Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

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How do we ask people for information? At one extreme is using a battery of identical, mostly closed-ended questions. These highly structured surveys, typically with large samples, can be administered many ways (phone, mail, Internet, in person; see Chapters Fourteen and Eighteen). At the opposite extreme is the fluid inquiry of focus groups (see Chapter Twenty). Compared to surveys, a focus group engages far fewer people (an optimum of ten to twelve per session) for a much longer period (up to two hours) with an elastic agenda of open-ended questions that allow extended probing. Making up in depth what they lack in breadth, focus groups enable the moderator not only to pursue detailed inquiry into existing opinions but also to obtain reactions to new ideas and conduct group brainstorming, if desired.

Another approach falls between standardized, mostly closed-ended surveys of individuals and free form, open-ended sessions with groups. This intermediate method pulls elements from both but puts them into a distinctive package. Curiously, this methodology does not have a consensus name. Lewis Dexter (1970) called it *elite interviewing*, although that label may erroneously suggest talking only with high-status respondents. Robert Merton (1956) termed it the *focused interview*, although that phrase now risks confusion with *focus group*. Cultural anthropologists speak more narrowly of the *ethnographic interview*. Sociologists sometimes refer to *depth interviewing*. Due to the approach's many open-ended questions, the term *qualitative interviewing* may also be used. However, the name that appears to be currently garnering a majority of usage is not crisp, clever, or inventive but it is simple and descriptive: the *semi-structured interview.* That is the term used in the chapter. Let's call it *SSI* for short.

Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, the SSI employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up *why* or *how* questions. The dialogue can meander around the topics on the agenda—rather than adhering slavishly to verbatim questions as in a standardized survey—and may delve into totally unforeseen issues. Relaxed, engaging, in-person SSIs can be longer than telephone surveys, although they seldom last as long as focus groups. About one hour is considered a reasonable maximum length for SSIs in order to minimize fatigue for both interviewer and respondent.

Disadvantages and Advantages of SSIs

Before going into more detail about semi-structured interviews, let's first consider their disadvantages, in case you may then decide to skip the rest of this chapter. SSIs are time-consuming, labor intensive, and require interviewer sophistication. Interviewers need to be smart, sensitive, poised, and nimble, as well as knowledgeable about the relevant substantive issues. The process of preparing for the interviews, setting up the interviews, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the interviews is not nearly as quick and easy as you might think. The time and effort required to do all of it right is considerable. SSIs usually entail the arduous task of analyzing a huge volume of notes and sometimes many hours of transcripts.

Another drawback—unless you are just interviewing members of a small group (such as the board of a nonprofit organization or top program administrators)—is that, without an enormous outlay of time and personnel, SSIs are unlikely to encompass a large enough sample to yield precision of the "plus or minus *n* percent" variety. Consequently, for many purposes, a standardized survey of six hundred clients would be superior to attempting six hundred one-hour SSIs. For some other purposes, four focus groups with ten people each would be much more efficient than conducting forty individual SSIs. Yet, despite the disadvantages and costs of SSIs, they offer some extraordinary benefits as well.

Semi-structured interviews are superbly suited for a number of valuable tasks, particularly when more than a few of the open-ended questions require follow-up queries. Especially consider employing SSIs in the following situations:

- If you need to ask probing, open-ended questions and want to know the independent thoughts of each individual in a group
- If you need to ask probing, open-ended questions on topics that your respondents might not be candid about if sitting with peers in a focus group
- If you need to conduct a formative program evaluation and want one-on-one interviews with key program managers, staff, and front-line service providers
- If you are examining uncharted territory with unknown but potential momentous issues and your interviewers need maximum latitude to spot useful leads and pursue them

In mixed methods research, SSIs can be useful as an adjunct to supplement and add depth to other approaches. For example:

- If you need to conduct some in-depth reconnaissance before designing a large-scale survey, configuring a focus group agenda, or constructing an overall research strategy
- If, after drafting a standardized survey questionnaire, you discover that important questions cannot be effectively addressed without more open-ended questions and extended probing
- If you want to explore "puzzles" that emerge (or remain) after you have analyzed survey or even focus group findings

