



Methods for Change

Open Interviews

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Open Interviews



Open Interviews are about developing a transparent and collaborative approach to interviewing that works for your participants. Power is a critical dimension of the research encounter in conventional interviews, as even in more relaxed, semi-structured approaches it is the interviewer who 'holds' the interview schedule and strongly influences the encounter. Rather than the interviewer directing the interview by asking questions, Open Interviews are designed to disrupt the conventional encounter; while you identify the key topics and questions that you would like your respondent to discuss these are ultimately navigated and explored by the participant in the interview.

In advance of the interview, participants are sent, or given, a one-page topic guide created by the researcher which clearly outlines the areas of interest to the research study. This summary can be presented in writing, pictorially or a combination of these depending on the audience. It is used to ease the participant into the research by giving them time to reflect how they might want to respond to a particular question and so make them feel more comfortable and prepared before the interview. In the interview, it is the participant who 'holds' the interview schedule, and it is up to the participant where they would like to start the conversation, in what order they cover the different points and how long they spend talking. While you can respond to any questions from the participant or give prompts if you deem that to be essential, your role during the interview is essentially to listen. It is important for you to explain the format of this kind of interview in advance and to reassure participants that there are no right or wrong answers, that they can choose to talk around the topics and questions and to ignore any topic areas that they prefer not to cover.

This approach is designed to enable participants to set the agenda within the broad parameters of the topic guide as they can foreground issues and talk longer on the topics they deem to be of interest compared to others listed. While Open Interviews can be conducted face to face, via email, telephone or on online platforms, it is important to remember that these mediums produce qualitatively different material. The point is to be open to what option works best for the participants and try to be consistent in your approach (email, phone, face-to-face) throughout your study.

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How does this method create or contribute to change?

Change happens in the way the interview itself unfolds. Indeed, this is a method that is designed to be flexible and open to change as the prompts are inevitably interpreted by the different participants with new information introduced during the interviews. The topic guide can be re-worded and developed between interviews if participants find some topics hard to relate to, or the phrasing hard to understand, and new topics can be included in the schedule as your thinking and analysis develops throughout the study. As participants are likely to engage with the order of topics/ questions in a different way, this is likely to generate interesting insights into the areas that (some) people engage with some topics and ones that they spend less time on, or omit.

Open Interviews can produce change in a variety of ways. They can function as a form of intervention into the lives of participants (and researchers) as through talking, participants often come to reflect on something to do with themselves, their community or whatever else is being discussed. Sometimes the interviewees' opinions and beliefs about things can change during the interview process as they reflect on their experiences and articulate their views

Interviews from commissioned research are designed to reflect a specific need that organization has identified, and therefore the findings will inform the desired change in policy or practice. The anonymized findings from an open interview study, for example, would be shared with partners and circulated to other organisations, used in advertising campaigns and used to instrumentalise change on a broader project goal. The findings may be used to raise awareness of an issue or to positively influence behavior change.

What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Open Interviews draw inspiration from feminist approaches in that they are designed to empower participants and to support them to lead the discussion. Rather than a prescriptive interview in which the researcher is in control of the type and order of questioning, Open Interviews are concerned with the co-construction of knowledge and consciously try to dilute uneven power relationships between the interviewer and interviewee. Open Interviews are inspired by ethnographic approaches; each encounter occurs within a unique social, temporal and physical context and accepts that this affects the way that topics and/or questions are interpreted and responded to by each participant. This method also draws influence from narrative theory and recognizes that people often enjoy telling stories, that they need to tell their story their way, and so start where they feel comfortable and extrapolate as they see fit.

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Why might I want to use Open Interviews?

You might want to use Open Interviews if you hope to create a collaborative and comfortable interview experience for researchers and participants alike. This method aims to shift the position of power away from solely the researcher by granting participants the flexibility to decide how and in what order they would like to narrate their experiences or thoughts on a given topic. This helps to cultivate an organic and conversational flow meaning you are more likely to cover a wider range of interesting topics than a more prescriptive approach would allow. They can also be used for interviewing people about sensitive topics, or for people who may feel vulnerable, as participants may be apprehensive about what they will be asked, and how much they will be expected to disclose. Open Interviews can take the uncertainty out of interviews by giving participants more time to consider their responses and complete control over what is raised and how.

While interviewing is a commonly used social science research method which can be used in many different sectors, Open Interviews can work particularly well with participants who are time pressured and who would like the interview to unfold on their own terms. They are particularly good in contexts where you are relying on people's good will to partake in research (i.e. where there is no reward for participants' time) as the interview can unfold as they desire. Equally, Open Interviews can be a great method to empower participants, allowing their voices to come to the fore.

