

CHAPTER

3

An Open-Ended Interview Approach for Studying Cognition and Emotion in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

I present a way of conducting open-ended interviews that I have used in my own research. Good preparation for interviews includes learning about the interviewee and their context beforehand, developing a list of potential follow-up themes, and various hygiene factors. During the interview, key practices include building psychological safety and professional respect; phrasing questions appropriately; using various types of elaborating questions; tolerating long pauses; and recognizing that managers are rarely naïve interviewees. Analyzing interview data requires being mindful of the content rather than coding it mechanically, using theories to aide interpretation, and getting deeply engaged with the data.

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The interview method is as old as the entire spectrum of the social sciences and has perhaps endured because of its inherent flexibility. In studying cognition in and around organizations, the interview has some inherent strengths, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues and research topics that need to be handled with tact and diplomacy. However, it also has some weaknesses relative to other methods.

One key reason for using the interview technique is that because interviews literally enable the interviewer and interviewee to view one another, the resulting data is much richer, revealing some of the less conscious elements of cognition (and emotions) that are more difficult if not impossible to detect via the other methods mentioned above. The interview is especially powerful when adopting a more embodied perspective on cognition in the workplace (Healey & Hodgkinson, 2014, 2015). Observation can also reveal these aspects, but interviews often allow getting a deeper understanding of the interviewee's mental state, while observation allows seeing what the person does.

A second key benefit of interviews is that interviews allow studying cognition and emotion in context because each interview can be tailored for the focal interviewees' situation. For example, when I was conducting interviews at Nokia (Vuori & Huy, 2016), I could ask about the interviewees' thoughts and emotions in relation to specific aspects of specific phone models and how they were related to their and other peoples' activities. To illustrate, they could describe me how choices between different screen technologies for Nokia's N97 touchscreen phone influenced programming requirements, cost level, and usability; and I could see how different people took different factors into account in their thinking. In such a way, I was not studying only a more abstract concept and a hypothesis about its influence on behavior, such as "liking" and "work effort", but could really combine the process and content of cognition and emotion. This leads to a rich understanding of people's specific thoughts and emotions in relation to specific content, which is important because the way of thinking and the strength of emotions might be influenced by the content and the organizational context (see also Regner, 2003).

However, the strengths of the interview method also point to its weaknesses. Closeness to the interviewees and their context

can make the data less structured and less standardized, making it more difficult to assess its reliability and validity and to generalize the results statistically. There are techniques that one can use to improve the trustworthiness of interview data (Shah & Corley, 2006) but one needs to be mindful about the limitations of the method when making strong arguments. The key is in reflecting what does this data really tell us and would it be logical to assume that similar dynamics could occur also in other settings (see also Yin, 2003).

Another limitation of the interview method can be that it relies on people's reflections of their own behaviors. There can be non-conscious influences that they are not aware of, which could only be recognized through experimental methods and advanced physiological and neurological measures (e.g., Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Laureiro-Martínez, Brusoni, Canessa, & Zollo, 2014). In addition, people may construct narratives that portray themselves in a better light. They may do this to manage impressions or to feel better about themselves (e.g., Miller & Ross, 1975; Wagner & Gooding, 1997). For these two reasons as well, it is important that the researcher carefully reflects what the interviewees are saying and challenges them especially when they describe that things unfolded in a way that seems too smooth in light of what we know about people's behavior from other research.

For the rest of the chapter, my main focus will be on conducting open-ended interviews, but I will also briefly discuss other forms of interviews and analyzing interview data. I will use and cite other works on the interview method but will mainly rely on my personal experience and reflection because I believe that there is much tacit skill in interviewing that is best communicated through personal narratives. I will also provide a list of further readings in the end of this chapter.

What is the Interview Technique?

Interview refers to a researcher asking questions from an interviewee. The nature of the questions can vary from very specific to very open ended and loose. When the questions are precise and their order is strict, the interview is called a structured interview. In the extreme, the interview is similar to a survey that is conducted face to face. In the other end of the spectrum, there are unstructured interviews, during which the researcher encourages

the interviewee to speak about certain themes and then asks further probing questions to elaborate themes emerging during the interview. Semi-structured interviews include a list of questions but allow some freedom for the interviewer and interviewee to elaborate on emerging themes.