The people who may be appropriate for SSIs can run the gamut of those involved in the program being evaluated. For convenience, let's put them into three general groups:

1. Program recipients (or beneficiaries, clients, customers, members, constituents, or audience—preferred term will vary)
2. Interested parties (contributors, suppliers, any other stakeholders who are neither direct recipients nor program administrators, plus others in proximity who may be affected in collateral ways)
3. Administration (front-line service delivery people, other staff, top managers, program board members, whether salaried or volunteer)

If one or more of the SSI situations listed previously applies to one or more of these three general SSI-appropriate groups—and if you have adroit and well-spoken interviewers available who can be adequately educated on the program at hand—then semi-structured interviews would be the methodology of choice.

Designing and Conducting SSIs

Assuming that this methodology is your choice, let's proceed to consider practical steps for designing and conducting semi-structured interviews: selecting and recruiting the respondents, drafting the questions and interview guide, techniques for this type of interviewing, and analyzing the information gathered.

Selecting Respondents and Arranging Interviews

Chapter Seventeen offers detailed advice on preparing for site visits, making staff assignments, training field teams, and carrying out other practical administration steps for collecting data in the field. However, a few basic elements important to SSIs should be mentioned here. Having identified at the outset the target group or groups for SSIs, how do researchers then select respondents from among the target group? If the group is a large one, researchers ordinarily choose to interview a manageable random sample or a stratified random sample (as defined in Chapter Fourteen). If the group is not so large and resources permit, it may be possible to interview virtually everyone, such as all key administrators and all program board members. Even if time and resources do not allow conducting a large numbers of SSIs, it is still important to get the perspectives of more than just a few people.

Respondents ought to have been identified and appointments set up before interviewers arrive at the site. If staff members of an organization are being interviewed, ordinarily, top managers will assist in setting up the interviews, greatly simplifying the process. If a sample is being drawn from a roster (stratified perhaps to include set numbers of managers, supervisors, and various categories of staff members), the evaluators convey the names of the chosen individuals to the managers, rather than letting the managers personally pick which staff members are heard. Sometimes, researchers must telephone those chosen to request and schedule each individual appointment. Rather than making a "cold call," researchers should send a short letter of introduction in advance, noting the importance of the individual's advice and citing the project's endorsement by the top administrator. This can add legitimacy and save time that would otherwise have to be spent explaining and justifying the research. That advance letter can pave the way for the subsequent phone call to arrange the meeting.

Approaches vary when interviewing program beneficiaries (rather than program workers), depending on who the beneficiaries are and their relationship to the program. If possible, they should be chosen randomly (incorporating stratification when certain subgroups are targeted) to eliminate the biasing effect of convenience samples. Sometimes the program staff is best positioned to set up the interviews, or at least make the introductions. Other times researchers may obtain a list from which to sample and contact the potential respondents.

Prospective respondents will probably want to know how much of their precious time you covet, and that can be the trickiest single issue in obtaining the interview. Proposing too long a period can prompt an outright refusal. Conversely, if an unrealistically short period is requested, respondents may depart after the allotted time, even if key agenda items are far from finished; the interviewer also risks appearing to have been deceptive or foolish or both. So here are a few ideas to consider. Pretesting the interview should yield a rough idea of how long the questions will take. You can initially mention that time ("It shouldn't take much longer than . . ..."). Then, if things are going well but slowly during the actual interview, ask permission for "just a few more questions" to finish the core questions and perhaps cover some of the second tier of topics. A late afternoon session may have the advantage of not running up against another meeting. Regardless of the time and place, the most important element—aside from respondents' actually consenting to be interviewed—is the content of those interviews. The development of appropriate and well-crafted interview guides is essential.