Step by step guide to using Open Interviews:

- 1. Ask yourself, who is it I want to talk to and what would I like to know?**
- 2. Then ask yourself,** how can I communicate to these participants everything that I would like to know in a one-page document, in a way that will not overwhelm or deter them. If you are researching with children, for example, perhaps it is more appropriate to explain the purpose of the interview using images, photographs or simple diagrams as opposed to all text. This can also work well for adults too as pictures can help to break down power relations and avoid jargon ridden language that often accompanies procedural ethics.

Clearly communicating what the interview might look like in a one-page pictorial or written document to participants beforehand can help to create a 'road map' for the interview while providing participants the freedom to decide how to navigate the journey. Using pictures, photographs or text to introduce the project provides the sense of a menu of things to discuss rather than a set of separate tasks that the participant must 'know' about. This can help to dilute power relationships, creating a comfortable atmosphere.

3. Design a topic guide for the interview.

Create a long list of all the topics and/or questions you think you might like to ask participants in a document. Be sure to take a step away from these initial thoughts and begin an editing process where you look for repetitions or where a few areas could be condensed into one. Try to thematize the



Step by step guide to using Open Interviews:

questions into different sections or areas that you would like to cover in your interview. You can keep this (or the longer version of the topic guide with more detailed questions) next to you while you are interviewing in case there are prompts you would like to introduce but don't share this with your participants as a long and detailed list of questions could risk overwhelming them.

Ask yourself: do the types of questions I have allow me to access the type of information I am interested in finding out? For example, if you are interested in understanding someone's embodied experience, you might want to ask questions which encourage reflection on a particular moment, memory or encounter.

4. Decide how you would like the interviews to take place for your study (phone, online, email, face-to-face etc.). Try to use a single approach that will work for all participants as different approaches will produce qualitatively different data. For example, responses emailed to you are likely to have been reviewed and edited by your participants before they send them to you, whereas more personal and immediate methods (phone, face to face) do not offer participants this opportunity.

5. When arranging your interviews, be sure to share the one-page summary with an overview of the interview process well in advance to allow time for participants to ask any questions about the process and to think about their responses.

6. Now it's time to do the interview. Always take printed copies of the topic guide with you for face-to-face interviews or have them ready to email/ send in case your participants have lost their copy/ files. To get the conversation started, it is a good idea to briefly introduce the project and perhaps a 'context setting' question for them to introduce themselves. Starting in this way can help to build rapport and enable participants lead from this point onwards. Participants will have the topic guide in front of them and so they can start wherever they like. Once the participant concludes their responses, ask them just to look down the list of topics/ questions again in case they have missed any points that they would like to talk about. However, if they have decided to omit a topic do not prompt for it directly. Remember to take fieldnotes and note any points you would like to clarify with them, as these can be asked at the end of the interview. If your interview was face to face or online with a camera, note if anyone else was in the space and how did this affect the dynamic? How did the room look/ feel? How did you feel? How might you describe the mood? Remember to consult your field notes when listening back to audio recordings.

Remember to build flexibility into how the interview schedule might unfold. Though you might think it makes sense for the interview to follow a particular narrative structure, encourage the participant to decide where they would like to start, and how long to spend talking about different themes.



Examples of where Open Interviews have been used in social science research

Playing at Home: Researching the In Harmony initiative with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic (RLP) Orchestra, Liverpool UK.

Researcher: Prof. Jude Robinson, The University of Liverpool

This research was commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic (RLP) in 2013 as part of a broader programme of research to evaluate the In Harmony project, which is part of the El Sistema family of musical initiatives designed to help children in low income households learn to play a musical instrument and to appreciate classical and modern orchestral repertoires. RLP based its activity in with one local primary school with a nursery in a low-income community in Liverpool, West Everton, later expanding to others in the local area. Playing at Home was designed to engage with the families of the children aged 5-11 years, to explore how learning to play an instrument at school impacted on their home life and their families' and communities' engagement with classical music and the RLP. The research took place over 6 months with repeated visits to 10 families in their homes and used an ethnographically informed approach to carry out Open Interviews, observations, some mapping tasks, the compilation of a personal playlist, photography and sound recordings with the different family members.

The idea for the open interview format here came from initial meetings to tell families about the project and encourage them to join (informed consent). I had created a one-page Information Sheet for the younger children using just key words and images to explain the different elements of the project, and a written prompt sheet for the older children and adults. However, the older children and adults tended to refer to the children's Information Sheet rather than their own, and for later meetings, I relied on this to explain the project, although the written versions were still given to the adults for reference. Using this experience, I used the simplified, one page, children's interview schedule for all of the interviews with family members, which enabled them to cover all of the different topics, with minimal prompting from me. The project shows how open interviewing can be used with a combination of other methods to support people to identify and foreground the issues that are important to them, and to create an interrupted narrative of their engagement with music, playing instruments, listening to music, and what music meant to them.