Each of the three varying approaches differs in terms of the sorts of research questions they are best applied to, and in their implications for data collection, analysis of the data, interpretation of the findings, and the sorts of inferences that can be drawn. Unstructured approaches lend themselves directly to inductive theory building, whereas fully structure approaches lend themselves to quantification through content analysis and hence theory testing. In the unstructured approach, the researcher lets the interviewee speak first and then abstracts/brackets/reduces the data into conceptual categories, whereas in heavily structured approaches, the researcher first does the conceptual reduction and then asks the interviewee to speak. To a certain extent, semi-structured approaches constitute a hybrid method, combining the strengths of the other two approaches and mitigating some of their associated weaknesses, but at the same time losing some of the edge of the “pure” approaches. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus on the open-ended approach which I have used in my own work.

Despite its loose nature, the open-ended interview can be viewed as a measurement event. Various things can influence the scope and accuracy of the measurement. A key challenge for the interviewer is to make the interviewee speak openly about relevant themes, without influencing the interviewee’s thinking too much. A skillful interviewer gets people to say things that they would not dare to say to others or come to think of when talking with them. The interviewee develops insights during the interview, as a response to the interviewer’s questions. (This does not need to bias the data any more than forced choice questions in experiments do; people would not be thinking about the topics without the survey.) To succeed in this task, the interviewer needs to prepare well for the interview and conduct the interview skillfully.

Preparation

Good preparation helps tremendously in conducting good interviews. I discuss three particular themes that are relevant. First, knowing the interviewee and their context is crucial for being

able to ask focused questions and also for getting the interviewee's respect (which makes them likely to contribute more). Any kind of company documents can be useful for understanding the context of the interviewee. Much information can also be collected about any interviewee and their organization through online sources: there are various news items about many companies and much professional content about individuals can be gotten from their LinkedIn and Twitter accounts. To illustrate, I go through the online trace of each interviewee before the interview, making sure that I have a clear understanding of their career path and general interests; then I make a note of any specific themes that I should ask or mention during the interview. But the main point is that this background review gives me a good sense of the interviewee and helps me to discuss with him or her in a more natural and familiar way, improving the flow of the interview.

Second, besides getting to know the interviewee before the interview, knowing the relevant theories is important. As Siggelkow (2007, p. 21) noted: "an open mind is good; an empty mind is not." The success of the open-ended interview often depends on the quality of the follow-up questions one is able to make. The better one knows the existing theories, the more likely he or she will be able to ask elaborating questions that probe theoretically interesting themes. An interviewee might describe some company action for several minutes, after which the researcher has to make a choice as to what to ask more about. The interview is more likely to lead to fruitful data if you can compare everything that the interviewee has said against the published research in real time and then focus the follow-up question on those aspects of the interviewees' story that diverge from what previous theory would predict. At the same time, there is little point asking for more detail about events that unfolded pretty much like theory would predict, as not much new could be learned from them.

In practical terms, detailed notes or checklists often help in targeting the follow-up questions. I often construct a list of 10–20 themes that I would like to elaborate during the interview. This list is based on both my empirical understanding of the focal case and the theoretical interests I have. Then, when the interviewee speaks, I use the list to help me choose what follow-up questions to ask at any point. At an early point in the Nokia study, my list included themes such as cannibalization, leadership, resource allocation process, cognitive inertia, identity, strategy versus implementation, emotions, and differences between people. As our understanding evolved, the list became more focused on themes

that related to the ultimate theoretical model and included, for example, organizational capabilities, illusion about capability, embellished communication, short-term focus, fear, target of fear, aggression, silence, internal competition, and pressure.

Third, one also needs to take care of formal hygiene factors before the interview. These include, for example, explaining the purpose of the interview, securing interviewee consent, and promising anonymity but not confidentiality. I have found it useful to include as much as possible of this formal side in an introductory e-mail (which often also serves as an invitation to the interview), such that the actual interview event can proceed more informally.

