Interviewing

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Interviewing

Introduction

This chapter covers aspects of the interviewing process in CBQR, including selecting participants, writing questions, identifying an appropriate interview method, and conducting the interview. The chapter also reviews different types of interviews researchers might use within their study, including individual interviews and focus groups.

Learning Goals

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Identify different types of qualitative interviews, and determine when and how they might be used in a community-based qualitative research (CBQR) study.
2. Create and develop interview guides for various types of interviews, including individual interviews and focus groups.
3. Explain how to prepare for various types of interviews, and identify approaches used by researchers to conduct interviews.
4. Describe the role of the researcher within interviews, and discuss how to elicit additional information from interviewees through follow-up questions.

Types of Interviews

Interviews are a primary way of obtaining information in all qualitative research, and they are especially important within community-based qualitative research (CBQR) studies as they enable researchers to gather pertinent background information on the community and particular institutions that might not be accessible via other means. Community leaders often possess a storehouse of information and knowledge that has not been published elsewhere. Furthermore, individual and group interviews can help researchers delve into the particulars of specific activities and events and probe participants' perspectives on certain issues and concerns. This section reviews some key types of interviews used in CBQR and how they might contribute to the construction of knowledge within the study. Interviews are important within qualitative research because they provide insight into participants' behavior, perspectives, and attitudes and emphasize the telling of stories and elicitation of rich narratives. Irving Seidman (2013) describes interviews as possessing "an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9).

Formal and Informal Interviews

Interviews within CBQR studies can take place formally or informally. Formal interviews are scheduled interviews usually occurring face to face and using an interview guide; informal interviews can be more impromptu and emerging from regular interactions with community members and research participants, and they usually do not employ an interview guide, although a research team might develop some guiding questions to gain insight into community life and practices. There are generally three types of interviews used within research studies: structured, semistructured, and unstructured. **Structured interviews** are used within quantitative studies and survey research, and they rely on a prescribed and standardized interview guide with closed questions and a fixed set of responses, although some open-ended items might be included. Questions are all asked in the same order and in the same manner, and there is meant to be no opportunity for interviewees to veer from the guide or share the details of particular experiences and viewpoints. In contrast, **unstructured interviews** do not make use of a guide, and they may only have areas or topics for discussion, such as "family life," "education," "community," or "work." Questions are meant to emerge from the experiences of interviewees, and they are developed and posed within the context of the interview. These sorts of interviews are appropriate for life history interviews with participants and when researchers might be interested in gaining broader insight into the background of the community and experiences of participants.

Semistructured interviews use an interview guide but one composed of open-ended questions that allow for interviewees to share and narrate distinct experiences related to the research topic or focus. Follow-up questions may be asked that are not part of the initial interview guide, thus, providing the opportunity for questions to be generated that build on the unique perspectives of research participants, as well as for the research to be taken in new and unexpected directions. Interviews using a semistructured guide are the most common in qualitative research studies, and they are a key way to gather information within CBQR projects.

Interviews in CBQR studies usually occur face to face as this is often the best way to build rapport with participants; because interviews in community-based studies often take place within the community, they can also be great opportunities to learn about community life and practices. However, there might be some occasions when a telephone interview is more convenient, although this should only be used if a face-to-face interview cannot be arranged. Gestures and other cues, which often suggest interviewees' frame of mind or viewpoints on an issue, are inaccessible over the phone. Increasingly, interviews within qualitative research studies are also occurring in online environments, such as through e-mail or via video chat. Although these methods can be essential for researchers conducting research from afar, or who cannot access a location or participant, they are not recommended for CBQR studies, except as a form for conducting follow-up interviews. The sections that follow review types of interviews that can be conducted formally or informally by using unstructured or semistructured interview guides.

Background and Foundational Interviews

In the initial stages of a study, background and foundational interviews with community leaders can serve an important function and provide essential historical and background information on the community and particular institutions. In some cases, this information can help furnish a direction for the study especially when researchers are beginning the project with a broad area of interest rather than with a specific research focus. Much of the information provided in these interviews might not be published or available elsewhere, and thus, it can be integral to gaining information for the study.

Specific content that might be covered in background interviews might include the history of a particular organization or community or an overview of an organization's primary services and projects. Individuals who might be targeted for these interviews could include local politicians and prominent community leaders, executive directors of community organizations, and local historians. These interviews would usually be scheduled as formal interviews, and they use an unstructured or semistructured guide. An unstructured guide would be especially appropriate for interviews aimed at obtaining an overview of the community or a particular organization. Semistructured guides are necessary when researchers are interested in specific issues or want to gather background information on particular projects, incidences, or events.

Individual Interviews With Leaders, Practitioners, and Community Residents

Throughout the project, researchers should be gathering perspectives and experiences related to the topic/issue from a variety of participants. This can be done as part of formal interviews, as well as through informal conversations within research activities. Different from background interviews—where the interview is used to establish foundational information and possibly determine a direction for the study—these interviews are intended to provide insights that can contribute to developing study findings and/or informing the creation of new programs and initiatives. In community-based research projects, it is important to gather multiple perspectives, including those in leadership roles; practitioners, teachers, and individuals who are "on the ground" and responsible for implementing programs and initiatives; and community residents and those who use specific programs or attend particular events.

These sorts of individual interviews are usually formal interviews employing a semistructured interview guide. However, follow-up interviews might take place more informally, and questions could potentially be posed over the phone or via e-mail. Content that might be covered includes individuals' familial, community, and professional experiences as a way of better understanding community issues and concerns. Interviews would also focus on eliciting participant perspectives on specific issues.

