Developing the interview guide

Developing an effective interview guide is central to the conducting of a semi-structured in-depth interview. Although the semi-structured interview gives you the scope to digress and talk about unexpected aspects, all the major topics in the interview guide should ultimately be covered. The data elicited from the questions should give you the capacity to answer the research questions you are investigating. Chapter headings include:

- Things to do prior to constructing the interview guide
- The research question
- Constructing the interview guide – key topics or themes
- Questions within topics
- Ordering the themes and questions
- What questions not to ask

Things to do prior to constructing the interview guide

An interview guide is essential for focusing the research. It details the main themes or topics and the questions that the researcher wants to ask. The level of detail can vary considerably and to some extent it depends on your approach. A researcher using a ‘realist approach’ is likely to have a far more detailed interview guide than somebody using a life history or narrative approach. There is a danger that if your interview guide is too detailed and you are intent on sticking to it, you may limit the capacity of the interviewee to make important digressions and reveal significant detail. Alternatively, if your interview guide is too sparse you may fail to cover important topics (King and Horrocks, 2012: 36). What is key is to ensure that all topics that you want to cover are covered, but to keep in mind that your guide is merely a guide and that you give the interviewee the scope to digress and do not treat the interview guide as a prescribed script.

Prior to constructing the interview guide you should have a clear idea of your topic and research question/s (what exactly is a research question is discussed in the following section). As Flick (2004: 149) observes, ‘the research question of a qualitative investigation is one of the decisive factors in its success or failure’. Of course, one of the key advantages of qualitative research is that you are able to adjust your research focus and add new questions at any time (King and Horrocks, 2012). Nevertheless, before you start interviewing you should have a well defined idea of the research question/s you are trying to answer. If you fail to ask an important question in the interviews, it is usually difficult to go back to the people already interviewed.

Although it is common to have a fair amount of anecdotal knowledge, preparation of the interview guide requires that you familiarise yourself with existing research on the topic. This will help you formulate your research questions and the interview guide. It will also clarify what are the gaps in the existing research. The more knowledge you have of the area, the greater the likelihood that your research questions will be
appropriate and the questions you ask in the interview will generate the data required.

For some topics a useful preparatory strategy is to talk to key stakeholders and discuss your draft interview guide with them. People who have worked in the area under investigation are bound to have useful knowledge and insights and could make an important contribution. For example, if you are investigating the impact that accessing secure housing with support has on the quality of life of people with mental illness (Muir et al., 2008), it would be useful to speak to the professionals who were involved with establishing the programme before interviewing the clients.

The research question

Your overall topic and the research question guide what you will ask in the interview. The research question is the mystery you are going to try and answer. If you are investigating young people of Pakistani descent in the United Kingdom, your research question could be, ‘how do they view themselves and what contributes to their sense of identity?’ (see Mythen, 2012). The research question in a study of homeless youth in Melbourne, Australia was, ‘how does the experience of homelessness impact on the subjectivity of the people affected?’ or to express it another way, ‘How do they see themselves?’ (Farrugia, 2010). You could have a number of research questions. In my study of inner-city transition in Johannesburg, I had several research questions: Why did the white residents move out of the area? Why did black people move into the area despite racist legislation that made living in the area a criminal offence? Why did the apartheid government allow their ‘sacred’ policy of racial segregation/apartheid to disintegrate so dramatically in the inner city of Johannesburg? Why did certain apartment blocks decline significantly while others remained in reasonable or pristine condition? Why was crime so high in the area? These were the key research questions explored.

The questions you ask interviewees should help you answer your research questions. However, one of the strengths of semi-structured in-depth interviewing as a method is that it gives you flexibility. It is likely that as the research progresses questions will emerge that you had not thought of at the outset. The proponents of grounded theory argue that as your research progresses, the research questions will emerge and your research question/s should be fairly general at the start of your research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This approach has merit but personally I think it is useful to have your research questions formulated when you go out into the field. They help guide the research and give you the basis for constructing your interview guide. Of course, you need to remain open to new possibilities.