Drafting Questions and the Interview Guide

Questionnaire is not the best term for the compilation of SSI questions, because that word connotes a fixed instrument to be read verbatim, rather than the flexible, interactive approach of SSI questions. Instead, you must create the agenda for the *interview guide*, the outline of planned topics, and questions to be addressed, arrayed in their tentative order. Of course, if SSIs are going to be conducted with different groups, a guide will have to be tailored to each group. Consider the following recommendations when constructing an SSI guide:

1. At the outset, be sure to budget enough time to carefully draft, edit, pretest, and polish the interview questions and guide, allowing time for several iterations and feedback from colleagues. If possible, pilot tests with a few intended respondents (or people similar to them) can be the final step in refining the guide.
2. Don't try to cram too many issues into the agenda, but if the list of potential topics is long, decide in advance which ones are critical and which ones are

optional. Once the top priorities are clear, put those questions in bold. Classify the second and third tiers of questions to be raised if time allows, but decide in advance which questions are vital and which ones are lagniappes. In theory, SSIs can be somewhat lengthy, but that does not mean that busy respondents are going to want to dedicate hours to talk. As part of rigorously editing the draft questions, be sure to omit questions asking for simple facts that can be retrieved from an organization's website, published material, or available records (unless perhaps you want to assess someone's understanding of those facts).

3. Don't forget that closed-ended questions can be ideal gateways to open-ended probing. For example, after asking, "In your judgment, was this program change a major improvement, minor improvement, or not an improvement?" the interviewer could follow up by asking, "Why is that?" or "Why do you feel that way?" and continue with additional probing as needed. Compared to using a broad start (such as, "What did you think about this program change?"), the beauty of incorporating a closed-ended query first is that it dramatically streamlines the summary analysis to have some firm quantitative points of reference (for example, "Ten of the twelve board members called the change a 'major improvement' and cited these reasons. . . .").
4. When potential respondents do not speak English, careful translations and bilingual interviewers will be required. Even if the respondents do speak English, don't assume it's exactly the same language spoken by university-trained researchers. Communication can fail when we blithely assume that everybody shares our vocabulary, acronyms, and lingo. In designing an SSI, use the everyday words of the target groups, while taking care not to talk down to them as well. It may be useful to make adjustments to question wording after the first round of interviewing.
5. Think through the extent to which the draft questions may evoke pressure to give socially acceptable answers. Might recipients worry that their eligibility could be jeopardized by what they say? If so, along with assurances of confidentiality, look for ways to remove any stigma that might attach to certain answers. One tactic for showing nonjudgmental acceptance is to insert a prefatory comment such as "some people tell us [*a particular opinion about an issue*]," before asking, "How do you see this issue?" This suggests that answers like the one cited would not surprise or disturb the interviewer. Administrators themselves may feel an urge, conscious or otherwise, to circle the wagons and put the best possible face on a less than ideal program situation. Rather than asking them to identify what is "bad," ask about "areas that need improvement" to help minimize defensiveness.

6. The agenda for a semi-structured interview is never carved in stone. If a conversation unexpectedly turns from the first to the fourth topic, by all means, reorder the topics on the fly and return later to pick up the ones that were skipped. Nevertheless, when drafting the tentative question order, try to anticipate the most likely and smoothest sequence. These time-tested guidelines can help the agenda fall into place:
   - After customary pleasantries, as the actual interview begins, start with a few extra easy, even throwaway questions to start a comfortable chat before the more serious inquires begin. To break the ice, respondents might be asked how long they have lived in the city or worked in the program, for example.
   - After establishing some rapport, turn next to more directly relevant but still nonthreatening questions.
   - When introducing critique questions, consider putting positive inquiries first: "What are the good things about X?" or "What do you like about it?" Starting with positives allows those people who might be reluctant to voice criticisms to share their complaints later because they already offered some praise. Another advantage of this approach is that some people, once they adopt a harsh critical tone, find it difficult to say anything good, as if they fear they would be contradicting themselves or minimizing the seriousness of their grievance.
   - After looking at the positive sides of a topic, turn next to its drawbacks, disadvantages, disappointments, or areas that need improvement, always taking a neutral, nonjudgmental tone. (There will be more information about tone and delivery later in this chapter.)
   - The most potentially embarrassing, controversial, or awkward questions should come toward the end. By this point the interviewer is no longer a stranger but a pleasant, nonargumentative professional who seems genuinely interested in the respondent's opinions. Now respondents are wishing that their kids, spouse, or co-workers showed as much respect and attentiveness to their thoughtful opinions. So at this stage, more sensitive questions can be introduced, along with reminders of confidentiality as needed.
   - Why are demographic questions best saved until the end? For many people, few topics are more delicate or possibly painful than their current marital status, their age, their amount of education, their income, and so forth. These questions raise fundamental identity issues in a way that mere opinion questions do not. Revealing one's personal profile, even in confidence, can still feel like a privacy intrusion. Be sure to scrutinize the typical laundry list of demographic questions to omit all that

