of structure



Advantages of interviews

- Can ask directly about why people behave how they do
- Can follow up on subject-specific information
- Can produce large and detailed information on specific topics



Challenges with interviews

- Interviews take a long time
- It can be hard to recruit participants
- Lots of data is produced, which can be a challenge for analysis
- Recruitment can be difficult
- Interviewer can inadvertently solicit certain answers



Preparing for interviews

- Three types of interviews
 - Structured
 - Semi-structured *most common by far*
 - Unstructured



Structured interviews

- Interviewer has a script that they stick to
- Relatively rare - why not just do a survey instead?



Semi-structured interviews

- Interviewer has a loose script, but they can deviate from it/elaborate on questions/etc
- Feels much more natural, while still ensuring comparability between interviews
- Interviewer can adjust the script as they realize deficiencies, or ask for additional information from short answers



Unstructured interviews

- Basically a conversation
- May have a prompt
- Useful when you're not looking for specific information
 - e.g. in oral history or ethnography



Inductive vs. deductive

- Many interviews are *inductive*—the interviewer isn't coming in with hypotheses, rather the interview is creating new ideas
- Can also be *deductive*—testing a hypothesis *(Brinkmann and Kvale 2018)*



Writing interview questions

- Questions should be open-ended, and invite longer responses
- Fully structured interviews are rare, follow-ups based on responses are common
 - Many interview guides include “probes”—pre-written follow up questions to encourage interviewees to share more



Writing interview questions

- Avoid leading questions
 - Can be subtle
 - Interviewers may present body language etc. that are difficult to control



Writing good interview questions

- Ask difficult/embarassing questions towards the end (*Harvard Sociology, n.d.*)
 - There are ethical issues involved if you are asking potentially embarassing questions
 - Think about this in your consent and as you design your study



Writing interview questions

- Level of structure may depend on purpose of study
- When looking for differences between participants or groups, more structure/standardization are called for *(Brinkmann and Kvale 2018)*



Recording interviews

- Recording can be helpful for later coding/transcription
- But it can also change the dynamics
- Some interviewees may not wish to be recorded
- IRB has regulations about how you store/use recordings



Transcribing interviews

- Transcribing interviews can facilitate coding
- It can be time consuming or costly
- Some new automated/AI options available
 - May be low quality or not meet IRB guidelines



Virtual vs in-person

- Many interviews are now happening online
- This is convenient, eases respondent burden and makes recording easier
- On the other hand you lose some body language, etc.
- May be harder to make respondents feel comfortable



Focus groups

- Small groups of people (often around 8)
- Members meet as a group for a discussion, possibly multiple times
- Generally somewhat but not completely homogeneous
 - Consensus is not the goal, but comfort is
- Very common in market research, but also common in academic research
- Efficient (no need for many interviews)

Most insights in this section are from Hennink (2014)



Focus groups

- Focus groups are very useful for inductive/brainstorming research



Focus group setup

- Generally one moderator and one notetaker
- Participants may be split by demographics or positions
- Generally 1–2 hours
- May or may not meet multiple times
- Scheduling can be a challenge



Focus group dynamics

- Group dynamics are the defining aspect of focus groups
- They can be positive or negative
- Some participants may be more or less comfortable speaking in groups
- They may reduce expression of extreme views
 - This may be good or bad



Focus group dynamics

- May more easily allow discussion to proceed beyond interview questions
- Less role of moderator/interviewer



“Groupthink”

- “Groupthink” is when group members try to avoid conflict
- They quickly reach a consensus without critical evaluation
- Differing opinions may be unsaid

(BYU Marketing Lab 2020)



Focus group guides

- Guide may be more or less structured, like interviews
- Academia tends towards more structured
 - Especially when comparing between focus groups is the goal



Focus group guides

- Each question generally takes 5–10 minutes
- Don't overload a focus group
 - Leave time for groups to follow other paths



The role of the moderator

- The moderator asks the questions
- Should also ask follow-up questions,
- Make sure all materials are covered,
- Watch the time,
- and promote equal engagement among group members



Confidentiality

- You can't guarantee confidentiality in focus groups, though you can encourage it
- This may dissuade some folks from talking
- If members already know each other, they may share less for two reasons
 - Perceived lack of confidentiality
 - Assumption other group members already know how they feel



Group activities



Focus groups vs interviews

Focus groups

- Capture range of views
- Discuss issues
- Exploration
- Identify norms
- Community-level information
- Evaluate group interaction

Modified from Hennink (2014)

Interviews

- Individual perspectives/narratives
- Personal/sensitive information
- Detailed/in-depth information
- Complex issues/processes that require long descriptions
- Geographically dispersed participants
 - Or difficult to schedule



Pretesting

- Interview guides and focus group guides should be pretested (*Harvard Sociology, n.d.*)
- i.e. conducted with the research team, friends, colleagues to get feedback on the guide itself
- See what data you might be missing



The Delphi method

- The Delphi method is an alternative to focus groups that tries to avoid “groupthink” and bias
- It is conducted asynchronously in several rounds, with participants reviewing and commenting on others’ previous answers in each round



How many interviews or focus groups do I need?



Mixed methods research

- “Mixed methods” is research that uses multiple methods, generally a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research
- The methods complement in each other in different ways



Qualitative research before quantitative

- Qualitative research can generate hypotheses, ideas for survey questions



Qualitative research after quantitative

- Qualitative research can help understand why observed patterns exist in quantitative data
- It can provide additional insights for subpopulations too small to support quantitative research



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