Focus Groups

During a study, it can be helpful to bring together groups of particular individuals for a focus group. This allows for the sharing of common or divergent experiences and discussion of key issues. Focus groups can be particularly useful when researchers are interested in gathering perspectives from a large number of participants in a short time or when it is difficult to set up individual interviews. Focus groups are also appropriate when researchers are interested in fostering discussion and debate around particular issues or topics. Groups can comprise homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings. In **homogeneous groups**, participants are grouped because of a common characteristic, such as age, gender, professional role, or membership in an organization, and help researchers tap into group norms and practices. For example, a researcher might be interested in exploring youth perspectives on civic engagement and community involvement in a Latino/a community, and convene a group of students 16 to 20 years of age attending a local alternative high school that promotes community involvement. **Heterogeneous groups** bring together participants who might vary on a specific characteristic and can facilitate debate across groups and characteristics. For example, a research team might want to explore the issue of food deserts and insecurity from various age perspectives to get a sense of generational issues related to access to food and nutritional practices.

Focus groups are generally organized as formal interviews as they often require prior planning and coordination. They usually use a semistructured interview guide and require a facilitator, and sometimes an assistant, who starts off asking central questions and then probes to elicit additional information and encourage discussion and debate.

Panels

Panels are similar to focus groups, but they entail direct presentations by three to five participants, in possession of knowledge or experiences related to the topic, to a group of researchers, who then ask follow-up questions and engage in discussion. Panels are particularly appropriate for undergraduate and graduate classes assigned to conduct community-based research. They can be a great opportunity to provide introductory information to a research group to identify key concerns related to a specific issue and/or sector of the community. For example, in a summer research CBQR course that I teach, I regularly organize a panel of youth from an alternative high school in the community. One year, the presentations and discussion focused on youth civic engagement; another summer, the emphasis was on postsecondary transitions to college and work. Discussions allowed graduate students to gather information related to their projects and to refine their research focus.

In planning panels, researchers should target individuals who have key experiences and knowledge related to the topic, instructing each participant to present more generally about his or her background and experiences for 10 minutes, and then allowing for discussion and more targeted questions. Researchers should prepare two to three questions, but they can also ask questions in response to information shared by panelists. Panels can bring together those who have fairly similar experiences or roles, such as the youth panel described earlier, or might involve individuals with varying roles on a project or initiative, such as teachers, youth, and staff involved in a local sex education initiative. These panels, as well as focus groups, can also help identify individuals you might want to interview individually and more in depth.

CBQR studies often make use of multiple interviewing formats and approaches throughout the course of the study to gain insight into the central phenomenon or topic. For example, background interviews with community leaders and panels comprising community youth could be employed at the beginning of a study to gather information and develop a more specific focus; later, individual interviews with particular participants and focus groups will help researchers identify important perspectives and issues related to this focus. Throughout, informal interviews with participants can help researchers follow up with particular participants and expand on experiences and clarify viewpoints. The following sections provide researchers with more detailed information on how to prepare interview guides and conduct various types of interviews.

Writing Interview Guides and Questions

As mentioned, many interviews in qualitative research use a semistructured interview guide. These guides include mostly open-ended questions, allowing for follow-up questions and probes that are not on the guide but generated in response to participants' experiences and narratives. This section provides guidelines for writing and generating questions for individual interviews and focus groups, as well as include some sample guides.

Semistructured interview guides include a list of guiding questions to be asked during the interview to ensure that researchers are gathering useful information across participants throughout the study. For the most part, interview questions should be aligned with a study's research questions, although there may be background questions and follow-up questions that do not directly relate back to a particular research question but provide important contextual information to the study or take the study in new directions. Although there is flexibility entailed in all qualitative research studies, and particularly in CBQR projects, interview guides provide an essential structure for the interview, as well as help researchers stay on task within the interview. Although each interview is unique and based on the distinct experiences of participants, it is important that studies obtain some common information across participants to identify patterns and themes during the analysis phase.

Interview guides in qualitative studies should predominantly comprise **open-ended questions**, which cannot be answered with a yes/no answer (these are referred to as closed questions). They should be questions that elicit extended descriptions of particular experiences and perspectives rather than one-word responses. They often begin with broad "Tell me about . . . " questions as a way of drawing out narrations from participants, and then they include more specific follow-up questions that focus on the particulars of experiences or on helping participants define or describe key concepts, beliefs, and practices. The questions should avoid leading the interviewee down a particular narrative pathway, which may seem an obvious point, but it can be difficult to remove our biases and assumptions from questions. For example, a question such as "Don't you think group learning is the best way to teach youth?" obviously contains an assumption about the best pedagogical approaches (and is a yes/no question). However, a question/prompt that may seem open-ended, such as "Talk about food deserts as the biggest problem in the community," also contains a central assumption about the role of food deserts, which may or may not be shared by the interviewee. Within the interview, it is important that perspectives and viewpoints originate with the interviewee rather than be suggested or identified by the interviewer. A researcher can also lead the interviewee by only focusing on one facet or property of an experience. For example, it is fine to ask participants to identify their favorite aspect of a particular experience, but this should be followed up with a question that asks them to share a less favorite feature or something that they would improve and change. Sometimes, it can be difficult for participants to identify less favorable elements of an experience or program particularly if they believe the interviewer might have a personal stake in the program or there are power differentials between researchers and interviewees. For example, when I have interviewed youth about what they would change at their school, some have seemed reticent and reluctant as they identify me as a teacher, although I am not a teacher at their school. In these cases, I ask participants how they would prepare someone about to attend the school. This can provide insight on what they find as valuable, or less valuable, about the school or program without interviewees feeling like they are being critical or disparaging of the interviewer.