Data Collection

The actual interview event is at the core of the interview method – it determines whether one can form novel insights from the data or not; and there can be huge variance in the quality of interviews, as some people may waste the one hour (or whatever duration) on talking about various things in a shallow way and come up with no interesting data, while others may engage in a deep and honest conversation about selected topics in ways that provide multiple insights. I will discuss five themes that I think are particularly relevant for creating an insightful interview event.

The first is building a psychologically safe and, at the same time, professionally respectful climate for the interview. Cognition and emotion studies typically focus on topics that require people to reveal their deeper or hidden thoughts, some sensitive topics, or even emotions or thoughts that they are ashamed of. At the same time, especially managers are skilled in impression management and can remain in that level if they do not feel safe in the interview event or if they do not respect the interviewer. Hence, the interviewer should make sure to emphasize to the interviewee that the situation is safe, that he or she respects and appreciates the interviewee's time and expertise (to trigger both good feelings and reciprocal liking and respect), and avoid making rude, hostile, threatening, or annoying comments during the whole interview. Most importantly, don't judge; even if the interviewee describes things that you disapprove of, focus on understanding the situation from the interviewee's point of view. At the same time, one should intellectually engage the interviewee by asking questions that force the interviewee to stop and reflect in a way that they find relevant and revealing also for themselves. If the

questions are too easy for the interviewee or if the interviewee sees them as irrelevant for the topic of discussion, he or she may quickly conclude that the researcher lacks sufficient expertise for the discussion. The point is that the interviewee is likely to truly open up only if he or she really wants to help the researcher, and that psychological safety and professional respect are two key factors influencing this willingness to help.

A second important theme is phrasing the questions. I have found it useful to start from an open-ended question about concrete matters and then proceed toward more detailed questions. Keeping the open-ended questions concrete is important because such questions make people describe specific things that they have experienced which makes them more likely to remember them accurately and avoids more conceptual synthesis and idealism in their answers as well as text-book style answers that describe how things should be done rather than how they are actually being done.

The open-ended nature of initial questions also makes people remember more things and describe them more accurately (see also Fisher, Ross, & Cahill, 2010). That is, when people start narrating about what happened or what they did, they can freely move with their memory and describe the content as it comes to their mind, without exerting much effort for looking for different aspects of the memory to answer detailed questions. Once they have first gotten the chance to lay out much of the content in this free-flowing way, the interviewer can then focus the follow-up questions on those themes and details that did not come out without squeezing. This makes the interview a more pleasant experience for the interviewee and also ensures that they have cognitive capacity left for answering and reflecting the relevant follow-up questions.

To illustrate, in one recent interview, I asked a senior consultant: “what did you do yesterday?” He then started describing a meeting that he had had with a younger consultant. Then I asked why this particular younger consultant was there. Then the senior explained that he had chosen him because he had previous experience with the client. Then I asked is this typical that you select people based on client experience. He then elaborated on the factors that could influence the selection of people in projects with concrete examples. In this way, I could access his true behaviors and associated beliefs, whereas if I had asked directly how do they select people on the projects, he would more likely have described a formal framework that would not necessarily

reflect his true thinking in real situations. Note also how I got the interviewee to reflect his behaviors carefully by asking many elaborating “why” questions that moved the conversation from description of events to the reflection of semi-conscious cognitions (mere description would be pointless, but you cannot get to the reflective level without a detour to description).

Third, different kinds of elaborating questions are needed for truly challenging the interviewee. The simplest ones are “can you tell me more about that?,” “Why?,” and “can you give me an example?” Each of these three questions prompts the interviewee to tell more and the why question also makes them reflect the reasons more. It’s kind of like pressing pause button in the interviewee’s description of his or her activities and asking him or her to explain more what happened in some particular situation.