Constructing the interview guide – key topics or themes

The interview guide is constituted by key topics that fundamentally structure the interview. Although the interviewer has a great deal of flexibility when conducting the interview and the interview will take many twists and turns, each topic should be covered. As the research progresses it is likely that certain topics will emerge as central and others will be viewed as less significant.
Deciding on the topics

What is crucial is that the responses to the topics should allow you to collect the data necessary to answer your research question/s and they should resonate with existing research on the overarching topic. For example, if you are examining the impact of being unemployed and the possibilities of re-entering the workforce, you need to think through what are the issues and what has existing research established. There is consensus that the experience of unemployment, especially if it is long term, can be debilitating psychologically and materially. In their classic qualitative study on the impacts of unemployment, Jahoda et al. (1971) concluded that besides being impoverishing, unemployment has five major impacts. It takes away shared experience; a structured experience of time; collective purpose; status and identity; and required regular activity. Jahoda et al.’s study could play a key role in shaping your interview guide. Each of their findings could be a sub-theme, the primary theme could be the impact of unemployment, and you could test their conclusions. In relation to shared experience you may ask interviewees how important work was in regards to friendships and whether unemployment has led to a decline in social contact and difficulties in social interaction. This is premised on work giving individuals a common foundation and material for conversation. The impact of not having a temporal structure due to no longer having to go to work, could be a key and interesting theme. Interviewees could be asked how they spend their days and what impact, if any, not having to go to work has. Jahoda et al. saw the lack of a temporal structure regulated by work as necessarily negative and concluded that it fostered depression. You may find that some interviewees find unemployment liberating as it gives them time to engage in pursuits that they find interesting and meaningful. The issue of collective purpose would involve asking questions about what work meant for the interviewees and whether not having employment means that they have little or no purpose in life. The question of status and identity overlaps with collective purpose. You could ask if they feel stigmatised and whether they are treated differently because they are unemployed.

An interesting question is whether work is important for people’s identities. The theme of the impact of not having ‘required regular activity’ overlaps with a lack of temporal structure. The impact of not having regular activity could be interrogated by asking interviewees whether they miss the routine of having to go to work. The notion that regular activity is crucial for well-being has been questioned. For example, Bauman (1998: 7) contends that ‘the work ethic was … about the surrender of freedom’.

In many countries the government benefit paid to people who are unemployed is minimal (see Aleksynska and Schindler, 2011). This potentially has dire implications and a comprehensive analysis of unemployment would focus on the various implications of this minimal support. An important question is whether the minimal income support motivates people to re-enter the labour force or does it serve as an obstacle (Morris and Wilson, 2014). More recent research on unemployment benefits has assessed the effectiveness of employment assistance programmes (Davidson, 2011). This could be an important topic – are the employment assistance programmes, that interviewees are often forced to participate in, helpful?

In sum, the interview topics for a study analysing the impact of being unemployed and dependent on the...
unemployment benefit could be the following:

**Topic 1: History of unemployment**

You would need to know how long the interviewee has been unemployed and why they are unemployed.

**Topic 2: Impacts of being unemployed – testing Jahoda et al.’s findings**

This theme, following Jahoda et al.’s study, could be subdivided into the following themes: the impact of a) not having a shared experience related to work; b) not having a structured experience of time; c) not being involved in a collective purpose; d) being labelled unemployed and not having any status attached to work; and e) not having regular activity.

**Topic 3: Surviving on the unemployment benefit and its impacts**

A further theme could be surviving on the unemployment benefit. This theme would examine the impact of the minimal income support on physical and mental health; family relationships; leisure and social connections; and housing affordability and material circumstances.

**Topic 4: Budgeting and ability to purchase necessities**

This theme would ‘measure’ the level of deprivation that people dependent on the unemployment benefit suffer. There are robust measures around deprivation so the interview could engage with some of these indicators (Saunders et al., 2008).

**Topic 5: Ability to re-enter the workforce**

A final theme could investigate the issue of re-entry into the workforce; what is helping unemployment benefit recipients re-enter the workforce and what are the factors hampering them?