Furthermore, questions that focus on concrete and particular instances and examples are more likely to yield detailed descriptions than general questions. For example, “Tell me what you like about your job,” may be used to start off a discussion about an interviewee’s professional role, but this should be followed up with “Describe a project at work that was particularly enjoyable for you” or “Describe a day at work when you felt especially successful.” Other ways to obtain specific details about a particular event would be to ask participants to pretend they were being followed by a video camera. Questions that ask how participants define particular concepts or offer exemplars can also be useful in generating knowledge and perspectives on topics central to the study. For example, a study on community/civic engagement would want to ask all participants to provide their definition of a community; a project exploring community food insecurity and health issues might ask participants to describe what it means to be a “healthy person.”

For questions that aim to identify more abstract values and beliefs, it can be helpful to ask participants hypothetical questions or to create an ideal exemplar or model. For example, rather than ask young parents what their educational philosophy is, I often ask them to create their “ideal teacher,” one they would want for their child. Researchers interviewing program directors and staff at a health program could ask them to imagine their ideal health education program or ask them to imagine they were in charge of a fully funded new health education program. In community-based qualitative studies, researchers are often interested in the roles and positions that participants play in a setting and in the tasks, activities, and responsibilities associated with these roles. Interviewers might ask participants to describe a typical day or their morning routine. Or they could ask participants to offer a job description that includes tasks and responsibilities. See Figure 5.1 for a summary of types of interview questions.

Figure 5.1 Interview Question Examples

- Tell me about . . .
- "Spectrum" questions: What is your favorite thing about your community? What is your least favorite thing about your community? What would you change?
- Typical day/routine: What is a typical day like for you?
- Definition question: What is your definition of technology?
- Recall a specific event (instance): Tell me about the last community project you were involved in.
- "Video camera" question: If I were to follow you with a video camera during the last community event, what would I see?
- Referral/recommendation question: How would you prepare someone to attend this program/school? What advice would you provide someone about to begin a job here?
- Response to prompts/scenarios

It is also essential that the guide not contain "double-barreled" questions or a single question that includes more than one question. For example, questions such as "What do you like most about this community and what do you like the least?" and "How would you describe yourself and how would others describe you?" are questions asking for two different responses. Often, the interviewee gets confused by the double-barreled question and may ask the interviewer to repeat the question or may just respond to one part of the question. It is suggested that multipart questions be divided up into separate questions. They can also be included as follow-ups on the guide.

Questions should also avoid academic jargon unless it can be assured that participants are familiar with particular terms. Such jargon can be off-putting to participants, especially if interviewers have a higher level of education than participants. Some jargon may be appropriate, and even expected, if it is regularly used by participants within the community setting. For example, a term such as *socio-emotional learning* might not be a familiar one for high-school students at a community alternative high school, but it might be one regularly used by members of the social work staff at the school. Similarly, trained staff members at a health/diabetes initiative are likely familiar with specific public health terminology, whereas clients who use the services are less acquainted with these terms. Researchers should also be sensitive to cultural norms and preferences, and they should avoid derogative and pejorative terms. For example, when conducting interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, a researcher would want to avoid the term *ex-con*; when interviewing staff at a juvenile detention facility, interviewees should not use the term *juvenile delinquent* to describe the youth. In the communities within which I research, the term *Latino/a* is preferred over *Hispanic*. Furthermore, in certain professions and fields, there are often agreed-upon terms for specific roles and positions, and researchers should be attentive to these when developing and refining their interview guides. For example, in the early childhood field, there has been much work to professionalize the field and to move away from the notion that teachers are "just babysitting" children; therefore, terms like *caregiver* have been eschewed in favor of *early childcare professional*. Although researchers might believe that they are aware of appropriate and respectful terms, it is advised that researchers show their interview guide to a community insider to gain insight on terminology. A rule of thumb is to avoid language that labels interviewees in terms of a perceived pathology or deficit. However, as the examples shared underscore, certain terms can connote orientations or viewpoints toward particular groups and there are many other subtleties and nuances that play a role in how a particular term or phrase might be received by a participant.

When developing an interview guide, researchers should pay attention to the ordering of questions. I usually recommend beginning an interview with a broad, warm-up question. This often helps "open up" the interview and put the interviewee at ease. It is also helpful to ask the more benign questions toward the beginning of the interview and to save questions touching on sensitive issues or controversial topics for later on in the interview after researchers have developed a sense of trust with interview participants. If questions cover a wide variety of topics, it is suggested that researchers group questions by topic area, such as family, education, work, or community.

Follow-Ups and Probing Questions

Interview guides should also include follow-up questions to elicit additional information from participants; these can be especially helpful for less talkative participants and if interviewees are initially not forthcoming with information. In addition to follow-up questions created for the guide, researchers might need to ask probing questions, which are developed in the moment in response to information shared by interviewees, that can help clarify or expand participants' experiences and perspectives. Some basic types of follow-up and probing questions and their purposes are discussed in this section.

