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PRACTICAL TIPS AND GUIDELINES: CONDUCTING FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS (AND EVEN FOCUS GROUPS)

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Introduction

The interview process is, to some extent, an art form but it is also based (or should be) on scientifically grounded theories and methodologies. In my judgment, a good theoretical and methodological background is extremely important to allow us to generate the knowledge, expertise, and skills to carryout face-to-face interviews. However, hands-on experience is instrumental. It is through the actual interview process that we will polish and fine tune our skills, develop new interview strategies and abilities, and learn to establish an interactive process and the "connection" between interviewer and interviewee that is essential to generate a comfortable and stimulating environment. Experience is indeed the best "teacher" allowing us to identify our interview skills, strengths, and weaknesses. Further, if we are reflective enough, we should learn from our mistakes thus allowing us to improve the quality and results of the interview process.

In order to facilitate and enhance the interview process, in the following section, we provide a number of practical guidelines and tips (based on observation and experience, including my own mistakes). This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of tips and ideas. Further, many of these tips are not original and they may appear to the reader to be "obvious" or "common sense," until we discover (after completing the interview) that we committed some serious mistakes which may impact the outcome of our research. It is noteworthy that the following issues are not necessarily listed chronologically or in order of importance (although we have tried to do this as best as possible). Thinking about these issues before, during, and after the interview process, will allow us to generate a methodology that is systematic, uniform (as best as possible), and that will enhance the interview process. That being said, as with all types of art forms, creativity and critical thinking is an important part of the interview process.

Before proceeding with a discussion of the practical tips and guidelines, we should emphasize that there is no such thing as a "perfect" interview; we are either very satisfied or very dissatisfied (or somewhere in between) with the interviews we conducted; we should obviously aim for the former. Although there are a number of variables that may impact the outcome of the interview process and our level of satisfaction, the interview team has a significant impact on the final outcome. Our aim or primary goal should be to generate an interview that meets that highest scientific and methodological standards, that will allow us to provide answers to our research questions (whether we like them or not), and that will take us a little bit closer to that "state of perfection."

Practical Tips and Guidelines

1. In the process of scheduling interviews, you should follow-up with the potential interviewees with a formal letter which reiterates the goals/objectives of the interview and the day, time, and location where the interview will take place.

2. Once the interviews have been scheduled, you should confirm the day, time, and location of the interview about two to three days before it is scheduled to take place. It is somewhat disconcerting and frustrating to travel (sometimes hundreds of miles) to find that the interviewee did not show up. Although we cannot control this problem completely, the communication process will help us alleviate or avoid this situation.

3. Generate a to-do list and/or a list of the materials and supplies that you should have with you during the interview process (e.g., survey instrument, consent forms, recorders, plenty of tapes or CDs (if still using "older" technology), batteries, extension cords, pencils, maps and directions for the places that you will be visiting, contact information for the participants, etc.). Go through the checklist every time, before departing for the interviews. When you start relying on your memory or recollection of what you should take with you that is when you start leaving essential materials and supplies behind.

4. Ensure that you have the most recent (up-to-date) copies of the interview instrument and the consent form. It can be quite depressing to discover that you used the incorrect version of the interview instrument after the interview was completed, not to mention the impact that it may have on your research results and the overall project.

5. Before you start the recording process (see below), make sure that you have the consent of the interviewee to do so. This should also be clearly stated in the consent form.

6. All interviewees must sign an informed consent form. The interviewer should discuss the content of and the function of the consent form and its implications for the interviewee. You should provide an additional copy of the consent form (which also contains contact information) to the interviewee so that he/she may contact you in the future, if necessary. The consent form should have been reviewed and approved by the university's committee that focuses on the protection of human subjects in research.

7. The goals/objectives of your research project should be explained to the interviewees before the interview begins. This information should also appear in the consent form.

8. The research team participating in the interview process should consist of two persons, the facilitator (who will be conducting the interview) and the recorder (who will be responsible for the recording equipment, taking notes, and following-up on issues that they believe are important).

9. Before starting the interview, all the equipment that will be used must be in place and ready to record (if you are recording). Prior to and throughout the interview process, you should ensure that the equipment is indeed recording. One of the most terrible feelings is to notice that the equipment was not recording (oops!), when you have already concluded the interview.

10. Have a backup recorder and make sure that another person (not the facilitator) is taking detailed notes.

11. If recording, it is extremely important that all participants are talking loud and clear. If the facilitator or the recorder (person taking notes) is having difficulty in hearing the interviewee, more than likely, it is not being well recorded and will pose serious problems for the transcriber, not to mention your final results.

