- Ask follow-up questions (some of which may be scripted in the interview guide) in order to elicit participants' complete knowledge and experience related to the research topic.
- Probe participants for elaboration of their responses, with the aim of learning all they can share about the research topic.

Document the interview

- Record the interview using an audio (and sometimes video) recorder.
- Take backup notes.
- Observe and document participants' behaviors and contextual aspects of the interview as part of your field notes.
- Expand your notes as soon as possible after each interview, preferably within 24 hours, while your memory is still fresh.

Document participant behaviors

Note if the participant seems distracted, becomes emotional over a particular question or topic, or seems reluctant to discuss a subject area. Also make a note if you suspect the participant is not being truthful and why you think this.

How do I recruit people to interview?

Recruiting participants is often a challenge, for a variety of reasons, including the often delicate nature of working with vulnerable populations; possible stigmatization of participants resulting from affiliation with the study; the high mobility of some populations; participants' concerns about confidentiality; and misinformation, lack of information, fear, or rumors about the study.

The work plan for each site should outline policies and strategies for recruiting participants. However, it is common for realities in the field to necessitate creative revision of these strategies. When developing a recruitment strategy, it can be helpful to consult with local people who are active in or have connections to the study population. They may be able to offer ideas about how to gain access to the population, how best to approach people, and possible obstacles to recruitment.

Why and how would two people co-conduct an interview?

Typically, only one investigator conducts the interview, but sometimes it is appropriate to have two interviewers. For example, when interviews are not being recorded for some reason, an extra interviewer is needed to take notes while the other person conducts the interview. Safety concerns may also call for two interviewers, as may adhering to local norms regarding proper interactions between men and women.

When two field staff are present, they should decide on their roles before the interview. One person should take the role of conducting the interview (interviewer), while the other concentrates on taking notes (note-taker). (The interviewer can also take brief notes.) The note-taker should not interrupt or intervene in the interview unless invited to do so by the interviewer or asked a question by the participant.

Once finished with the questions, the interviewer should ask the note-taker if any points require clarification before the interview comes to a close. Both staff members should then debrief with each other (that is, discuss what happened and what was learned) either immediately after the interview or within a day. The note-taker should take detailed notes during the debriefing. These notes may then be reviewed and supplemented by the interviewer.

Where should I conduct the interview?

Ideally, interviews should be conducted in a private location with no outsiders present and where people feel that their confidentiality is completely protected. Finding such a location may be difficult in some settings, but every effort should be made to protect participants' privacy to the greatest extent possible. One way to do this might be to rent a space in which to conduct interviews. Interviewers who will move among communities will need to find suitable locations on an ad hoc basis. Inviting participants to suggest a location where they would feel comfortable may also be a viable option.

When selecting a location for interviews, be sure to consider local implications of male-female interactions. For example, it would probably be inappropriate for a male field worker to conduct an interview alone with a female participant in her room at a women's boarding house.

How should I present myself to interview participants?

The relationship between the interviewer and the participant begins at first contact, with the participant's first impression of the interviewer based on a variety of factors such as the greeting, manner of speaking, clothing, and body language. All of these should be appropriate for the specific culture and setting and convey respect for the participant. Cell phones should be turned off and placed out of view so as not to imply that the participant's testimony is of secondary importance.

What do I say in the interview?

When conducting an in-depth interview, researchers ask mostly open-ended questions – that is, questions that encourage a detailed response rather than "yes," "no," or one-word answers – to elicit unstructured talk from participants about their experiences and opinions. Later, researchers analyze what participants say for insights into the person's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions.

The questions you should ask during the interview will be suggested or specified in an interview or question guide created in advance by the research team. The interview can be conducted with varying degrees of structure, however, depending on what the project calls for. For example, some interview guides specify the exact questions researchers should ask, along with follow-up questions and probes. Other guides simply contain a list of topics to be covered over the course of the interview, leaving the wording and order of questions up to the individual researchers.

It is common to conduct in-depth interviews with several different categories of people as part of a single study. This often involves a separate question guide for each category. For example, in a study about maternal health practices, in-depth interviews might be conducted with health care providers, pregnant women, and women who have given birth within the last year. Some questions in the three guides may overlap, but each guide will be tailored to elicit information specific to the category of participants being interviewed.

How long should the interview last?

On average, in-depth interviews last from one to two hours. As you begin the interview, consider how much time you will likely have with the participant. Set realistic goals for covering all of the questions in the interview guide accordingly. It is a good idea to record the start and end times of each interview in your notebook. Interviews should be tape-recorded, if possible.