Some follow-up questions are meant to *clarify* information shared by participants. This can be important if an interviewee does not directly respond to the question or if information shared is unclear to the interviewer. Clarification questions can involve the rephrasing of the question or asking the participants to repeat a portion of their response. This rephrasing can assist the interviewee in better understanding the question. In some cases, requesting that participants describe or explain a place, event, practice, or occurrence to the researcher as if they were outsiders, or had never been to the setting, can help clarify the details of responses. This approach can be particularly useful if researchers are insiders to the setting and participants assume shared knowledge and experiences and, thus, do not provide detailed accounts as they might to an outsider.

Another strategy for asking follow-up questions involves getting participants to *expand* their response. This can help provide additional details on an experience and/or flesh out the particulars of an instance or event. The interviewer can very simply ask, "Can you tell me more about that?" as a way of probing participants to share more information related to their response. Often, researchers are also interested in concrete examples and illustrations of a practice or event. Follow-up questions such as "Can you provide an example of a time that happened?" can help participants further *illustrate* beliefs and practices, which helps researchers further understand their meaning or significance.

Throughout the interview, researchers might also need to ask interviewees to *define* particular terms and concepts. These definition questions can help identify and refine the meaning participants attribute to specific concepts. These could include specialized terms, such as *food desert* or *project-based learning*, as well as more general and commonly used terms that could have multiple and various meanings, such as *success*, *community*, or *identity*. An example of a definition question would be as follows: "You earlier stated that you wanted youth attending the program to be successful. What does it mean to you to be successful?" Definition questions could also be part of central questions in an interview guide, especially when researchers want to explore definitions of a concept across participants. For example, a study investigating youth's perspectives on civic engagement could ask all youth being interviewed, "What is your definition of community?" as a way of establishing knowledge and perspectives on a particular concept. Researchers should also pay attention to "**markers**" which Robert Weiss (1994) defines as "a passing reference made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state" (p. 77). These refer to events that the interviewee deems as significant to his or her lives but that might not be directly related to the study topic. For example, an interviewee might mention a recent "breakup" or the death of a loved one or an argument or disagreement with someone in the workplace that may not be immediately significant to the topic at hand but that could provide some insight on issues impacting the mindset of an interviewee. Sometimes these are offered directly, whereas on other occasions, they can be suggested more obliquely. For example, a participant might say that "a lot was going on at that time." Researchers could view this sort of statement as insignificant, or feel uncomfortable about probing further, but these markers can often provide further information about the conditions and context related to the study's phenomenon or topic.

At times during the interview, there may be the need to ask questions that *redirect* the interviewee, especially when the conversation is veering too far off topic. Some questions or statements that may help redirect an interview include "Earlier we were talking about . . . can you tell me more about that?" or "What you are sharing is very interesting, but I want to make sure that we have time for all of the questions on the guide." It is fine during an interview to get a bit off topic and to allow for tangential conversation as it can help build rapport and make the interviewee feel more comfortable; sometimes these sorts of conversations can also lead to unexpected discoveries and take the research in new directions. However, if the interview goes too far off course, researchers may end up not getting all areas or topics addressed.

Another technique that can be helpful when conducting interviews for CBQR studies include the use of **elicitation devices**, such as **mapping exercises**, responses to scenarios or lists, or **freesorts (also called free pilesorts**; Schensul, 1999). For example, a study examining health and food insecurity might ask participants to mark on a map stores where they can obtain nutritious food. Requesting responses to lists of items or scenarios can also be an important way to spur discussion of particular topics. For example, a list of cultural proverbs related to childrearing commonly used among Puerto Rican families might be used to initiate discussion of how they have been used in participants' families. Descriptions of stereotypes of homeless people could be used to explore perspectives on homelessness within a particular community. Freesorts involve the use of index cards on which are written various items or cultural domains that participants can group or sort into categories. For example, a project interested in community housing issues might have participants sort problems with housing, such as cost, safety, or quality, by order of importance. In using such elicitation techniques, researchers should be careful that they are not leading the interviewees down a particular narrative path. Many of the topics and items for lists and freesorts can also be generated from interviews and other forms of data collection, which will make sure that they are salient and relevant to the setting and participants.

Focus Group Guides

When developing interview guides for focus groups, researchers can follow many of the aforementioned guidelines suggested for writing questions for individual interviews. However, focus group interviews are meant to encourage discussion and debate, and thus, questions are often more targeted toward shared experiences rather than individual narratives. Pranee Liamputtong (2011) recommends the following structure for focus group interview questions: Introductory, Transition, Focus, Summarizing, and Concluding (p. 76). Introductory questions help generate knowledge about participants' experiences and perspectives, whereas transition questions narrow the focus and prepare for key questions related to topic/phenomenon of study. These focus/key questions are more closely related to research questions. Summarizing questions restate main points and provide a chance for participants to discuss important issues; concluding questions offer a final opportunity for participants to weigh in on the topic and cover ground not yet addressed in focus group. For example, Liamputtong (2011) suggests that the focus group facilitator end with “Is there anything we didn't talk about?”

Elicitation strategies such as the mapping and freesort activities described earlier can be extremely helpful for generating discussion within focus groups. For example, at the beginning of a session, in a project examining civic engagement, youth could be asked to locate on a map organizations and/or places where they hang out in the community. These could then be placed on a larger map and employed to initiate a group discussion on resources for youth in the community.

The Interview

This section focuses on preparing for and conducting the interview. In particular, it provides helpful information for scheduling and planning interviews, as well as guidelines to assist in the facilitation of the interview. These aspects of the interview process are as important as the design of the interview guide. Proper planning and facilitation—which includes paying attention to participants' demeanor and behavior—can often “make or break” the success of an interview. The first two sections provide information applicable to individual interviews, whereas the last section provides additional guidelines for implementing focus groups.

