

## Interviewing for Research - Asking the Questions

- Listening skills
  - Eye contact
- Asking questions
  - Open questions
  - Follow up questions/probing
  - Closed/leading questions
- Silences
- Other tips

### Listening skills

A good listener is someone who is interested in what they are being told, and who helps to create a good environment for someone to tell their story. As a listener, you will not only be listening to the substance of what is being said, you will also be aware of the non-verbal messages coming from the interviewee, and you will be listening for when the interviewee is speaking personally or when they are using a 'public' voice, which gives little away and uses safe language.

You should think about the space in which the interview is happening. Is the seating plan going to help or hinder you? Are you going to be free from distractions or interruptions? Can your interviewee see your face clearly (particularly important if you are talking to someone who needs to lip read)?

Adopt an open posture (no crossed arms or slouching), keep appropriate eye contact, and stay relaxed. Look at the two lists below and consider how each element in the lists may help or hinder the interview.

### Verbal Behaviour (What is Said)

- Loudness
- Tone
- Pitch
- Clarity
- Pace
- Silences

### Nonverbal Behaviour

- Facial Expression
- Gaze
- Posture and Position
- Proximity
- Gestures
- Physical Appearance

### Eye contact

The natural reaction of most interviewers when trying to encourage an interviewee to speak is to mutter 'Yes, yes', 'I see', or 'Uh huh', throughout the interview. If you are recording an interview you should try to do this as little as possible so as not to

interfere with the interviewee's voice on the recording. Generally, it is advisable not to do this as it may unintentionally reinforce what the interviewee is saying.

A better method is to maintain eye contact with the interviewee. Non verbal behaviour - nods of the head, eyebrows raising, facial expressions – are excellent ways of keeping an interview moving, as long as they are culturally appropriate.

### Examples of good and bad posture



Good posture



Bad posture

### Asking Questions

'Who', 'what', 'where', and 'when' will help establish time and place, while asking 'how' and 'why' may give you motivation and meaning.

### Ask open questions

Some people will talk fluently with little prompting, but in many situations asking 'open' questions - questions phrased in such a way as to encourage the interviewee to speak in their own words – is the easiest way to encourage people to talk freely.

Rather than ask 'Do you remember the General Strike?'

ask 'Tell me about the General Strike'

Rather than ask 'That must have been terrible'

ask 'How did you feel about that?'

'How' is one of the most useful words to start a question with:

- How did that happen?
- How did you feel?
- How did you do that?

'What' is also useful:

- What happened then?
- What do you think about...?
- What was the best/worst...?

'Why'

- Why do you think...?
- Why did you...?

Be a little careful with 'Why...?' as it may sound accusatory and result in your interviewee becoming defensive.

#### Asking the follow up question, or probing

One of the most difficult things for an inexperienced interviewer to do is to ask a follow up question (often given the rather clinical name 'probing'). Remember that you are trying to get at the meanings and motivations people attach to events, but consider the difficulties in spontaneously voicing all your thoughts and memories in a coherent manner to someone you barely know. As an interviewer you are able to help and prompt the interviewee by indicating that you want to hear more, that you are perfectly happy for her/him to take her/his time and consider what s/he is saying.

To explore a topic further, you can either nod your head and keep quiet, which will usually encourage the interviewee to expand on their point, or ask:

- 'How did you feel about this?'
- 'Was this what you expected?'
- 'Would you tell me more about that?'

You should also try to look behind stereotypes, clichés, and words which may not mean much. Ask people to be more precise and to define the words or terms they are using.

- 'Everybody knows....' *Who is 'everybody', how do they know this?*
- 'It's a challenging job.' *What is meant by 'challenging'?*
- 'We all pulled together...' *In what way? Moral support, practical support, monetary support?*

Asking a hypothetical question may encourage your interviewee to talk more. For example, if someone has had an adverse experience with a health service, you could ask:

- What would you like to have happened?
- Ideally, how would you like to be treated by nurses/doctors?

#### Avoid closed and leading questions:

Closed questions are questions which invite a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Sometimes you may need to ask questions in this way for clarification, but generally it is to be avoided.

- 'Do you remember the General Strike?' (Answer: yes/no)
- 'Is politeness important to you?' (Answer: yes/no)

*How would you rephrase these closed questions to make them more open?*

- *Do you think that was the right thing to do?*
- *Did you feel happy about that?*
- *Is that important to you?*
- *Have you been there recently?*
- *Was it your manager's idea to do that?*
- *Has it changed much over the years?*
- *Were the unions satisfied with that?*

Leading questions are those questions which suggest an answer in the question. Ask a question like this and you may well have your choice of words, rather than the interviewee's, coming back at you in the answer.

- 'Don't you think ...'
- 'Wouldn't you say that....'
- 'That must have been....'
- 'Don't you agree that...'

### Silences

Don't be scared of silences! This may be difficult for inexperienced interviewers to appreciate. At times, we all need a second or two to collect our thoughts, or we may not be sure if the person we are speaking to wants us to continue. Particularly with older people, the pace of the conversation may be slow and the interviewee may pause for thought quite frequently. At such moments (which may seem like ages at the time but are often only a few seconds) it is important that the interviewer keeps quiet and doesn't disrupt the thought processes. A nod of the head will usually encourage the interviewee to continue.

Also, silences may indicate an unwillingness, or an inability, to talk about a subject. Someone talking about war experiences may tell you that they can't describe some experiences, and so won't try; or in one sentence they may skip from one year to another without talking about the intervening period. Family relationships may be revealed as much by what isn't said as what is. Try and be sensitive to these moments; you can always ask if someone wants to talk about a particular subject or not.

## Other tips

*Keep your questions short, incisive, one at a time.*

*Use clear, simple language:* avoid technical or 'academic speak' language.

*Clarify uncertain points:* any words or ideas you don't understand, especially when someone uses clichés or generalisations which don't tell you much.

'Clamping the mangles' on the farm

'Pushing the envelope' in the office

*Don't be afraid to ask,* as that is what you are there for.

*Don't interrupt or butt in.* An interrupted train of thought may never be retrieved. If an interesting point is made, make a note and follow it up at an appropriate point.

*Follow your instincts.* You don't have to stick rigidly to your interview schedule or questionnaire, if an interesting diversion appears – take it!

*Respect people's opinions,* even if you don't agree with them. You may have to bite your tongue at times, but you are able to explore how people's opinions have come to be formed. You should be 'critical but not confrontational'.

*Be aware of tiredness.* It is often said that 90 minutes is enough for an interview but many interviewers will have found a couple of hours can fly by. Generally, but particularly with elderly people, take time for a break if need be and watch out for either or both of you starting to flag.

*At the end of the interview,* ask about anything you feel has been left out, and ask the interviewee if there is anything else they would like to say.