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**Questions within topics**

The topics should drive the interview and there should not be too many detailed questions within the themes. However, you should note down the questions you want to pursue. This ensures that you cover everything you want to cover. Often, you will not have to ask many of the questions noted as they will be answered in the course of the interviewee answering another question. It is important that the questions are clear, easy to understand and not unnecessarily complex or abstract. Jargon should be avoided. You cannot expect your interviewees to understand academic discourse or to be part of what Wengraf (2001) has called your ‘language community’. The questions should be open-ended. Patton (1990: 296) comments, ‘The truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person’s full repertoire of possible responses’. ‘How do you feel about being unemployed?’ is an example of an open-ended question.
You need to make sure that interviewees can answer the questions posed. There is no point asking interviewees questions that they cannot answer. Patton (1990) has a useful list of the kinds of questions that can be asked. You can ask them about their:

- Experiences/behaviours
- Opinions/values
- Feelings
- Factual knowledge
- Sensory experience
- Personal background

**Experience/behaviour questions:** These questions ask ‘about what a person does or has done’ (Patton, 1990: 290). If you are interviewing a person who is unemployed and who has had to move because they could no longer afford the rent/mortgage, an ‘experience/behaviour’ question might be: ‘What did you do when you realised that you could no longer afford to stay in your home?’ Another experience/behaviour question may be, ‘How do you spend your day?’

**Opinion/value questions:** These questions involve asking interviewees what their opinion is of something related to the topic under discussion. For example, you could ask an unemployed interviewee, ‘What role do you think the government should play, if any, in alleviating unemployment?’ or, ‘What do you think the unemployment benefit should be?’

**Feeling questions:** These are questions that aim to understand an interviewee’s emotional responses to their experiences. ‘In asking feeling questions, the interviewer is looking for adjective responses, for example, ‘To what extent do you feel anxious, happy, afraid, intimidated, confident …?’ (Patton, 1990: 291). A feeling question could be, ‘How did you feel when you were told that you are being retrenched?’

**Knowledge questions:** These questions ask interviewees about their factual knowledge of a situation, policy or process. These questions elicit what are considered facts by interviewees rather than opinions or feelings. You could ask an interviewee, ‘What systems does the job-finding network have in place to assist you in your pursuit of employment?’

**Sensory questions:** These are questions that focus on what the interviewee has ‘seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled … Sensory questions attempt to have interviewees describe the stimuli to which they are subject’ (Patton, 1990: 292). You could ask an unemployed interviewee, ‘What do you see when you walk into the job network office?’

**Background questions:** These questions probe the personal characteristics of the interviewee – age, education, occupation, marital status, etc.

A useful question in many instances is what has been called a ‘grand tour question’ (Spradley, 1979). These questions ask the interviewee to talk about something they know well and are grand in scale. In an interview
with an unemployed person a grand tour question may be, ‘Could you tell me how you spend a typical day?’

If we take the various themes on exploring the impact of unemployment we could compile the following questions under each topic as shown in Figure 3.1. It is good to have the main topics on one page and then you can go into detail. It is important to remember that the interview guide is merely a guide and should be viewed as a flexible ‘help’. Ultimately, the questions asked in the interview will, to a large extent, be dictated by the responses of the interviewee. This is elaborated on in Chapter 6.
**Interview guide:** The impact of being unemployed and dependent on the unemployment benefit

**Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic 1: History of unemployment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic 2: Impacts of being unemployed (testing Jahoda et al.’s findings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 3: More general impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 4: Deprivation, budgeting and the ability to purchase necessities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 5: Employment services and the ability to re-enter the world of work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Topic 1: History of unemployment**

For how long have you been unemployed? What were the events that led to you becoming unemployed? Is this the first time you’ve been unemployed?

**Topic 2: Impacts of being unemployed (testing Jahoda et al.’s findings)**

Could you tell me what impact being unemployed has had on you? How has it affected you financially? How has it affected you psychologically? How has it affected your overall quality of life? How has your life changed since you stopped working? What do you miss most about work? Do you miss your fellow workers? How do you spend your day? Do you enjoy not having to get up at a set time? Does the lack of a set work routine have an impact? Do you feel that you are treated differently now that you are unemployed? Do you feel that your status has been affected by being unemployed?

**Topic 3: Surviving on the unemployment benefit and its impacts**

Has being unemployed changed your relationship with your family and, if so, in what ways? Has being unemployed affected your leisure activities and, if so, in what ways? Have you managed to maintain your social network? Has being unemployed had an impact on your friendships and, if so, in what ways? Have you been able to maintain your health?