Preparing for the Interview

Once researchers have developed an interview guide and have selected appropriate individuals to interview, they need to go about scheduling interviews and attending to logistical concerns related to the interview process. These details are not insignificant as aspects such as convenient and comfortable location and proper equipment provide the conditions for a successful interview. The following guidelines can help researchers with individual interview preparation.

Scheduling

Scheduling interviews can be more time-consuming than one might imagine as it requires coordinating busy schedules of interviewers and interviewees. When planning interviews, it is important that researchers open up their schedules so that they can accommodate the availability of interviewees. Since researchers are asking participants to dedicate their time and energy to participate in an interview, they should not be rigid in offering days and times. Especially in community-based research, where participants often work for hectic nonprofit organizations, there may be limited time for conducting interviews. Those working for schools and education programs may not be able to participate in an interview when students are on-site; if interviewing students, researchers may have to interview after a class or program has ended. Some participants may serve in an organization or initiative as a volunteer, and thus they are trying to balance full-time paid employment with volunteer responsibilities. Therefore, researchers need to be sensitive to these issues when setting up interviews.

Location

Another concern when arranging interviews involves the location for the interview. It is often most convenient to conduct the interview at the participant's workplace or primary research setting, such as the school or community-based organization. However, issues such as privacy, noise level, and comfort level must be considered when scheduling interviews. For example, although a participant's workplace seems like a good choice for the interview, if there is no private office available, it would be inappropriate for an individual interview. An interviewee's home can sometimes be a suitable setting for an interview and can provide additional insight into the home life and setting of a participant; however, there may also be interruptions that could disrupt the interview. Thus, although convenience is a major factor in the scheduling process, researchers need to be mindful of potential distractions and/or impediments posed by various settings.

Dress

In planning the interview, researchers should also consider how they might dress for the interview. Although this could be viewed as a somewhat superficial concern, one's attire can play a significant role in developing rapport with an interviewee. For example, professional dress can indicate respect for the interviewee, whereas dressing sloppily suggests a lack of concern or care for the interviewee. On the other hand, in some cases, overly formal attire can make a participant uncomfortable or uneasy, in particular, if researchers possess more power in terms of education level or class. Although a business suit could be appropriate dress for an interview with a local political leader, it would likely make one overdressed for an interview with youth attending an afterschool program, when business casual attire would be sufficient.

Language

The language of the interview should be a language of fluency for the interviewer and interviewee. Although particular researchers may believe that they speak a language well enough to conduct an interview, they should be fluent, as asking follow-up questions and probes requires a sophisticated knowledge of a language and its nuances. Participants may also deem their language skills as “good enough” to complete the interview, but researchers should explain the importance of being fluent and conversant in the target language for the interview. If none of the researchers can conduct interviews in a language of fluency for interviewees, researchers should hire an interpreter to participate in interviews (and keep in mind that researchers would also need to translate interview guides).

Make a Checklist

Once interviews are scheduled, researchers should develop a checklist of supplies and materials for interviews to ensure that they have everything they need to conduct interview. Materials that researchers would want to bring to an interview include a copy of the interview guide, a digital voice recorder or video camera (depending on how researchers plan to record interviews), and copies of the consent forms (projects would usually provide one for the interviewee and keep a signed one for the project, but the particulars are contingent on the institutional review board protocol for the project). Researchers might also want to bring a notebook for taking notes during the interview. Remember to test the equipment before the interview, as well as to bring extra batteries and/or a back-up recording device; there is nothing worse than having to reschedule an interview because of equipment malfunctioning.

During the Interview

Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (2006) exhort qualitative researchers that good interviewing involves “deep listening” (p. 106), and Irving Seidman (2013) identifies listening as “the most important skill” (p. 81) for qualitative interviewing. The same holds true for interviews within CBQR studies. Important qualities to exhibit during interviews include “respect, interest, attention, and good manners” (Seidman, 2013, p. 99). Interviewees who believe that researchers are interested in what they have to say and respect their beliefs and viewpoints will likely be more forthcoming in sharing information. Robert Weiss (1994) recommends developing a “research partnership” with interviewees, which can be initiated by plainly explaining the purpose of research and further developed and maintained by being an engaged and respectful listener.

At the outset of the interview, researchers should emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that all responses are valid. During the interview, interviewers should take notes on important points but also try to maintain eye contact throughout the interview, if culturally appropriate. As noted in the previous section, researchers should also ask for clarification of terms and definitions, as well as be mindful of “markers” (Weiss, 1994, p. 77). However, in asking these follow-up questions, researchers need to be careful not to interrupt the interviewee. When an important term or concept is used, researchers should take note of it and ask the participant after he or she has completed response. If participants are interrupted in the middle of a response, they may lose their train of thought and overlook important details related to a particular experience or event.

Although the interview should proceed like a great conversation, the interviewer should be in control throughout the interview. It is fine to engage in “friendly chit-chat” not directly related to study—particularly before the formal interview begins—as it can help build rapport. However, throughout the interview, the interviewer should be asking the majority of questions, and most of the talking should be done by the interviewee. It is important for the interviewer to be in charge of the interview but not so overly controlling that the participant feels manipulated. Throughout the interview, researchers should carefully manage transitions by preparing the interviewee for shifts to new topics; I usually recommend setting up the interview at the beginning by explaining to the interviewee what areas the interview will cover and then informing participants as the interview moves from one topic to another.