are not essential for this specific program evaluation. Refusals can be minimized by asking about the broadest usable categories, instead of exact amounts (for example, asking respondents to select from among large income ranges rather than prying for precise annual income). A few demographic variables, such as gender, often race, and perhaps general age group, can be coded by the interviewer without needing to ask.
- To end on a substantive note, consider concluding by returning to a short, easy, program-related question, perhaps about the future.

Once developed, the interview guide, no matter how extensive its preparation, should still be considered a work in progress. It remains subject to change for this reason: in the field, as feedback quickly begins to accumulate, adjustments will need to be made (Galletta, 2013). Perhaps the sequence of questions will have to be rethought, the way certain issues are posed will have to be recast, and some unanticipated issues will emerge that seem sufficiently important that they should be added to all subsequent interviews. Agile researchers will exploit these new insights to rapidly refine the interview guide and will actually have planned for this possibility at three stages—after the first interview, after the first round of interviews, and periodically thereafter.

After the first interview, reassess everything. What works well, and what needs to be modified? Some questions and topics may need to be added or subtracted, expanded or condensed, recast or reordered. If more than one interviewer is working on the project, have the most experienced and knowledgeable person conduct the first interview; then he or she can brief the others and take the lead in refining the questions and agenda. After everyone on the team has conducted an interview, schedule another opportunity to share tips and experiences as well as to modify the questions as needed. Thereafter, periodic, even daily if feasible, sessions allow the team members to continue to review their work to identify any areas for which adjustments should be made and to ensure that their individual approaches are not diverging too much.

Decisions on modifying the interview guide in the field are necessary judgment calls. If, for example, one respondent volunteers a surprising and troublesome problem that seems potentially quite threatening to the effective execution of the program under study, should subsequent respondents be asked pointedly about that issue if they fail to volunteer it? Adding it to the guide might be the safest strategy. If feedback from the next rounds of interviews consistently dismisses that particular concern, it might then be taken back off the guide and the initial response treated as an outlier. Ongoing reassessments of the interview guide, particularly during the early waves of interviewing, let researchers catch areas for improvement early, avoiding the need to repeat numerous interviews.

During the course of their interviews, some respondents (program administrators, for example) may refer to certain documents that the interviewers may not yet have. Interviewers should keep a list of any such documents that are of interest (and not subject to privacy restrictions) so these items can be collected immediately after the interview if possible or, if not, then sent by e-mail or mail. The post-interview thank-you note can serve as a convenient vehicle for a reminder.

Starting the Interview

Interviewers should establish a positive first impression. They should dress professionally—men with ties even on Fridays—although slightly more casual attire is preferable when the respondents are economically disadvantaged. They should always arrive early and review the agenda, having allowed time for potential travel delays and getting lost, rather than risk arriving even one minute late. Thanking the respondent for the meeting and offering a business card can add to professional credibility.

To record or not to record, that is a key judgment call. A small digital recorder, if permission is granted, allows the interviewer to be more actively engaged in the conversation as well as to ponder the best next question instead of having to concentrate on writing down answers. However, if the topics covered are at all sensitive, respondents may be inhibited by a recording device, even if complete confidentiality if promised and consent is given; some people forget the recorder is running, but others stay wary. If the machine option does seem acceptable, bring a small, unobtrusive digital recorder (or a microcassette tape recorder) that has been verified as working properly and is ready to use, so no fumbling is required. After gaining permission, switch it on and say something like this, "OK, [*respondent name*], thanks for letting me record this," to document the confirmation of consent. Be fully prepared, in case the respondent declines, to nonchalantly switch to taking notes.

