

Designing Effective Interview Questions

Taken from Braun and Clarke (2019: 86-87)

Ask open questions: this is the most important guidance for designing effective qualitative interview questions. Open questions, which avoid yes/no answers and encourage participants to provide detailed responses and to discuss what is important to them, are key.

Try starting questions with phrases like: 'Can you tell me about ...?', 'How do you feel about ...?', 'What do you think about ...?' At the same time, avoid questions being too open and not providing participants with enough direction. For example, from Victoria's lesbian and gay parenting interview study (e.g. Clarke, 2006):

Victoria: Erm I don't know anything about you at all so erm why don't you we start by you saying something about your family and your situation

Mary: Me or Jane ((inaudible))

Victoria: Both of you

Mary: Oh both of us

[...] Mary: Erm what sort of things do you want to know personal things or how long we've been together

Victoria: Well cos I- I don't know if you've got who's got kids or ((inaudible))

Jane: Right we've got five

Ask 'non-leading' questions: you are interested in participants' perspectives, so avoid putting words into their mouths by asking leading questions. Hypothetical questions (Patton, 2002) that invoke other people's views ('Some people think that ...') or imagined scenarios that project into the future or invite participants to view an issue from someone else's standpoint can be a good way of asking about controversial issues.

Ask singular questions: questions that ask about multiple things can be confusing for participants (which part of the question do they answer first?), and you can miss collecting important data because participants only answer one part of the question. For example (from Virginia's research on sex in long-term relationships, Terry & Braun, 2009):

Virginia: Mmm so what were you, what, when you felt bad what was, what sort of things was it, how did it make you feel, like was it worried about the relationship or about him or about yourself or

Ask short questions: long and complicated questions can be confusing for participants.

Don't ask questions with double-negatives: these can also be confusing ('So you're not not getting married?').

Ask clear and precise questions: avoid ambiguity (especially when asking about intimate and sensitive topics such as sexuality); don't assume that participants will share your understanding of widely used and assumed-to-be commonly understood terms (such as 'sex').

Ask linguistically appropriate questions: ensure the wording of questions and use of

terminology is appropriate to your participant group. Avoid using jargon and complex language (you don't want people to feel stupid); also avoid overly simplistic language that leaves your participants feeling patronised. Rubin and Rubin (1995: 19) advise that 'by being aware of your own specialized vocabulary and cultural assumptions, you are less likely to impose your opinions on the interviewees'.

Ask non-assumptive questions: avoid making assumptions about your participants. For example, imagine you are interviewing 'average-sized' women about their feelings about their bodies. If you ask a question like 'Can you imagine how you would feel if you were a size 20?' you indicate that you assume your participant has never been a size 20 – because you ask her to imagine what that would be like. Although such presumptions can potentially be damaging to rapport, and result in poorer data, assuming shared knowledge or asking 'presumptive' questions works sometimes (Patton, 2002). But it should not be done unintentionally. For example (from an interview with a Muslim couple):

Victoria: Mm-hm what about Christmas? What did you do about Christmas with presents and stuff like that buying presents for each other and?

Farah: Erm ((pause)) we don't actually celebrate Christmas Victoria: Oh of course of course you don't then

Ask empathetic questions: avoid questions that overtly or covertly criticise or challenge participants ('You're not into country music are you?'), and questions that can be perceived as threatening: 'why' questions can be interpreted in this way (instead of 'Why do you ...?' try 'What are your reasons for ...?').