Examples of where Open Interviews have been used in social science research

Evaluation of a GP Fellowship Scheme in Public Health, UK

Researcher: Prof. Jude Robinson, The University of Glasgow

I first used open interviews whilst researching with General Practitioners (GPs) who were undertaking postgraduate training in public health. The pilot scheme was funded by the then Manchester Deanery, now part of the North West School of Public Health, and they wanted to understand the value of the course to the GPs and how it might influence their medical practice. I designed a project to span their year of study, involving one initial face-to-face interview with each participant soon after the start of the course, to be followed up by 4 interviews that could be face-to-face or by telephone.

Open interviews were used as the GPs had already indicated that there was little time in their working days for any additional tasks, and we agreed that I would design an interview schedule that would require no more than 30 minutes for them to complete and send it to them in advance via email so that they could reflect on their responses. To use the time efficiently in the first interviews, I asked them use the interview schedule as a guide and to talk about the issues that were the most important to them in the time they had, and I just listened and audio-recorded what they said. The goal was to ensure that the limited time was spent on their responses, rather than my asking questions. Despite their concerns over time, all the GPs became absorbed in the topics and spoke for nearly one hour. From this I learned that spending time editing down the number of topics to allow for a shorter 30-minute interview meant that each

point was covered in more depth over an hour, suggesting that a less crowded schedule was conducive to reflection. I was also aware that concerns over time could be a way of expressing concerns around other issues: that the GPs didn't want to commit an hour of their time to talk about things that might not be of interest to them. By streamlining the encounter to focus only on directly relevant issues and allowing them time to speak, they became committed to their narrative and spent longer than they had anticipated discussing the issues.

It became increasingly hard to schedule the follow-up telephone interviews with GPs, and those telephone interviews that were arranged were often cancelled at late notice. I didn't want to run the risk of doing short interviews with little depth and meaning or missing interviews with some respondents, so I decided to go back to the original design and ethical approval to work out how I could be more responsive to their working lives. With their agreement, I sent an email with the questions embedded in the text and attached as a Microsoft Word Document. They were asked to print the questions with their typed or written responses and post them back to me using recorded delivery. However all but one of the GPs decided to respond directly to the email, writing their responses under each question, and emailing it back to me. Only one took part in a telephone interview at this stage. As the questions were about their working lives there was no confidential or personal information in the emails, and so for the next round of



interviews, I offered them the flexibility to decide whether they would prefer to complete the next interviews via email, telephone or face to face. All elected for the email option and responded within three days of my initial request. The additional advantages were that the responses were typed and so did not require transcribing. The difference was that all the GPs wrote in complete sentences and had probably edited and refined their accounts, perhaps over time, to arrive at the

final, detailed and highly articulate versions they had sent to me. While these are different data from naturally occurring speech in real time, and require careful reporting to ensure that the readers understand how the account was produced, it did enable the respondents to say exactly what they wanted to say, and reflect on the words and phrases that best conveyed their meaning, and in this way it was empowering.

Where else could Open Interviews be used?

Time is a precious commodity for many research participants and open interviewing can be used in many different situations with varied populations. They have been used successfully for interviewing people in professional contexts; the disclosure of questions in advance as part of the process of informed consent is believed to reassure potential participants of the nature and line of questioning and allays any fears that they could be 'tricked' into responding to questions that could damage their or their organisations' professional standing.

The topic guide also can be shown to line managers or others who may act as gatekeepers to others' participation in organisations to reassure them of the line of questioning, and that the participant will have absolute discretion and control over their responses. The limitation of the method is that it does rely on the ability of the participants to read and understand the topic guide you produce and so may not be suitable for people with visual impairments or people who have difficulties in reading, unless designed with visual accessibility in mind.

Top tips

1. Clearly communicate the purpose of the interview to participants. Open interviews are a deceptively simple method but they require a lot of thought and planning. It is particularly crucial to make sure you clearly communicate the purpose of the interview to participants beforehand, using a one-page summary.
2. Allow for flexibility. Be sure to allow yourself the flexibility to adapt your approach if it does not seem to be working. Perhaps you need to change the medium through which you are conducting your interview, maybe communicating the purpose of the researching using photographs and pictures might be more appropriate than text alone.

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Further reading

- Article on the *In Harmony* project: The use of Participatory Methods
- The End Is Where We Start From: Communicating the Impact of a Family Music Project to Wider Audiences
- Understanding pressures in general practice
- Emancipatory Research

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