If the interview is not recorded electronically, alternatives for taking notes include booklets, legal pads, electronic tablets, laptop computers, or smaller notebook computers. The interview guide can be produced in a number of layouts: bound as a booklet (with enough blank space between items for writing out the answers), put into a condensed format (perhaps even one page, so you can see everything at a glance, with answers recorded separately), or even printed on five-by-eight-inch index cards that can be shuffled as needs dictate in the conversation. In any layout, it can be helpful to use a large font, with priority questions in boldface or color coded. One additional strategy should be considered if resources permit and a recorder is not used: a two-person team. Using a division of labor, one person can take the lead in asking questions and ensuring that all key topics are addressed, while the other person, who does not have to be mum, concentrates on taking notes.

When taking notes, interviewers should do the best they can with their own shorthand systems. They should use quotation marks when writing verbatim phrases. Many notes will be paraphrases and should be treated as such when writing the report, but it is important to write down word-for-word and put quotation marks around any particularly valuable or memorable comments. Put any interviewer observations (for example, of respondent laughter, nervousness, or anger) in square brackets. If needed, it is fine, even flattering, for interviewers to ask respondents to pause for a moment in order to finish writing down an important comment. Immediately after the interview, interviewers should be able to rush to a computer to clarify and expand their scribbles and, while the chat is fresh, add any other key remarks that they recall but did not write down at the time.

At the start of the interview, the matter of confidentiality must be addressed clearly. If the respondent is going to be quoted by name in the report, that must be explained and consent obtained. However, unless there is some compelling reason to do otherwise, confidential interviews are generally better because they are more likely to elicit candid answers. If that route is taken, it is worth explaining and emphasizing confidentiality to the respondent in the initial invitation and at the start of the interview. For example:

> We're trying to learn how the XYZ program operates and get your suggestions on how it can be improved. We're not auditors and we're not employees of any government agency. We're independent. Nothing you say today will be quoted with your name. We'll be submitting a report, but no confidential names will be mentioned. Do you have any questions about our pledge of confidentiality?

If later, when writing the report, some observation stands out as so brilliant that you really ought to give credit to that person, contact him or her to ask permission. Likewise, if a valuable comment obviously must have been voiced by a particular person, he or she might be asked, "May I quote you on that by name?" during the interview, or the evaluator might go back later to ask permission, so as not to violate the confidentiality promise. The evaluation should also establish procedures for handling and storing the information collected, especially if it is confidential. Procedures may range from not entering respondents' names into any project databases to randomly generating identification numbers maintained in encrypted computer files.

Polishing Interview Techniques

Preparation is vital. Interviewers should know the questions thoroughly, understand the purpose of each question and the overall priority level of each question in the overall research scheme. When asking questions, tone is extremely important. SSI interviewers should take a casual, conversational approach that is pleasant, neutral, and professional, neither overly cold nor overly familiar. In this relaxed, comfortable setting, probing is accomplished without the interviewer sounding astonished by anything said, interested but not shocked.

Not all SSI practitioners agree about the exact persona that the interviewer should adapt. Some advise interviewers to "appear slightly dim and agreeable" (McCracken, 1988, p. 38), so that respondents won't feel threatened. Even though being sensitive to people's feelings is certainly a good idea, too much playing dumb might make respondents decide they are wasting their time and should not bother getting into complex discussions with such a clueless interviewer. The opposite extreme, a superior, all-knowing stance, seems likely to be off-putting and counterproductive as well. Probably the best balance is to appear generally knowledgeable, in a humble, open-minded way, but not to pose as more expert than the respondent (Leech, 2002). In that vein, interviewers should not debate with or contradict a respondent; interviewers must be sure they understand his or her views. They should maintain that calm, nonreactive demeanor, even when faced with a respondent whose personality or comments are offensive.

From time to time, it can be constructive to restate concisely in one or two sentences, using mainly the respondent's own words, what was just said. This technique of active listening reinforces that the interviewer is indeed intently interested and can ensure that the interviewer does, in fact, understand a point. After any unrecognized lingo or acronyms, interviewers should not apologize, but just repeat the mystery word in a questioning tone.

