

The unstructured interview topic guide exercise

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I teach qualitative research methods to Masters level social science students. By the end of the semester-long module we want students to gain an understanding of what it is to be informed, and reflexive qualitative research practitioners. On the front cover of our module guide we have an image of lightbulbs to capture the illumination about qualitative researching that we aim for.



Module guide cover

The students who take the module each year are an internationally diverse lot, but more significantly they have quite different levels of familiarity with qualitative research. While some may have knowledge of qualitative approaches, others often have only studied, for example, demography or statistics, and have little insight into qualitative research. In the case of one of the basic qualitative tools: interviewing, students can hold a view of this method as just chatting and not very rigorous. So, a key pedagogic question is how to switch on the lightbulb understanding that in-depth, unstructured interviewing is a skilful interactional dialogue and a thorough process of enquiry?

For quite a few years now I have been using a particular workshop exercise to help students think through how to develop and use unstructured interview topic guides. The workshop is preceded by an hour-long lecture on interviewing that looks at the various forms qualitative interviews can take, along with debates about the nature of interview data, and a range of methodological and practical issues. The latter include types of qualitative interview questions, including broad descriptive openings; what, where, when, why and how queries; and comparative questions; and techniques such as silence, reinforcement, repetition, and probes. The lecture also stresses the importance of active listening.

The associated 'interviewing' workshop involves the students collectively generating an interviewing guide for an in-depth qualitative investigation of 'feelings about housework', followed by partnering in pairs and conducting a brief interview with each other using the guide. I use housework as the topic of inquiry because it is one that everyone can relate to and knows something about, even if they don't do much of it! The feelings element of the research is an attempt to position the activity firmly in the qualitative paradigm.

In the centre of a whiteboard¹ I write the interview focus in capitals 'FEELINGS ABOUT HOUSEWORK' (with feelings underlined), and I give the students a few minutes to think about questions they want to suggest for the guide. (If students read the module guide, they will have advance notice of the topic ...) I then ask the students to call out their suggestions, recording the subjects on the board in a form of a spider diagram or mind map. I organise and link the topics as we go along, grouping similar subjects together. The workshop is timetabled for 45-50 minutes, but if we had longer, I would just list the students' suggestions and ask them to group the items themselves.

Here are some of the key, cumulative lightbulb moments of realisation that often occur for students as we proceed through the interview guide exercise.

- What are qualitative questions?

Generally, the first questions students suggest for the interview guide are along the lines of 'how many hours housework do you do a week?' or 'what percentage of your time do you spend on housework?' I ask them what the answers to these questions will tell them about their

¹ This exercise could be carried out online via visual mapping tools

interviewee's feelings on the topic. We acknowledge not much and talk about the difference between quantitative and qualitative eliciting questions. But we also consider that such numerical information might be useful as background context. This discussion spurs the students to suggest questions that bring emotions into the enquiry. Sometimes these are along the lines of 'do you enjoy housework?', and we can discuss how 'closed' questions that can be answered with a straight 'yes' or 'no' will need follow up probes, or that we need to think about questions that are 'open' and require more extensive responses.

- Assumptions about what constitutes the topic

Occasionally a student will suggest something like 'what do you think counts as housework?' for the interview guide. When this happens, I get excited, write 'definition' on the whiteboard, and point out the importance of finding out how your interviewee understands the topic of enquiry. More often the issue of what falls within the parameters of housework for the interviewee doesn't get raised, so after a while I ask the students whether cooking is housework, or washing up, or shopping, or dressing children, or taking out the rubbish, and we discover that we don't all have the same view on what we consider as housework. I reinforce the point about not assuming you and your interviewee share a similar understanding of the topic of your investigation, write 'definition' on the whiteboard and remind students about broad descriptive opening questions that I raised in the lecture.

- Assumptions about interviewee circumstances

Division of domestic labour is a recurrent issue that students raise in the workshop exercise, through questions about who does the housework. As well as returning to the issue of whether and what this particular topic might or might not tell us about feelings, we discuss how we should avoid making assumptions about the interviewee's household circumstances. They may be living on their own, they may be living in shared accommodation, or with parents, or partner and children. They may be buying-in housework help or be employed to do cleaning for others. But it is important to acknowledge that the students are thinking like social scientists when they are interested in pursuing division of labour issues.

Once we have a strong set of (relevant) interview guide topics up on the whiteboard, I ask students to pair up with each other, and to use the guide to conduct a practice interview with their partner, swapping roles after a period of time. We then come back together as a whole

class to feedback how it felt to be the interviewer as well as the experience of being interviewed. Students are often enthusiastic about discussing the interesting and surprising substantive things that they learned about each other, raising similarities and differences in what they each considered housework and their feelings about it. What we have in action here as the lightbulb moment concerns not making assumptions about shared understandings.

Generally, the students can need more encouragement to raise and reflect on their experiences of the process of being the interviewer. It transpires that often this is bound up with being unsure about what order to put the topics in the spider diagram guide and how to phrase them as questions, such that they felt there was no natural flow or direction for the interview. We draw out some messages from this experience. We acknowledge that if it was our actual research project we would know our interview guide very well and wouldn't need to keep looking at it or be stumbling about how to form questions. We would have a strong sense of what we wanted to know and why. From this we think about what active listening in an interview means – that we can follow what the interviewee is saying attentively, engage with what they are saying and respond flexibly and appropriately to them with our interview questions as and when, rather than following a strict question order and format. We can build from here into considerations of what makes for a successful in-depth qualitative interview.