In asking elaborating questions, it is important to ask them in an open-ended way to avoid forcing the interviewee to describe less relevant things. For example, when Quy and I were studying the impact of fear at Nokia, I asked “why did you not challenge the top managers in this situation?” rather than “did fear prevent you from challenging...” after the interviewees had described that they sometimes could not challenge the top managers. In this way, I avoided leading the interviewees to talk about the impact of a predetermined theme and instead allowed them to describe those themes that had seemed most relevant for them. It was only because so many interviewees then described fear-related themes that I felt confident about making arguments about the impact of fear.

More advanced elaborating questions can challenge the interviewees more and lead to novel insights. Toward the end of interviews, I often try to interpret what the interviewees have told me and ask them to challenge me. I can say something like: “You said that ‘xxx,’ can I interpret this that [abstract interpretation or theoretical argument]”, or “You said earlier/Some other people have said that ‘xxx’ while you now said ‘yyy.’ Why do you think this difference exists?” Sometimes I also bring up previous theory explicitly and ask them to reflect their own behaviors in light of the theory: “Theory would predict that ‘xxx’ but you seem to ‘yyy.’ Why is this?”

Fourth, a fundamentally simple factor that seems to influence the quality of interviews is listening: you need to tolerate long pauses and silences that might be uncomfortable in normal social interactions because the interviewees are typically reflecting things during these breaks and come up with more thoughts if you let them develop and share them. If you are too eager to ask

the next question, the interviewee will not get a chance to hear inside his or her head the more silent thoughts that may reveal more than what he or she has initially said. To illustrate, consider how the long pause enables the interviewee to reveal his weakness in the following transcript:

[Question:] Can you tell me more about some of the more difficult situations?

[Answer:] Well, ... [silence 23 seconds] ... Project X frustrated me because I did not have the sufficient understanding for conducting my task effectively. [...] (*Source*: unpublished research)

A fifth and final point I want to emphasize is that highly educated managers as interviewees are not naïve. They have read various books like Kahneman's (2011) "Thinking, Fast and Slow." They can reflect their own and others' behaviors in an analytical way, and they often care about the accuracy of their reflections very much as they need to achieve concrete results and they get them only if the working theories they use are accurate enough. This is why I have found it useful to ask them to challenge my emerging theoretical interpretations (toward the end of interviews). In a similar fashion, Michel (2007, p. 533), who was studying investment bankers, described in her data tables how her interviewees challenged her: "I know you are interested in identities. But you just have to accept that people here don't think in these terms. People think of themselves in the context of the deal they are working on and what they have to do next." (Director)

In addition to these five themes, there are of course pragmatic factors that one needs to think about. These include the venue of the interview (comfortable, private, not too noisy, practical), recording of the interview (very beneficial as it's practically impossible to capture everything by making notes; but sometimes people are uncomfortable with recording and one needs to settle for notes), breaks between interviews (if you do many in the same day), and follow-up calls and e-mails to ask for further detail and double-check interpretations. Also, having a back-up recorder is useful.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Typical interview studies can consist of 50–100 interviews in the management field, which easily gives you more than 1,000 pages

of single-spaced transcribed text. The analytical procedures that you use to make sense of the data are central in carving out the interesting parts of the data and still making valid interpretations that are consistent with the whole of the data. Various types of coding and categorization practices are valuable in this process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this section, I focus on three themes that I find particularly important.

First, one should recognize that the interview material is not standardized data that can be processed mechanically. Instead, one needs to look at the meaning of the sentences uttered by the interviewees, the nature of the substance that the sentences contain, and the context in which the interviewees have said them. To illustrate, when a CEO says “our sales increased by 5% from last year” you can make several inferences: (1a) the sales likely did indeed increase like the CEO described (it’s unlikely that he would have misperceived or misremembered the figure); (2a) he considers that this increase was relevant in relation to the things he was talking about; (3a) he considers the practice of comparing present performance to past performance as meaningful, at least when the comparison is favorable. On the other hand, when a same CEO says that “our company culture is very supportive” (1b) you probably cannot infer that the culture really is supportive because it is quite possible that the CEO has not accurately perceived how other members of the firm experience the culture. You probably can infer that (2b) he thinks the culture has relevance in relation to the other things he was talking about and that (3b) he thinks speaking about culture is important. The point is that you need to reflect carefully about the content of the statement and its context to form a plausible interpretation. This requires situational judgment rather than reliance on formal coding rules (which are applicable for some other purposes).