**Topic 4: Budgeting and the ability to purchase necessities**

Are there any essential items that you need to purchase but cannot afford? In regards to your housing situation have you been able to maintain your mortgage repayments/pay the rent? Are you able to feed yourself and your family adequately? Are you able to heat and cool your home adequately? Are you able to buy new clothes? Are you able to look after your health? Do you ever have to resort to charity? Can you afford insurance?

**Topic 5: Ability to re-enter the workforce**

Is finding a job difficult? What are the main barriers preventing you from finding work? Are the employment services that you have been working with useful? What aspects have been most useful? What aspects have not been useful?

Figure 3.1 Interview guide

Another interview guide
This interview guide is drawn from my research on housing tenure and older Australians dependent solely or primarily on the government age pension. My main research question is, 'how does the housing tenure situation of older Australians who are primarily or solely dependent on the age pension impact on their life circumstances?' The research was inspired by earlier research on older people and homelessness that indicated that older Australians in the private rental sector were particularly vulnerable to homelessness (Morris et al., 2005). The housing costs of older private renters are far greater than the housing costs of social housing tenants and homeowners, resulting in older private renters struggling to maintain a foothold on their accommodation. This is a comparative study comparing older homeowners, social housing tenants and private renters. I have an interview guide for each group. The topics/themes are similar, but there are some small differences. For example, I ask older private renters about their relationship with their landlord or real estate agent. The interview guide for older private renters follows.

**Interview guide for older private renters**

**Topics/themes**

1. History of becoming a private renter
2. The adequacy of the accommodation
3. The cost of the accommodation and its impact
4. Finances/budgeting
5. Landlord–tenant relationship/maintenance
6. Health
7. The neighbourhood
8. Leisure and social connections
9. Social and family support
10. Housing options and policy
11. The future

**Possible questions within topics**

1. **History of becoming a private renter**

   Could you tell me how long you have been living in this apartment/house? Where were you staying before? Was it difficult to find this accommodation? Could you tell me about the process of finding accommodation? Have you always rented privately? How long have you been a private renter? Could you tell me why you are renting privately? Did you ever think you would find yourself in this situation? Were you employed until you retired? Were you married? Do you have children? Did you choose to rent when you were working? Do you regret it?

2. **The adequacy of the accommodation**
Do you feel the accommodation is adequate? Do you have enough space? Has the accommodation been modified at all to satisfy your needs? Is it physically difficult for you to live here?

3. The cost of the accommodation and its impact

How much rent are you paying? Is it a battle to pay the rent? Would your life be very different if you were paying a lower rent? Has the rent gone up since you first moved in? Are you scared that it will go up again? Can you afford another rent increase? What will you do if it goes up again? Is it difficult to find cheaper accommodation? Does the fact that you’re renting make you feel uneasy? Does it keep you awake at night? What would make you move? Do you worry about living here? Is the rental assistance benefit adequate?

4. Finances/budget

Is it hard to live adequately on the income you receive? After paying the rent do you have enough money for food? After paying for rent and food do you have money left for anything else? Do you have enough money for medical/dental expenses? What happens if an appliance breaks down? Can you afford to fix it? Have you had any expenses over the last year that you couldn’t find the money for? Is there something you really need that you can’t purchase? Do you ever have to resort to charity?

5. The landlord–tenant relationship/maintenance

How is your relationship with the landlord/real estate agent? Is the flat/house well maintained? Do you feel secure in terms of your tenancy?

6. Health

How would you rate your health? Is your health being affected by your situation? Is your financial situation making you anxious?

7. The neighbourhood

Do you like the neighbourhood? How would you feel about moving from this neighbourhood? Do you have a lot of connections in the neighbourhood? Are the facilities/services good? Would you be prepared to move to cheaper housing in a different area? Do you feel there is a sense of community in the area? Did you choose to live in this neighbourhood or did you decide to live here because the rent was cheaper?

8. Leisure and social connections

Are you able to get out much? Do you ever meet friends for coffee? Does your lack of finances affect your ability to socialise? Are you involved in activities? Do you have much social interaction? Do you have contact with your neighbours?

9. Social and family support
Do you have people that can help you if needs be? Family/friends? What support do they offer? Do you have family you can fall back on? What support do they give? Do you have a social network that you can fall back on? Do you have anybody that helps you around the house?

