



## Interviewing Techniques

### Interviewing Skills

A good interview that elicits rich data requires preparation and a good deal of skill in execution. An interviewer needs to learn how to:

- 1) Establish rapport with a wide range of people
- 2) Gather knowledge of the subject
- 3) Elicit information

#### **1) Establish Rapport**

Establishing rapport with the subject means creating a fluid, easy back and forth conversation with a free flow of information, avoiding conflict or discomfort of any kind.

To do this, the interviewer does their best to help the subject be comfortable speaking about personal experiences and thoughts, as well as some of their interpretations. Despite the formality of the setting and the fact that the interviewer is usually a stranger, we work hard to achieve this comfort.

Rapport is often culturally specific and will depend on the local group and society in which the research is occurring. The interviewer needs to know enough about the local culture to have a sense of what is acceptable, polite behaviour.

What are the boundaries of civil exchange? And what words and actions communicate that respect? These as well as the kinds and degrees of expected deference will vary by groups, organizations, and national cultures.

The interviewer should think about establishing rapport as a process of moving from uncertainty and apprehension to exploration, where the interviewer and the subject are engaging in a mutually cooperative and developing relationship.

It's important to keep in mind that uncertainty marks the beginning of all interviews, so that the interviewer remembers to develop strategies to quickly move through the opening moments.

For the respondent, the uncertainty could be a minimal concern or a confusion about why the researcher wants to speak with them, or whether they even have any information that could be of use, or if this is going to be unpleasant or a waste of time.

The respondent might also be worried about how the information will be used, that the researcher is misleading them, or could potentially use the information to evaluate or harm them in some way.

It is absolutely essential to understand that most responders will be thinking about all these possible risks. Thus the interviewer needs to have prepared in advance statements and descriptions designed to resolve the interviewee's natural hesitancy and skepticism.

Although the researcher will have given a great deal of thought and planning to these opening exchanges and explanations of the project that should calm the interviewee's anxieties, the researcher herself could also be feeling uncertainty about how the interview will proceed,



whether the respondent will cooperate and provide useful data, their skills are insufficient, or that the experience is stressful for the respondent.

The easiest and most direct way to establish a relationship is to get people talking in an easy, relaxed way. The interviewer can do this by asking simple questions that are both easy to answer and sufficiently interesting that the person wants to continue the conversation.

This comes from a thoughtful interview protocol design that has focused on creating a good opening and questions to overcome apprehension and encourage engagement.

## **2) Knowledge of Your Subject**

Successful interviewers must also command a degree of expertise about the subject matter and perhaps the particular person they are studying.

Being an expert, however, does not mean that the interview is an opportunity for the interviewer to perform or display her command of knowledge, rather, indicating gently and subtly that the interviewer knows something of the topic is another way of showing respect.

This can be done by asking a carefully prepared question that shows some knowledge of the subject, or the interviewee's role or job. For example, if you were interviewing an elementary school teacher, you might ask questions about the kinds of support available for developing classroom activities for children of varying abilities. This would indicate that the interviewer understands some of the challenges classroom teachers face, and that school systems vary in their support of teachers.

The interviewer has taken the time to prepare and is not just using the respondent for her own purposes to collect information that she does not take the time to collect in other ways. An interviewer who displays no knowledge of the person or field being studied is insulting the people who have given their time to the project.

Of course, some interview studies are focused on very technical information, and here, the interviewer will have to be ready with some equally complex questions, based on extensive independent research beforehand.

Showing the respondent that you have done your due diligence to learn about them and their area of expertise before taking up their time is a show of respect.

These shows of respect are not only crucial for establishing rapport, but will also help a respondent feel that they can speak more openly and deeply about the issues raised in the interview.

## **3) Elicit Information**

A solid foundation of knowledge about the research topic is crucial for eliciting rich information through the conversational interview. It allows interviewers to probe beyond surface responses, to engage with the respondent in more detail, and to navigate uncomfortable and controversial subjects.



Knowing the details about a topic encourages the respondent to share even more specific examples and experiences, as they feel they are with someone who understands the context, the circumstances, the challenges, and opportunities that they are engaged with.

Expertise and subject matter familiarity also helps the interviewer to identify counterfactual accounts, alternative normative assessments, and interpretations to those the respondent is offering. With knowledge of the alternatives, the interviewer can press for more information and different interpretations from the respondent, asking for not only what they agree, but maybe things with which they disagree.

In this way, the interviewer is creating more and different stimuli for the interviewee to respond to.

### **Cultural Norms in an Interview**

When people encounter strangers, each comes with ready-made ideas, points of view, and sets of assumptions that they bring to almost all interactions with others.

These tool kits for social exchange normally vary with respect to the familiarity of the people with whom you are engaging: one set of behaviours and languages with members of your family and close friends, another set for people with whom you interact at work or in professional settings, and yet another for encounters with strangers, again depending on where you encounter these people – at work, on the street, or in their home.

In the normal course of events, people are likely to hear and repeat all sorts of ideas about who are good, reliable, decent people and about whom one should be wary. Research has shown that people tend to be attracted to and respond positively to others like themselves. We call this homophily and it can occur on the basis of gender, language, race, ethnicity, social class or any other possible characteristics, such as sharing interests in sports or music.

Skilled interviewers need to be aware of these common social tendencies and take precautions to help respondents to be comfortable, especially where demographic or other social differences might impede an open conversation.

Research has shown for example, that interviews between members of different races are less open, forthcoming, and detailed than when both interviewer and interviewee are persons of the same race. Similarly, studies have shown that women interviewing women, or men interviewing men, produce richer, more detailed, nuanced accounts than when interviews take place across genders. A researcher will want to take this information into account when planning data collection strategies.