Interviews Module

This module will guide you through the process of conducting interviews for your project.
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## Interactive Pages
(i.e. Worksheets) will help you...

## TOOLS IN THIS MODULE

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** TOOL 1: Question Examples **
What is it?

Interviews are a qualitative data collection tool that can be selected for use during design, monitoring, or evaluation. Interviews can be structured or semi-structured and may be look for varying levels of depth of information. They are one-to-one discussions with people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic of interest.

Tip: Semi structured interviews provide the interviewer with some focus, but at the same time provide him/her with the opportunity to explore new ideas as and when they arise during the interview process. The more structured an interview is the more it approaches being a survey (offering forced choice for answers).

What is it for?

Interviews are low cost and provide timely information, their flexible format allows the interviewer to explore unanticipated issues and gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experience.

Advantages & Disadvantages

Advantages

- Provides information directly from knowledgeable and/or experienced people.
- Provides flexibility to explore new ideas and issues not anticipated during instrument design. They are a good way to surface unintended outcomes of a project.
- Inexpensive and simple to conduct.

Disadvantages

- Not appropriate if quantitative data are needed.
- May be biased if informants are not carefully selected.
- Susceptible to interviewer biases.
- May be difficult to generalize findings.
When should it be used?

Specifically, interviews are useful in the following situations:

- When qualitative, descriptive information is sufficient for decision-making.
- When there is a need to understand motivation, behavior, and perspectives. In-depth interviews of program planners and managers, service providers, host government officials, and beneficiaries concerning their attitudes and behaviors about a project/programme can help explain its successes and shortcomings.
- When a main purpose is to generate recommendations. Key informants can help formulate recommendations that can improve a program’s performance.
- When quantitative data collected through other methods need to be interpreted. Key informant interviews can provide the how and why of what happened. If, for example, a sample survey showed farmers were failing to make loan repayments, key informant interviews could uncover the reasons.
- When preliminary information is needed to design a comprehensive quantitative study. Key informant interviews can help frame the issues before the survey is designed and undertaken.

How do we use it?

Step-by-Step Directions

Once the decision has been made to conduct key informant interviews, following the step-by-step advice outlined below will help ensure high-quality information:

Step 1: Formulate interview questions

- Form a list of possible questions related to the subject area that is the focus of your study or project.
- The Questions could be a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions depending on the situation and type of information needed.
- Closed-ended questions require simple forced-choice answers, e.g., “yes” or “no”. Open-ended questions allow respondent to elaborate on their answers.
- If a question is closed-ended, follow it up with a question requiring an explanation or reason for the previous answer.
- Questions should be neutral rather than leading. Example What do you think of the SFCG radio Program in Sierra Leone? rather than “Do you think the SFCG radio program is good?”
• Start off the interview questions with a few simple basic questions before discussing the more complex in-depth ones. This allows you to put the respondent at ease and build rapport.
• Questions should be arranged in a sequence that makes sense, e.g., past to present or vice versa.
• Pilot test the interview questions with a small number of people. They need not be actual respondents, but should have some basic knowledge of the topic. Make revisions based on pilot feedback.

**Step 2: Prepare a short interview guide**

• Identify the common themes in the questions.
• Sort the questions together according to the theme.
• Number questions and sub-questions accurately as this numbering system will later be used for organizing the data.
• Compile filters for questions where an answer to a question may suggest skipping to another question.
• Identify media for recording the interview: Note taking, Tape recorders, Digital Voice recorders.

**Tip:** Filtering enables the interviewer or the respondent to know which question to go to next. For example: If “yes” to Q1, Go to Q3

**Step 3: Select key informants**

• Identify persons to be interviewed. If program implementers or people with agendas regarding the program are to help identify respondents (interviewee), push for a wide sample of people with varying opinions (positive and negative) about the programme/project in order to reduce selection bias.
• It is important that the interviewer receives (written) consent of the respondent as well as consent from their superiors or appropriate officials (if needed)
• Permission should include information regarding anonymity and/or confidentiality of responses and permission to take notes and/or audio/video tape session.
• Tell interviewee in advance how long the interview will take

**Step 4: Conduct interviews**
• **Establish rapport.** Begin with an explanation of the purpose of the interview, the intended uses of the information and assurances of confidentiality. Often informants will want assurances that the interview has been approved by relevant officials.

• **Use of jargon.** Except when interviewing technical experts, questioners should avoid jargon.

• **Sequence questions.** Start with factual questions. Questions requiring opinions and judgments should follow. Whether to begin with the present and move to questions about the past or future or vice versa depends on the nature of the information you are collecting.

• **Phrase questions carefully to elicit detailed information.** Avoid questions that can be answered by a simple “yes” or “no.” For example, questions such as “Please tell me what you know about the alternative media?” are better than “Do you know about alternative media?”