10. Housing options and policy

Do you enjoy living in rented accommodation? Do you think you would be happier if you owned your own home? Would you prefer to stay in social housing? Have you applied? Do you feel that older Australians living in private rented accommodation are getting a fair deal?

11. The future

How do you see the future?

Ordering the themes and questions

In a similar fashion to a questionnaire it is important to begin the interview with non-threatening questions. There is no point asking a challenging question at the beginning. It could produce awkwardness or distress and it may impact negatively on the rest of the interview (Leech, 2002). Ideally, the beginning of the interview should be used to establish a rapport and the questions in the early stages should be easy to answer and not induce anxiety. As Frey and Oishi (1995: 100) comment, ‘A smooth start also sets the tone for the rest of the interview, establishing a “rapport effect” that builds trust and enhances willingness to participate fully in the interview.’ Once the interviewee feels comfortable you can move on to more challenging questions. Of course, some interviewees never feel comfortable and you may find yourself asking challenging questions and the interviewee will not open up. In these situations the responses are likely to be restrained and brief.

The interview guide needs to have a logical progression. The introductory questions, besides being non-threatening and easy to answer should also set the context. An ever-present possibility with in-depth interviews is that they go on for too long and fatigue takes hold. When this occurs the interviewee is more likely to give brief and unhelpful answers. It is thus advantageous to ask challenging and important questions midway through the interview. Of course, using semi-structured in-depth interviews means that the interview can go in a range of directions and much depends on how the interviewee responds to the questions posed. You may find that you have to enter difficult terrain early on. If the question is a logical progression from what has gone before this is not necessarily a problem.

Although in-depth, semi-structured interviews are necessarily flexible, there will be times when it is appropriate to take control. You need to gauge when a topic has run its course. When you move to a new topic, it is useful to flag the shift to the interviewee. You can explicitly inform the interviewee that you are now going to switch topics.
What questions not to ask

Barone and Switzer (1995: 83) provide a useful list of general principles as to what type of questions not to ask in an interview:

The thoughtful interviewer will word questions so as to:

- Probe, not cross-examine
- Inquire, not challenge
- Suggest, not demand
- Uncover, not trap
- Draw out, not pump
- Guide, not dominate

What their guide is suggesting is that the questions posed should not elicit discomfort, embarrassment, stress or hostility. For example, it is not a good idea to ask an interviewee, ‘How has being unemployed affected your sex life?’ A far less threatening question would be, ‘Has being unemployed had an impact on your relationships?’ It is important that the questions asked do not make the interviewee defensive. The phrasing of sensitive questions is crucial. Leech (2002: 666) gives a useful example of an interview with a lobbyist about political donations:

…[I]nstead of asking a lobbyist, ‘Did you give soft money donations?’ it might make the question easier to answer to say, ‘How much did your organization give in soft money donations?’ The latter presumes that it is normal to give soft money donations and that everyone must do it, and also shifts the onus away from the individual and onto the organization.

You should avoid questions that will provide information that you can obtain elsewhere. It could annoy the interviewee. This is especially important when interviewing elites (see Chapter 7) who often have limited time at their disposal.

The questions you ask can have an impact on the interviewee and it is your responsibility to ensure that the power you have as the framer of the questions is used wisely. There is no point asking questions that have the potential to generate a difficult atmosphere.

Summary

This chapter focuses on a crucial part of the research process – developing the interview guide. Prior to constructing the guide it is essential to do some preliminary reading in the area so as to obtain a sense of what research has been done and what are the issues. The drafting of preliminary research questions lays the foundation for your interview guide and should capture what you are trying to answer. You can have more than
one research question and you should view the research question/s as fluid, to be sharpened and added to as your research progresses. The construction of the interview guide should be organised by topic or themes. You can then have questions under each of the topics. The topics you focus on should allow you to answer your research questions. Ideally, the interview guide needs to start off with non-threatening, gentle questions before moving on to more challenging topics. The chapter reviews the different types of interview questions and also discusses the questions you should not ask.

Exercise

Construction of an interview guide

- Give your project a title
- Set out your research question/s
- Write out your topics for the interview guide
- Write out the specific questions under each topic

References


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