

# Unstructured Interview

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## The Interview Method

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Saul McLeod, published 2014

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Interviews are different from questionnaires as they involve social interaction. Unlike questionnaires researchers need training in how to interview (which costs money).

Researchers can ask different types of questions which in turn generate different types of data. For example, closed questions provide people with a fixed set of responses, whereas open questions allow people to express what they think in their own words.

Sometimes researchers use an interview schedule. This is a set of prepared questions designed to be asked exactly as worded. Interviews schedules have a standardised format which means the same questions are asked to each interviewee in the same order.

Quite often interviews will be recorded by the researcher and the data written up as a transcript (a written account of interview questions and answers) which can be analyzed at a later date.

The interviewer must ensure that they take special care when interviewing vulnerable groups, such as the children. For example, children have a limited attention span and for this reason lengthy interviews should be avoided.

Also the language the interviewer uses should be appropriate to the vocabulary of the group of people being studied. For example, the researcher must change the language of questions to match the social background of respondents' age / educational level / social class / ethnicity etc.

It should be noted that interviews may not be the best method to use for researching sensitive topics (e.g. truancy in schools, discrimination etc.) as people may feel more comfortable completing a questionnaire in private.

Interviews take many forms, some very informal, others more structured.

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## Structured Interview

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This is also known as a formal interview (like a job interview).

The questions are asked in a set / standardized order and the interviewer will not deviate from the interview schedule or probe beyond the answers received (so they are not flexible).

These are based on structured, closed-ended questions.

## Strengths

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1. Structured interviews are easy to replicate as a fixed set of closed questions are used, which are easy to quantify – this means it is easy to test for reliability.
2. Structured interviews are fairly quick to conduct which means that many interviews can take place within a short amount of time. This means a large sample can be obtained resulting in the findings being representative and having the ability to be generalized to a large population.

## Limitations

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1. Structure interviews are not flexible. This means new questions cannot be asked impromptu (i.e. during the interview) as an interview schedule must be followed.
2. The answers from structured interviews lack detail as only closed questions are asked which generates quantitative data. This means a research will won't know why a person behaves in a certain way.

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These are sometimes referred to as 'discovery interviews' & are more like a 'guided conversation' than a strict structured interview. They are sometimes called informal interviews.

An interview schedule might not be used, and even if one is used, they will contain open-ended questions that can be asked in any order. Some questions might be added / missed as the Interview progresses.

## Strengths

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1. Unstructured interviews are more flexible as questions can be adapted and changed depending on the respondents' answers. The interview can deviate from the interview schedule.
2. Unstructured interviews generate qualitative data through the use of open questions. This allows the respondent to talk in some depth, choosing their own words. This helps the researcher develop a real sense of a person's understanding of a situation.
3. They also have increased validity because it gives the interviewer the opportunity to probe for a deeper understanding, ask for clarification & allow the interviewee to steer the direction of the interview etc.

## Limitations

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1. It can be time consuming to conduct an unstructured interview and analyze the qualitative data (using methods such as thematic analysis).

2. Employing and training interviewers is expensive, and not as cheap as collecting data via questionnaires. For example, certain skills may be needed by the interviewer. These include the ability to establish rapport & knowing when to probe.
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## Group Interview

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This refers to interviews where a dozen or so respondents are interviewed together – also known as a ‘focus group’. This role of the interviewer is to make sure the group interact with each other and do not drift off topic.

A researcher must be highly skilled to conduct a group interview. For example, certain skills may be needed by the interviewer including the ability to establish rapport and knowing when to probe.

### Strengths

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1. Group interviews generate qualitative data through the use of open questions. This allows the respondents to talk in some depth, choosing their own words. This helps the researcher develop a real sense of a person’s understanding of a situation.
2. They also have increased validity because some participants may feel more comfortable being with others as they are used to talking in groups in real life (i.e. it's more natural).

### Limitations

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1. The researcher must ensure that they keep all the interviewees details confidential and respect their privacy. This is difficult when using a group interview. For example, the researcher cannot guarantee that the other people in the group will keep information private.
  2. Group interviews are less reliable as they use open questions and may deviate from the interview schedule making them difficult to repeat.
  2. Group interviews may sometimes lack validity as participants may lie to impress the other group members. They may conform to peer pressure and give false answers.
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## The Interviewer Effect

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Because an interview is a social interaction the appearance or behavior of the interviewer may influence the answers of the respondent. This is a problem as it can bias the results of the study and make them invalid.

For example, the gender, ethnicity, body language, age, and social status of the interview can all create an interviewer effect.

For example, if a researcher was investigating sexism amongst males, would a female

interview be more preferable than a male? It is possible that if a female interviewer was used male participants may lie (i.e. pretend they are not sexist) to impress the interviewer, thus creating an interviewer effect.

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## Design of Interviews

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First you must choose whether to use a structured or non-structured interview.

Next, you must consider who will be the interviewer, and this will depend on what type of person is being interviewed. There are a number of variables to consider:

- Gender and age: This can have a big effect on respondents' answers, particularly on personal issues.
- Personal characteristics: Some people are easier to get on with than others. Also, the accent and appearance (e.g. clothing) of the interviewer can have an effect on the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee.
- Ethnicity: People have difficulty interviewing people from a different ethnic group.

### **How to reference this article:**

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