Semi-Structured Interviews – Different Types of Questions

You can use qualitative researchers Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann's nine different types of questions as inspiration for how to ask questions during user interviews.

1. Introductory questions

Questions where your participants can make spontaneous, rich descriptions of a situation or context: e.g., *"Can you describe the last time you…?"*

2. Follow-up questions

Here, you follow up on something the participant has said either by asking about what the participant has just told you or simply by encouraging the participant to carry on with what he/she was saying by nodding, pausing, or saying "mm".

3. Probing questions

With probing questions, you ask participants directly to elaborate on what they were saying: e.g., *"Can you give me an example of that…?"* or *"Can you explain in more detail…?"*

4. Specifying questions

If you feel like you are getting too generalized a description, you can try asking specifying questions – e.g., *"What concretely did you do"* or *"How did that make you feel?"*

5. Direct questions

With direct questions, you introduce topics directly, because you know they are either of interest to your project or based on something the participant has said earlier: e.g., *"Do you have any experience with x video streaming service?"* It is best to wait with direct questions until the *last* part of the interview, so that you give participants a chance to describe their perspective before you introduce your own interests.

6. Indirect questions

If there are questions where you don't want to ask the participants directly about their experiences with something, you can ask them more indirectly: e.g., *"Do you think other people sometimes find the user interface difficult?"* The answer can reflect both the participants' own experiences and how they interpret the experiences of others, so you should be careful how you interpret their answers to any indirect questions.

7. Structuring questions

You use structuring questions, when you want to change the topic of the conversation or to get back on track if the interview has gone too much off topic. In that case, you briefly acknowledge that you have understood what the participant is saying and then say—e.g.—*"let's move on to…"*

8. Silence

When you conduct an interview, try not to fear pauses in the conversation. Leaving a bit of quiet time after your participants answer allows them to think and follow up with additional information. How quiet you can be is a balancing act, and you shouldn't be so quiet that it makes participants uncomfortable. For example, some interviewees may pipe up with off-topic or tangential points, just for the sake of filling such gaps.

9. Interpreting questions

You ask interpreting questions to ensure that you have understood a participant's answer correctly or to prompt him/her to elaborate. An example of an interpreting question could be this: *"Am I right in understanding that you feel that…?"*

Source:

Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. SAGE Publications, 2009

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