• **Use probing techniques.** Encourage informants to detail the basis for their conclusions and recommendations. This technique helps to uncover bias and can provide unexpected information. While most people will give honest answers, a keen sense of discernment is necessary to identify exaggerations.

• **Minimize translation difficulties.** Sometimes it is necessary to use a translator, which can change the dynamics and add difficulties. For example, differences in status between the translator and informant may inhibit the conversation. Often information is lost during translation. Difficulties can be minimized by using translators who are not known to the informants, briefing translators on the purposes of the study to reduce misunderstandings, making sure that the translator has an understanding of any technical or program-specific terms in both languages, and having translators repeat the informant’s comments verbatim.

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**Step 5: Take adequate notes**

• Interviewers should take notes and develop them in detail immediately after each interview to ensure accuracy.

• Use a set of common subheadings for interview texts, selected with an eye to the major issues being explored. Common subheadings ease data analysis.

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**Step 6: Analyze interview data**

• **Interview summary sheets.** At the end of each interview, prepare a 1 to 2-page interview summary sheet reducing information into manageable themes, issues, and recommendations. Each summary should provide information about the key informant’s position, reason for inclusion in the list of informants, main points made, implications of these observations, and any insights or ideas the interviewer had during the interview.
• **Use descriptive codes.** Coding involves a systematic recording of data. While numeric codes are not appropriate, descriptive codes can help organize responses. These codes may cover key themes, concepts, questions, or ideas, such as sustainability, impact on income, and participation of women. A usual practice is to note the codes or categories on the left-hand margins of the interview text. Then a summary lists the page numbers where each item (code) appears. For example, reintegration of ex-combatants might be given the code “rein-x-com,” and the summary sheet might indicate it is discussed on pages 7, 13, 21, 46, and 67 of the interview text. Categories and subcategories for coding (based on key study questions, hypotheses, or conceptual frameworks) can be developed before interviews begin, or after the interviews are completed. Precoding saves time, but the categories may not be appropriate. Postcoding helps ensure empirically relevant categories, but is time consuming. A compromise is to begin developing coding categories after 8 to 10 interviews, as it becomes apparent which categories are relevant.

• **Storage and retrieval.** The next step is to develop a simple storage and retrieval system. Access to a computer program that sorts text is very helpful. Relevant parts of interview text can then be organized according to the codes. The same effect can be accomplished without computers by preparing folders for each category, cutting relevant comments from the interview and pasting them onto index cards according to the coding scheme, then filing them in the appropriate folder. Each index card should have an identification mark so the comment can be attributed to its source.

• **Presentation of data.** Visual displays such as tables, boxes, and figures can condense information, present it in a clear format, and highlight underlying relationships and trends. This helps communicate findings to decision-makers more clearly, quickly, and easily.

**Step 7: Check for reliability and validity**

Key informant interviews are susceptible to error, bias, and misinterpretation, which can lead to flawed findings and recommendations. Pay attention to the following:

• Check representativeness of key informants. Take a second look at the key informant list to ensure no significant groups were overlooked.

• Assess reliability of key informants. Assess informants’ knowledgeability, credibility, impartiality, willingness to respond, and presence of outsiders who may have inhibited their responses. Greater weight can be given to information provided by more reliable informants.
• Check interviewer or investigator bias. One’s own biases as an investigator should be examined, including tendencies to concentrate on information that confirms preconceived notions and hypotheses, seeks consistency too early and overlooks evidence inconsistent with earlier findings, and being partial to the opinions of favored key informants.

• Check for negative evidence. Make a conscious effort to look for evidence that questions preliminary findings. This brings out issues that may have been overlooked.

• Get feedback from informants. Ask the key informants for feedback on major findings. A summary report of the findings might be shared with them, along with a request for written comments. Often a more practical approach is to invite them to a meeting where key findings are presented and ask for their feedback.

TIPS: INTERVIEW SKILLS

• **Use active listening skills**
  You should be listening, and not talking except to probe for more information. At the end of each major segment, recap what you heard from the respondent and get their agreement. For example say, “This is what I think I heard you said…..Is that right?”

• **Maintain eye contact**
  Use culturally appropriate body language that says you are interested and nonjudgmental (nodding head, smile, leaning forward, etc.)

• **Keep a neutral demeanor**
  Try not to let your own opinions show. Interviewees will not want to disagree with you if they feel you have an opinion or perspective.

• **Reinforce and encourage further comments by saying**, “That’s very interesting, say more…. ” “I’m interested in your opinion/perspective….”

• **Repeat the question**
  Repetition gives more time for participants to think. You may convey a limited understanding of the issue and ask for specific details.

• **Pause for the answer**
  A thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
TIPS: INTERVIEWING PITFALLS

- **Asking multiple questions:** For example, “How do you feel about the teachers and classes you’re taking?” Teacher and classes should each get their own question.

