Interviewing

Thanks to Beki Grinter, Georgia Tech

What is an Interview?

Set of open-ended questions designed to give you an in-depth understanding of people’s:

- Experiences
- Practices
- Perceptions
- Opinions
- Feelings
- Knowledge

Data consist of verbatim quotes with sufficient context to be interpretable
Types of Interviews

• Structured/Clinical
  – Interview follows strict set of questions
  – Deviation from script can compromise study
  – Goal is often to quantify, ordering may be important

• Semi-structured
  – List of topics to cover, may include specific ordering
  – Allowed to deviate from the script

• Unstructured
  – No set script (have plan, but follow conversation)
  – Let subjects open up, set pace, explore with them

Structured/Clinical

When to use:
• When you are the domain expert
  – You have to have a deep enough understanding of domain or practices to ask the right questions
• Goal is often to quantify/categorize behavior
  – Can sometimes work like a spoken questionnaire
  – Difference is subjects can give nuanced answers
• Works with multiple investigators
  – Supposed to yield the same results regardless of who gives it
• Ensure consistency, ordering, and coverage
  – Sometimes important for validity
**Unstructured Interviews**

When to use:
- When learning the culture and key concepts is the goal
  - Not sure what is important or what to ask about
    - What difficulties are they having coordinating/communicating?
    - What problems are they having with their current processes?
  - Not sure how to ask
    - Lack vocabulary or understanding of key concepts
- Have time and desire to learn the culture
- IRB does **not** like

**Semi-structured Interviews**

A compromise

When to use:
- When dealing with multiple investigators
- When efficiency is important, but depth as well
- When you have an understanding of the topic, but your subjects are equally or more knowledgeable (about interview topic) than you
- Have a set of questions you want to make sure to cover
**Example**

- Semi-structured interviews
  - Two people interview people about their job
  - Ask participants about what work they do
  - Ask about work history
  - Ask about their attitudes and expectations
  - Get them out of their comfort zone, see how they react
  - Ask them to solve a complex problem

**Anatomy of Interviews: The Preamble**

- Introduce yourself and your research
- Remind them of the confidentiality and anonymity commitments you’ve made to them
- Explain why you’ve asked them to participate in this project
- Thank them for agreeing to make the time for this activity
- Ask them for permission to record or take notes
- Remind participants of their rights and what they can expect

In other words, be helpful and polite
Anatomy of Interviews: The Grand Tour

The first question
- Does more than start the interview, it sets the tone of the interview

- Needs to accomplish the following
  - Familiarize the participant to taking a talking role in the interview
  - Encourage the participant to believe that their opinion does matter

- Grand tour question must be designed
  - Not ad-hoc or ad-libbed

Anatomy of Interviews: Crafting Grand Tour Questions

- Question needs to be
  - Easy to answer
    - A topic that the participant finds easy to answer will help them provide a detailed response and reinforce the sense in them that that’s what you would in fact like
  - …But not be too easily answered
    - At the same time the question should not be answerable by the words “yes” “no” “perhaps”

- Examples
  - “Tell me about the work that you do?”
  - “What made you buy the computer?”
Anatomy of Interviews: Questions

• Avoid leading participant
  – A CONSTANT threat to interviewing
    • Wouldn’t it be good if they liked the system you’d spent months building
    • Agreed with your opinion that a tool is total rubbish
  – Leading is a threat because people want to do well
  – A performance-based conflict avoidance
  – A good way to get non-leading question is to use value neutral terms

• For example
  – “What do you like about this system” will give you open ended information about things that were liked, but not yield much about disliked features
  – “Tell me what you thought about this system” more likely to get positive and negative answers

Anatomy of Interviews: Probes

Sometimes questions don’t yield significant answers
• Prompting is a means to get participant to say more
• A variety of prompts
  – Silent: when person stops talking, remain silent until they say more
    • Leverages natural aspect of conversation; conversation is about taking turns
  – Echo: repeat the last thing said and then ask “then what happens”
    • Good for events, things with temporal character
  – Making agreeing sounds
    • Think about conversation, when you say “uh-huh” the other person continues
  – Tell Me More
    • Ask could you tell me more about that?
  – Clarifying
    • Summarize what’s been previously said, and ask for confirmation
    • Often yields confirmation (and clarification) and then launches into new areas of discussion
Anatomy of Interviews: Building Rapport

Objective of an interview is to

• Get the participant onto the topic and get out of the way
• Grand tour questions will get you part of the way, but need to build rapport

Rapport

• About gaining the trust of the participant so they’ll share information with you

Key to building rapport is listening

• Listening can be challenging because you’re trying to take notes, or because you are focusing on guide, or unnecessary because you’re recording the interview
• Or you are busy asking/thinking up questions

Demonstrating listening lets the participant know they’re being heard

• Summarize what you’ve heard them say
• Ask them questions based exclusively on what they’ve said

Interview Guideline

• Try to stay concrete
  “So when the new guy joined the team and hadn’t got his email account set up yet, what happened then?”

  vs.