Within the interview, provide participants with sufficient time to collect thoughts and prepare their response. At times, researchers will need to “tolerate silence,” such as awkward pauses (Seidman, 2013, p. 95). Researchers should resist the urge to try to “help out” the interviewee by immediately rephrasing the question or suggesting responses as this can sometimes interrupt their thinking or lead the interviewee. If participants are struggling in their response, grasping for a word or phrase, do not be tempted to finish their sentences or offer a phrase. It is fine to restate the question if they continue to labor; sometimes it is also helpful to repeat an earlier portion of their response. Researchers should also be mindful of any sensitive questions or areas. Some questions might evoke painful experiences or memories for participants; if researchers anticipate some potential emotional areas, they should have Kleenex on hand. If interviewees are very upset, provide them with the opportunity to end the interview. In interviews I have conducted with young mothers, women have recounted horrific instances of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and losing loved ones to gang violence. Unfortunately, these experiences are part of their lived realities and provide insight into issues that need to be addressed within educational and social programs. Researchers need to be careful not to counsel participants or engage in what Seidman (2013) refers to as a “therapeutic relationship” (p. 109). Researchers may need to refer participants to counseling services (and most institutional review boards require that researchers have a list of resources and services on hand for referrals).

When interviewees share their experiences, researchers can react in various ways, and these reactions can influence participants’ further responses. Some qualitative methodologists urge interviewers to remain neutral in the face of participants’ opinions and perspectives so as not to lead the interviewee or convey preference for a particular viewpoint (Seidman, 2013); they view the use of “OK” and “yes” as responses to interviewees as reinforcing their responses, as well as potentially altering them (Seidman, 2013). However, those researchers employing a participatory approach within their projects might share the researcher role with participants and, thus, opt not to remain neutral; in many cases, then, they serve as advocates on behalf of issues important to participants. Especially when participants share painful experiences, it can be helpful to acknowledge these emotions and/or express some sympathy for particular challenges. If interviewees feel as if they are emoting to an impassive and expressionless "brick wall" and not receiving any response from the interviewee, they might refrain from further disclosure. Within CBQR studies, researchers are often playing more of an advocacy role, or they might be members of the community; thus, some sensitivity and/or empathy could be appropriate. I view the neutrality issue within interviews as occurring along a continuum; the level of compassion that is fitting needs to be decided by the researchers and often depends on the topic and the design and purposes of the project.

It is also important to avoid evaluation or judgment of information shared, in particular, when discussing divisive or controversial topics or issues. Sometimes participants might disclose beliefs or opinions that challenge the researcher's thinking or that the researcher disagrees with; in these cases, researchers need to be careful not to pass judgment on participants' beliefs and practices as this could discourage them from being honest and forthright in their responses. Statements that express shock and surprise, such as "Really?" or "You did WHAT?" as well as body language and facial expressions, can indicate disapproval of or disagreement with a particular viewpoint. Researchers are encouraged to keep an open mind throughout the research process and to be respectful of participants' experiences. The goal of most community-based research studies is not to evaluate practices and programs as "good" or "bad" but to understand better a phenomenon or issue from multiple, and often divergent, experiences and perspectives, which may or may not align with those of the researchers.

Another tricky area involves the amount of acceptable self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer/researcher. Within the field of qualitative interviewing, there is no consensus regarding how much a researcher should reveal about his or her experiences and perspectives. Seidman (2013) has discussed the delicate balance that an interviewer must strike in "saying enough about [oneself] . . . to be alive and responsive but little enough to preserve the autonomy of the participant's words and to keep the focus on his or her experiences, rather than [the interviewer]" (p. 98). Weiss (1994) believes that self-disclosure "complicates an interview situation by shifting the respondent's attention to the interviewer and altering the respondent's relationship with the interviewer" (p. 79). In some cases, sharing too much of one's opinion on an issue could bias participants or make them hesitant to share their perspectives. For example, if researchers are interviewing various residents, of different income levels and ethnicities, in a community about housing and gentrification issues, they might not want to reveal their opinions. However, a certain amount of self-disclosure could help build rapport or make the interviewee more comfortable divulging information. When I have interviewed teen mothers, I have often shared my role as a mother of a young child as I believed it might serve to bridge the age gap between us and build a sense of commonality.

Some participants might be interested in the researcher's experiences and ask pointed questions during the interview; if the interviewer avoids or tries to shake off their queries, they may feel a lack of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer. Thus, in some cases, it may be fine to respond to participants' questions when the interview has ended if researchers believe that doing so won't prejudice the interview and compromise study findings.

Ending the Interview and Afterward

Researchers should remain mindful of keeping to time allotted for the interview; if the researcher has told the participant to expect a 45- to 90-minute interview, he or she should not exceed this allocation. Toward the end of the interview, if it seems that there will not be enough time to ask all of the questions, the researcher can ask if the participant can extend the interview or schedule a second interview. If neither of these are a possibility, the interviewer should try to complete as many questions as possible in the remaining time. When the interview has ended, it is important to thank the participant for his or her time and to ask whether the interviewee has any additional questions. I don't recommend turning off the recording device until after the participant has asked any questions as these can often furnish interesting insights related to the study's topic. Researchers should also be sure to obtain current contact information for each participant in case they need to ask additional follow-up or clarification questions or need to set up follow-up interviews or focus groups.