Second, one can use theories to aid interpretation. For example, when coding for emotions, Huy (2011) used the appraisal theories of emotion to infer his interviewees’ emotions toward organizational topics. In this way, he could see more from the data than an uninformed interpreter would have. Often it requires some iteration before one finds the right theoretical lens or lenses for looking at the data. When using this practice, one should remember that the ultimate goal is not to simply explain the new data with an old theory, but to come up with new theoretical insights. The existing theories can help as building blocks such

that a novel meso-level theory emerges from data that has been interpreted with the help of micro-level theories, like when we (Vuori & Huy, 2016) used individual- and group-level theories to form interpretations as we were building organizational level theory about the influence of emotions on innovation process. In addition, sometimes one can get so lucky that the new data clearly conflicts an existing theory and then one can use the data to challenge and refine this particular theory. In practice, I have found it useful to continue reading articles as I'm working with data and for each article I read, ask "how would the theory presented in this article explain my data?," and "how do the patterns in my data differ from what this article would predict?"

Third, regardless of the specific analytic techniques used, I think in the end the success of qualitative analyses comes down the researcher's deep familiarity with his or her data and theories. Creativity ultimately results from making novel connections and the better one knows the data and the theories, the more possible combinations he or she can experiment with (in both mentally and in writing). In practice, this requires reading the interviews carefully (coding the interviews line-by-line forces you to do this) and developing various alternative categorizations iteratively (constant comparisons, visualizations, and coding structures force you to do this), while also keeping in mind the theories and pursuing directions that are more likely to lead to insights that have not been made before (drafting the introduction and discussion sections help in this) and staying honest to the data such that you don't make arguments based on partial data that are clearly invalidated by other parts of the data (presenting emerging findings to the interviewees is a powerful tool for avoiding this).

Concluding Remarks

The open-ended interview method allows for deeply contextual understanding of individuals' cognitions and emotions in organizations and intimacy that may be difficult to achieve through other methods. These benefits come at the cost of getting less standardized data that may be biased by the interviewees' unwillingness or inability to share their thoughts and feelings accurately, which is why interviews should be seen as one tool in the broader toolbox for studying emotion and cognition in organizations.

The goodness of the interview method depends heavily on the execution of the interview, which is why thorough

preparation, creation of psychological safety and professional respect, and a carefully reflected question strategy are needed. A management scholar should also remember that the interviewee is often highly educated and cares deeply about issues relating to management, which is why they can be treated as helpful peers rather than as naïve interviewees. The analysis of interview data requires situational judgment from the researcher and the application of various tools and theories, but ultimately comes down to extensive iteration between data and theory to find novel, true insights.

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Further Reading

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— Interview techniques developed for forensic use contain various aspects that are applicable to the management context as well and improve the quality of the management interviews.

AQ2 Nichols, R., & Stevens, L. (1957). Listening to people. *Harvard Business Review* AQ3 (September–October).

— Practical considerations and advice on how to become a better listener.

Pettigrew, A. M. (1992). On studying managerial elites. *Strategic Management Journal*, 13(S2), 163–182.

— Valuable points to consider when interviewing seasoned managers.

AQ4 Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and AQ5 procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.

— Mastering the basics is essential for good research. While I have found this book particularly useful, I think the main thing is to read several method books and develop a deeper sense of the qualitative process.

Williams, M., & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding a peace in a frantic world*. London: Hachette Digital.

— Ability to stay present, pay attention, and remain non-judgmental are keys to successful interviewing; mindfulness techniques help in developing these abilities.

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Author Queries

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- AQ2 Please provide the vol. no. & page details for ref. Nichols & Stevens (1957).
- AQ3 Please provide volume number for this reference.
- AQ4 Please provide the publisher location name for reference Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998).
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