  “What generally happens here when someone new joins the team?”

• Signs subjects may be ad-libbing
  – Interviewee waves hands expansively and looks up at ceiling =>
    generalization coming
  – Use of passive voice, “generally”, “usually”, “should”, “might.”
Anatomy of Interviews: 
Transcription

• Huuuuuuge pain in the behind

• Transcription
  – Typing up records of the interviews
  – Expect an hour of interview to take between 6-8 hours to transcribe
  – Transcribing your interview notes should occur within 24 hours

• Three types:
  – Detailed: captures the conversation
  – Exact: captures exactly the conversation, including pauses, overlaps
  – Selective: Transcribe only select quotes (reinforce/exemplify behavior already ID’d)

• To do or not to do?
  – Outsourcing to transcriptionist seems attractive option, but it is the most effective way to lose contact with the data
  – May save time in writing up interview, costs time in analysis because of loss of intimacy

Interview Pitfalls: Response, 
Deference & Expectancy Effects

• Response effects are measurable due to
  – Interviewee, interviewer and environment
  – Political orientation of interviewer
  – Gender, topic, age, accent

• People telling you what they think you want to hear
  – Not to offend you
  – To be seen to look competent as an interviewee
  – Because of who they think you are/represent

• The tendency to get the answers we’re expecting
  – Not due to correct intuition but to shaping the response
**Difficult Interviews**

- Some people are naturally quiet
  - Prompting and open ended questions are met with short responses and long silences

- Things to try:
  - See whether person opens up to more specific questions
    - Some people think in generalities, others more specifically
  - Explore other topics to see whether current topic is causing silence
    - That’s a finding in and of itself, if someone’s open but not to that particular topic

- If nothing seems to work - End the interview

**Difficult Interviews**

- Interviewees with a message/mission
  - Have a clear agenda, insist on derailing the interview

- Politically sensitive topics
  - Internal power struggles not always apparent to an outsider

- Sensitive topics
  - Personal experiences, personal investments
Top Mistakes in Interviewing
By Karen Holtzblatt

1. Pretending you are in the field when you are not
2. Accepting a “representative user” to interview
3. Using “I can’t see the work live so I’m not going to do a contextual interview” as an excuse
4. Not getting low-level details
5. Assuming users can tell you if you just ask
6. Asking “Why?” or open-ended questions
7. Not being honest about the user’s reaction
8. Falling into ineffective interview styles
9. Expecting the interview to run itself
10. Forgetting that one good interview is much better than no interviews
Mistake 2: Accepting a representative user

- Set criteria for screening subjects, stick to these
  - If the subject doesn’t meet conditions, don’t waste your time and theirs

- Be skeptical of people who are volunteered
  - If they don’t meet your criteria, don’t interview them
  - Look for agendas & understand who these people are in the org, their history etc
    - Can sometimes be supervisors, HR people, lawyers
    - Don’t be lazy, don’t substitute with in-house people

- Solution:
  - Offer other ways for gatekeepers to be heard
  - Interview them, but treat the data separately

Mistake 3: The “I can’t see live work” excuse

- Processing Interviews requires understanding of context
  - Sometimes that context is the work environment
  - Borders on observational research

- Barriers:
  - Intrusive
  - Time commitment
  - Sensitive materials/confidentiality

- Solutions:
  - Taping or log books
    - Allows subjects to reflect on a real incident
  - Recreate a work scene or situation off-site
MISTAKE 5: ASSUMING USERS CAN TELL YOU IF YOU JUST ASK

• A lot of knowledge & practice is intuitive or innate.
  – The more experienced the user, the more likely they’ll have trouble
  – Often they have a very different vocabulary than you
  – They may be prone to post-hoc rationalizations

• Can often learn more from just watching and assuming role of an apprentice

MISTAKE 6: ASKING “WHY?” OR OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

• Very difficult to answer
  – Where do you start
  – What level of detail
  – Prone to getting off-topic

• Often easier or better to ask the user to verify whether your theory or model is correct
  – Sometimes we offer intentionally incorrect interpretations
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