Although some CBQR projects may have funding to compensate interviewees, many projects do not have sufficient funds to provide remuneration for participation in research. Monetary compensation might include a stipend, a giftcard or gift certificate, or a small gift. In projects I have conducted, I have purchased gift certificates at a local café, writing journals, and sweet treats. In addition to monetary gifts, there are other ways to reward participants for their involvement in the study, such as the offering of a service. For example, teachers might appreciate help with curriculum planning or some resources for the classroom. A community-based organization might need assistance with identifying and/or preparing grants for a particular initiative or project. Youth could use support and guidance from researchers in writing personal essays for college or completing the college application process.

After the interview has ended, researchers should listen to the interview as a way of critiquing or evaluating the quality of the interview guide and skills of the interviewer, especially toward the beginning of the study when researchers have just begun the interview process. This can help researchers call attention to occasions when they might have asked better follow-up questions or when they might have been inadvertently leading the interviewee. Often, researchers are unaware they were interrupting a participant or evaluating information shared. Careful listening to each interview before conducting the next interview can help researchers strengthen and improve their skills as they progress through interviews, as well as help researchers refine the interview guide.

In most qualitative research studies, researchers prepare **verbatim transcripts** of interviews. This means completing word-for-word printed renderings of interviews for analysis (which is covered in detail in Chapter 7). Transcripts should be completed as soon as possible after each interview, and sufficient time should be allotted for the transcriptions as they can be time-consuming (allow 4–6 hours per each hour of interview). Tools and resources that can be helpful in transcribing include foot pedals for more precisely rewinding recordings and transcription software that can assist with keyboard shortcuts for rewinding and slowing down recording; although some programs and voice recognition software claim to transcribe automatically, these usually yield sloppy and inaccurate transcriptions. Projects with monetary resources may opt to pay professional transcribers, but researchers should still listen to audiotapes before sending them out because of the aforementioned points about being able to critique interviewing skills. Furthermore, when transcribing interview recordings, one becomes much more familiar with interview data, which will be extremely beneficial in the analysis phase. If completing all of the transcriptions is too onerous and unrealistic for a project, researchers might consider farming some of them out to a professional service but still transcribing a portion of the interviews.

Focus Group Implementation

Many of the recommendations for the implementation of interviews are also applicable to focus groups. However, because the focus group interview involves group facilitation and encouraging debate among participants, some additional approaches for preparation and implementation can be useful to achieving a successful and productive focus group. The following suggestions are related to focus group implementation:

- **Offer incentives**: To ensure that researchers will have sufficient participants for the focus group, incentives should be provided. These could include small stipends, gift cards, or a raffle. For youth, a pizza party can be a great way to incentivize participation.
- **Consider transportation and child care:** Another way to ensure full participation is to provide transportation and/or parking stipends and childcare (especially if researchers are focusing on parents within their research project). If funding is not available for this transportation, researchers should try to convene the focus group in a convenient location. An alternative to providing childcare stipends would be to offer childcare on site (I have found this imperative when conducting focus groups with young mothers).
- **Provide refreshments:** Offering food and/or refreshments can help create a convivial atmosphere and make participants more comfortable. It also provides an additional incentive for participants. Food can be available at the beginning of a session as a way of orienting participants into the session and of allowing for late arrivals; refreshments might also be served as part of a mid-session break.
- **Use nametags or tents:** This is especially important if participants are unfamiliar with one another. Supplying name tags or tents can help participants learn and use each other's names, as well as assist the facilitator in remembering participants' names. It is also helpful to ask focus group members to state their name when they speak as this eases identification of participants during transcription.
- **Sit in a circle around a table if possible:** To encourage discussion, it is crucial to provide conditions that facilitate conversation and dialogue. This includes making sure that participants are facing one another and are close enough to hear other participants. A table is not essential but can provide a steady surface for participants to take notes and a place for researchers to place the recorder/ microphone. Furthermore, a table can sometimes make shy or anxious participants feel less exposed

and vulnerable.

- **Work in pairs:** Because there are a lot of components entailed in setting up and managing an effective focus group, it is recommended that researchers work in at least groups of two. One researcher can serve as the facilitator, while the other can take notes and be in charge of consent forms and recording devices. Having at least two people also helps guard against important details being overlooked. Projects that are being conducted by one researcher only could make use of a graduate assistant or volunteer from a community partner.

The role of the facilitator in a focus group is to help foster dialogue and make sure that all participants get a chance to share their perspectives. It can be detrimental to the group if one particularly strong opinion dominates the discussion and silences other voices. Researchers should explore differences and disagreements *in situ*, or at the time they are being shared, without provoking arguments or conveying preference for a particular viewpoint. Some questions that might be used to promote discussion and make sure diverse viewpoints are expressed include “Does anyone have another experience to share?” or “BLANK seems to think X. Does everyone agree with that? Are there other opinions?” If one person seems to be dominating the discussion and/or interrupting others, facilitators can remind participants of ground rules for focus group.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we learned various strategies for the design, planning, and implementation of individual interviews and focus groups within CBQR studies. Interviews are a central form of gaining information and data in CBQR studies and require careful planning. Whereas individual interviews focus on eliciting rich and detailed narratives and descriptions from participants, focus groups emphasize dialogue and debate among participants on shared and divergent experiences and viewpoints. In addition to developing an interview guide that includes open-ended, nonleading questions, researchers should ask follow-up questions and probes that build on participants’ distinct experiences. “Deep listening” and respect for others’ opinions and perspectives are important qualities for interviewers to possess. Researchers need to ask follow-up questions that can expand and clarify responses and help participants define important terms and concepts.