- **Asking leading questions:** For example, “Do the staff foster a sense of community here? If so, how?” Instead, ask, “How does the staff foster a sense of community here?”

- **Cutting off the respondent:** Often it takes the interviewee a while to respond, allow for silence. Give them time to complete their thoughts and sentences. If interviewees are rambling and digressing, politely intervene and pull their attention back to the main question.

- **Asking closed ended questions.** If you ask a yes/no question, follow up with “Why?”, “Say more about this…”, or, “Please elaborate.”
The following example is taken from the Mid-Term Monitoring and Evaluation of the Mother and Child Free Healthcare Initiative in Sierra Leone in 2010. The questions were attempting to determine the effect of radio programming for a maternal and child healthcare project:

Research Questions:
The questions are aimed at three different audiences.

Questions – On-the-street Interviews with General Public (Direct Beneficiaries)

Involvement with Radio
1. Are you either pregnant, lactating or do you have a child under five?
2. Do you listen to the radio?
3. Do you listen to the healthcare radio programmes? Can you tell me what the FHC policy is?
4. Are you aware of the free healthcare campaign (FHC)? How did you hear of it?
5. Have you personally been influenced by the programmes? Has it changed your attitude about going to the hospital or healthcare?
6. Have you heard your concerns reflected in the programmes? Do you have any suggestions for improving the programmes?
7. Have you ever called a station to give feedback?
8. (For women) Would having women on the air be influential? Are the issues that you experience being adequately addressed by the programming?
9. (For parents) Are the specific concerns of children being addressed, in your opinion?

Accountability
10. Did you know that you could report acts of corruption to the ACC or the radio stations? Where did you learn that?
11. Have you ever reported a breach of the FHC or an act of corruption? When you reported this concern to the ACC, how did the interaction go?
12. What do you think ppl can do about the corruption?
13. What other issues of accountability would you like to be highlighted in the TDS programmes?

Experience at the Hospital
14. Have you been charged for care since the FHC has been launched? Have you been satisfied with the quality of care?
15. How do you define corruption? How do you define “good” healthcare?
16. What are some of the problems you have faced in the hospitals or clinics in relation to the FHC initiative?

Questions – Key Interviews with Station Producers

Feedback and the Community:
1. Have you personally listened to TDS programmes on the FHC?
2. What feedback have you received from your audience regarding the FHC Programmes (whether produced by your station or TDS)?
3. Do you have any questions from your audience about your programmes? Anything you’d like to hear from them?
4. What changes over the last two months have you made in your programming and why?
5. How did you decide what key information to include in your programmes based on your audience? What factors did you take into account?
6. What is the biggest vision you have for this campaign? What degree of public impact do you think it is capable of?

Messaging and Programming:
7. Have you had any challenges regarding your programming or messaging since the campaign began? What about with TDS programming?
8. How do you overcome the difficulty that it can be hard to influence people through the radio?
9. Radio has its natural limitations, what is the biggest vision you have for this campaign? How far-reaching do you think it can be?
10. Do you feel you understand the objectives behind the campaign?
11. Do you broadcast on the air who to call and their phone numbers in cases of corruption? [Call the ACC-corruption, call Amnesty – for mistreatment at the hospital, and call HR Commission – for rights violation.]

12. Do you think that people know what the goal is for healthcare (the ideal or norm of nursing standards, of treatment from doctors, etc.) Do you air what healthcare should look like? Do you think that would work? Why or why not?

**Partnership with SFCG:**

13. Is there any way that Search can be more helpful to you in promoting our message of conflict transformation?

14. Do they think that SFCG programmes are focused on the right issues of the community?

15. Is SFCG remaining on a policy level, and not digging deeper?

16. If we need to dig deeper, what are some of the issues that should be on the programme?

17. What recommendations do you have in terms of what SFCG is doing with regional programmes?

18. Is there anything you want us to focus on? What about on the community level?

19. What support do you need from us, or want?

**Questions – Key Interviews with Other Stakeholders and Allies (MoHS, ACC, Amnesty International, etc.)**

1. Have you listened to the FHC radio programmes?
2. Are the programmes supporting your work in a manner you find effective?
3. What feedback have you received from the public about the TDS radio programmes on healthcare?
4. What have the challenges been since the campaign began? Have these been addressed by the radio campaign?
5. What have the successes been? Has the radio addressed these?
6. What is the biggest vision you have for the media campaign? What do you think it can accomplish?
7. Where do you think TDS can improve?
8. Where do you think TDS has done well?
9. Do you have ideas for additional ways to engage the public in combating corruption and taking ownership of their healthcare?
10. Have you seen a reduction in the corruption? (Whether yes or no) Why do you think that is?
11. What barriers to eliminating corruption still remain?
12. What do you think the radio can do to address the issues of corruption?
Additional Resources

Trent Focus Group, Using Interviews in a Research Project, 1998 (updated 2002)