Prompting respondents to elaborate can be done in many ways besides just asking, "Why is that?" "Could you expand on that?" or "Anything else?" Sometimes a simple "yes?" with a pause, repeating a key word, or even nodding in silence is sufficient to signal that the interviewer would like to hear more. A tilted head can also be a green light for more detail. Avoid asking, "What do you mean?" because that accuses the respondent of failing to communicate. Asking for an elaboration or for an example is better. However, if something is unclear, do not hesitate to obtain a clarification. In the give-and-take of the conversation, take care not to interrupt and be overly controlling. Even when respondents drift into irrelevant territory, wait until they finish before making a soft segue back to a priority topic.

Sometimes, even if the recorder is running, it may be helpful to jot down an occasional note or star something on the agenda to return to later. Interviewers should be sufficiently familiar with the general questions that they do not have to bury their heads in the text to read each question verbatim. A glance down at the text should be sufficient. Because the actual conversation may diverge from the original order on the agenda, the interviewer must be flexible and ready with subtle improvisations to weave back to other issues. Entirely unexpected but promising avenues of interest may open up, and, if so, interviewers should feel empowered to pursue them. Such developments should be promptly shared with colleagues to determine whether those new topics should be explicitly added to the agenda or if the agenda order should be revised. After conducting numerous interviews, interviewers may sometimes find that answers begin to seem predictable. They have to remain alert, however, for different nuances in the answers that may be worth exploring or at least noting in the report.

Near the end of each session, nothing is wrong with asking for a moment to review the agenda guide to ensure that no key questions were missed. If time is running out, the interviewer will have to make a quick decision about whether to omit some of the remaining questions (and which ones), to ask to extend the visit a bit longer, or to request a short follow-up meeting at a later date. At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewer should thank the respondent cordially and confidently (not apologetically) for helpful comments. Before the day is out, the interviewer should send a short thank-you e-mail or, to be more traditional, a handwritten note; this extra expression of appreciation makes a difference in how respondents remember the experience and the people involved.

Other important tasks should also be completed daily. Interview notes should be cleaned and clarified so they will make sense to other members of the research team (and to the original interviewer a few weeks later). If notes were handwritten, they should be entered into a computer right away, and even if a small computer was used to take raw notes, these notes still have to be reviewed and edited while fresh. Maintain a master list of any abbreviations used in the interview summaries. Even if the session was recorded, some additional documentation (date, time, site codes, and so forth) should be filed. To save time, some interviewers prefer to dictate their elaboration of their handwritten notes; the dictation then must be transcribed later.

Analyzing and Reporting SSIs

Once the SSIs have been completed, the next step is to explore the results. As something of a hybrid between a standardized survey and a focus group, semi-structured interviews are suitable for a report that is a hybrid, too. If, as recommended, a few closed-ended questions were employed, there will be some hard numbers to cite, maybe suitable for a few simple tables and graphs. Percentages can be brought to life by the follow-up responses to open-ended questions. Look for ways to consolidate themes found in multiple answers and to supplement them with well-chosen, illustrative quotations. This aspect of the SSI report resembles a focus group report. (For a published example of a report of focus group findings, see Adams, 2005, Chapter 8.) For example, if roughly three out of four program administrators complained they were burdened by mountains of paperwork, quote some comments to make this issue vivid and explain it in more detail. Ordinarily, omit the highly unrepresentative outliers, unless for some reason a particular comment, even if rare, should be conveyed to decision makers.

The time involved and method chosen for analyzing the open-ended questions will depend heavily on the number of people interviewed and the number of topics addressed. Summarizing a dozen SSIs of top managers will not be onerous, but systematically assessing SSIs of several hundred program beneficiaries will be a challenge. For more advice about the analysis phase, see Chapter Twenty-Two, which explains in detail the techniques that can be used in coding open-ended answers, along with the software programs that assist in the process. A judicious appraisal of the findings should yield a depth of understanding about the issues at hand beyond that possible from the alternative survey techniques alone. All in all, effectively conducted semi-structured interviews, even though labor intensive, should be worth the effort in terms of the insights and information gained.

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