Key Terms

Elicitation devices 90
Freesorts (also called free pilesorts) 90
Homogeneous groups 84
Heterogeneous groups 84

Mapping exercises 90

Markers 89

Open-ended questions 85

Unstructured interviews 82

Semistructured interviews 82

Structured interviews 82

Verbatim transcripts 96

Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. **Interview guides:** Develop an interview guide for a proposed community-based qualitative research study. Trade your guide with a partner, and check each other's guides for the following:
    a. *Open-ended questions:* They should not be able to be answered with a yes/no or a single word/phrase.
    b. *Free of leading questions:* Check questions for implicit hypotheses or suggested responses.
    c. *Free of academic jargon:* Review questions to make sure that language is clear and will be understandable to interviewees.
    d. *Culturally appropriate terms and language:* Check questions for terminology and labels; take note of any terms that should be changed.
2. **Practice interview:** Conduct a mock interview with a partner. Develop/use a basic interview guide that focuses on educational background or professional experiences. Remember to ask follow-up questions that help clarify and expand responses, as well as define important terms. Each individual should get 10 minutes to ask questions. After the interview, discuss areas of strength, as well as where better follow-up questions could have been asked.
3. **Transcript reflection:** Review a transcript from an individual interview or focus group (either one you have conducted or a research team member). Identify places where the interviewer exhibited strong interview skills, and label them STRONG. Identify places where interviewer could have had stronger skills, and label them IMPROVE. Identify good follow-up questions, and label them STRONG FOLLOW. Identify weak follow-up questions, and label them WEAK FOLLOW. Find markers, and label them MARKER. Circle or highlight insider terms/concepts.
4. **Focus group fishbowl (for classes or research teams):** Assign three to five members of a small group (about six to eight) the following roles: "Gets off topic," "Agrees with everyone," "Interrupts," "Does not share or speak," and "Dominates discussion." Make sure that you have a few group members who have no assigned role; these individuals should just act normally. Designate another individual to serve as the facilitator. Provide a basic interview guide (of about five questions) to the facilitator on a topic that all group members have knowledge of and experience to respond to (for example, for a group of graduate students, questions might focus on experience in a program). The rest of the class or group should observe the focus

group while they go through the questions (allow about 10–15 minutes). Afterward, discuss how the facilitator handled problematic behaviors. Point out successes and where the facilitator might have addressed issues differently. This activity can also be adapted for smaller groups; assign less of the behaviors/roles, and make sure there is at least one member with a "normal" role.

Handout 4

Sample Interview Guides

Sample Interview Guide: Worker at a Community-Based Organization

1. Tell me about your educational experiences.

2. Tell me about some of your work experiences.

3. How did you find out about the program?

4. What are your responsibilities in the program?

5. What types of training did/do you receive? Were there any training materials provided?

6. Describe a typical day for you. What activities are you involved in? If you were to write a job description for your position, what would it include?

7. How do you know if you are successful? Describe a particularly successful moment.

8. What are challenges in this work? Describe a challenging moment, or when you weren't successful.

9. What have you learned from your participation at (name of site)?

10. If you were to describe the program to someone else, what would you say?

11. What are your goals in 1 year? 3 years? 5 years?

Interview Guide for Mentors in an Intergenerational Mentorship Program for Young Mothers

1. Tell me about your educational experiences.

2. What was your first reaction when you discovered you were pregnant? Who did you tell? How did he or she react?

3. What were your experiences as a student-parent?

   a. What were your challenges?

b. What support and resources did you use/receive?

c. Describe a particular memory as a student-parent that stands out.

4. What were your goals when you graduated?

a. Educational?

b. Professional?

c. Personal?

5. Tell me about your activities/experiences since graduating from high school.

a. Educational?

b. Professional?

c. Personal?

6. What challenges have you faced since graduating?

7. Why did you want to become a mentor for other young mothers?

8. What skills do you believe you bring to your role as a mentor?

9. What are your goals as a mentor?

10. Tell me about your work with your mentee. What do you do? Talk about?

11. Describe your mentee.

12. Tell me about an interaction with your mentee that stands out.

13. What have you gained/learned from your experience as a mentor?

14. What have been some challenges of your mentorship work?

15. What changes would you make in the mentorship program?

16. What advice would you provide to other young mothers?

17. What advice would you provide to others interested in mentoring young mothers?

Interview Guide for Youth on Community Engagement

1. What does community mean to you?

2. Describe the community that you identify with the most.

3. What things are you most proud of about your community? The least proud?

4. What do you think about community involvement?

5. What does an active community member look like?

6. What is your first memory of this community?

7. How would you describe the community to someone who has never been there?

8. How do you think outside people perceive the community?

9. Have you been involved in any community projects in the past year?

   a. How were you introduced to community service/civic engagement?

10. If you were in charge of a new community project, what issues/needs would it address? Why?

11. What information do you share with your family/friends about your involvement in the community?

   a. What do they say about your involvement in the community?

12. Tell me about the school's role in your community service?

13. What do you think your community will look like in 10 years?

Questions for Focus Groups With Students in a Community-Based Research Course

1. Please introduce yourself. Include program, degree, and professional role.

2. What motivated you to enroll in the class? How did you find out about course?

3. What did you know about the class before attending? Instructor?

4. Prior to attending the course, what did you know about the community?

5. What do you remember about that first day of the course?

6. What are your strongest memories from the course experience?

7. How was this course different than others you have taken?

8. What did you gain from taking this course?

9. What challenges did you face in taking this course?

10. How could the course be improved?

11. How would you describe the course to others?

12. How would you prepare other students about to take this course?

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