12. The interviewer should try to keep the language as simple as possible avoiding scientific jargon and concepts, unless the interviewees are experts in that particular area. Sometimes we use language and concepts that might be difficult to grasp and understand. We should note that our sample may be very diverse with different levels of education and varying language ability and reading and writing proficiency.

13. During the interview process, we should avoid providing/stating our opinions or ideas regarding a particular subject or issue. When the interview is over, you can address some of these issues (if appropriate), but during the interview, we should circumscribe our role (as much as possible) to asking questions and recording/taking notes.

14. Please note that as an interviewer, our role is not to criticize the interviewee for their opinions or ideas or to call into question their values, beliefs, attitudes or ideas.

15. In the process of asking or trying to elaborate on our questions, we sometimes tend to generate answers/examples that actually lead people to provide the same answers that we used as illustrations or examples. Our responsibility should be to state the questions as they appear in the interview instrument (not our interpretation of the same). If the interviewee does not understand or does not seem to understand our question, then we can try to clarify. It this strategy does not work, we can provide some general clues or examples. But if we start asking questions and providing specific examples, we may indeed lead or influence the interviewee to provide a particular answer. Let them provide the original answers.

16. When the answer to a question is not clear or if the respondent did not answer the question, follow-up on the question asked. Sometimes either the interviewee or the

interviewer gets caught up on a side topic and we forget to return to the original question, which remains unanswered. If the question was good enough to include in the instrument, then it should be asked and answered (unless the interviewee does not want to answer the same).

17. Probing is extremely important. Follow-up on answers that do not seem too clear; ask individuals to provide details or concrete examples. Sometimes we just move from one question to the other and do not get sufficient details. Follow-up on ideas/topics/examples that the interviewee refers to during the interview process; these can be extremely important.

18. When asking questions or when following up on a particular issue, avoid asking multiple questions at the same time. On many occasions, the interviewee provides an answer to one question (but to which?). Therefore, during the transcription process and the revision of the transcripts, we cannot decipher what questions the respondents were answering and we notice (a bit too late) that they did not answer all of the questions posed. One question at a time should be a basic rule of the interview process.

19. The interview guide that you are using went (or should have gone) through a series of iterations, changes, restructuring, addition/elimination of questions, etc. In essence, it takes a significant amount of time and effort to develop or design a good instrument. It is also important to note that all the questions and probes included in the instrument have a specific purpose and will allow us to answer a particular research question or issue. Therefore, it is extremely important that you follow the survey instrument unless there is a strong justification not to do so. Some interviewers have a tendency to jump all around the instrument. While on occasions this might be necessary, particularly if the interviewee is providing relevant information pertaining to other sections of the instrument, this generates a number of problems, especially when a series of questions or complete sections are left unanswered.

20. Try as best as possible to stay on track and on the relevant topics (and, again, following the interview instrument). It is common for interviewees to want to provide a variety of information, some of which is relevant and other which is not. Try to bring respondents (in an appropriate and delicate manner) back to the subject matter.

21. If we stay on topic (as best as possible) and follow the instrument (as best as possible), we will limit the interview and the transcription time. It is noteworthy that the longest interviews do not necessarily provide more in-depth/detailed information; sometimes the additional information is not really relevant to the subject at hand.

22. Generally, you should not promise anything to the interviewees in terms of the outcomes of your research, potential findings or discoveries or the impact of the same. Given that we are actually in the data collection phase of our research, we do

not know what findings we will generate or the final implications or impact of our research. We can certainly discuss the goals/objectives of our research and the expected outcomes or potential contributions but do not get carried away.

23. If we promise the interviewees that we will be sending them additional information, a copy of the final report, etc. we should follow-up on this and provide the necessary information in a timely manner.

24. Once the interview is over, the research process continues. Make sure that you do not erase the recording, that you generate a backup, and that the transcription process begins as soon as possible. Once the transcripts are complete, they should be reviewed and evaluated by the individuals conducting the interview (the facilitator and the recorder) to check for omissions, potential mistakes made through the transcription process, etc. Also, the research team should add to the transcriptions additional information, situations that came up during the interview process, specific comments/observations that the research team has, or any important/relevant information that may allow us to better understand what actually occurred during the interview process (remember the importance of...body language!).

25. Once we return to our home institution, we should send a letter of appreciation to the individuals who volunteered their time and participated in our interviews. This is a personal yet professional touch that shows our appreciation for the respondent's time and effort.

In conclusion, the interview process should be maintained as informal as possible and in a comfortable yet professional atmosphere. We certainly do not want the interviewer running through the interview process nor should we push or hurry the interviewees into providing answers. Of course, we should get as much relevant information as possible in a hospitable and friendly environment. We hope that the aforementioned guidelines will facilitate your data collection and transcription process and, consequently, the corresponding analysis and write up. Happy interviewing!