

Conducting an In-depth Interview¹

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Introduction

This paper, the second of a four-part series on using qualitative research for planning and evaluating Extension programs, provides a brief overview of in-depth interviewing, and suggestions for conducting such interviews. Also, a list of further readings that provide you with more detailed information on conducting interviews is included in this paper. The other two papers in the series will focus on observation and case study techniques.

What is an In-depth Interview?

In-depth, qualitative interviews are excellent tools to use in planning and evaluating Extension programs. An in-depth interview is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method that is well suited for describing both program processes and outcomes from the perspective of the target audience or key stakeholder.

The goal of the interview is to deeply explore the respondent's point of view, feelings and perspectives. In this sense, in-depth interviews yield information.

There are key characteristics that differentiate an in-depth, qualitative research interview from a regular

interview. Some key characteristics of in-depth interviews include:

- **Open-ended Questions.** Questions should be worded so that respondents cannot simply answer yes or no, but must expound on the topic.
- **Semi-structured Format.** Although you should have some pre-planned questions to ask during the interview, you must also allow questions to flow naturally, based on information provided by the respondent. You should not insist upon asking specific questions in a specific order. In fact, the flow of the conversation dictates the questions asked and those omitted, as well as the order of the questions.
- **Seek understanding and interpretation.** You should try to interpret what you are hearing, as well as seek clarity and a deeper understanding from the respondent throughout the interview.
- **Conversational.** You should be conversational, but your role is primarily that of a listener. There should be smooth transitions from one topic to the next.

1. This document is FCS6012, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date October 15, 2001. Revised January 2006. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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- **Recording responses.** The responses are recorded, typically with audiotape and written notes (i.e., field notes)
- **Record observations.** You observe and record non-verbal behaviors on the field notes as they occur.
- **Record reflections.** You record your views and feelings immediately after the interview as well.

In essence, in-depth interviews involve not only asking questions, but the systematic recording and documenting of responses coupled with intense probing for deeper meaning and understanding of the responses. Thus, in-depth interviewing often requires repeated interview sessions with the target audience under study. Unlike focus group interviews, in-depth interviews occur with one individual at a time to provide a more involving experience.

Important Skills and Attributes for the Interviewer

A skilled qualitative interviewer should be someone who is:

- a good listener,
- able to notice and react to nonverbal clues,
- flexible,
- open minded, and
- willing to release power and control.

Conducting an In-depth Interview

Kvale (1996) details seven stages of conducting in-depth interviews. They include thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting. Each step will be briefly examined below with strategies for implementation.

1. Thematizing

This is the first stage of the process whereby you clarify the purpose of the interviews and determine what you want to find out. The first basic question is

whether you are using the interview for program planning. For example, you may want to use in-depth interviews as part of the needs assessment process by interviewing key members of the target audience and/or influential stakeholders. Or, your desire may be to use in-depth interviewing to compliment other methods of evaluating your program. Once you have decided on your general purpose, then you can pinpoint the key information you want to gather through the in-depth interview process.

2. Designing

After you determine what you want to know, you must design a way to find it out. A key part of this process is designing an interview guide. An interview guide is a list of questions and probing follow-ups that guide you through the interview. As you prepare this guide, you should anticipate and organize the issues you plan to explore. However, if the discussion warrants it, you must be willing to transition or change directions during the interview. The interview guide helps you stay on track; helps insure that important issues/topics are addressed; provides a framework and sequence for the questions; and helps maintain some consistency across interviews with different respondents.

There are three basic parts of the interview guide: facesheet, actual questions, and post-interview comment sheet. The facesheet is used to record factual information such as time, date, and place of the interview. Also, any special conditions or circumstances that may affect the interview are recorded. Demographic information about the interviewee is noted on the facesheet as well. The actual interview questions, probing questions or statements, and anticipated follow-up questions comprise the second part of the interview guide. Typically, a column alongside the questions is used for observations made during questioning. The final part of the interview guide provides a place to write notes after the interview that detail your feelings, interpretations, and other comments.

3. Interviewing

The actual interview consists of three main parts. The first part involves introducing yourself and the study. It is critical that you establish a good rapport

with the respondent. You also should put the respondent at ease. Your main responsibility is to listen and observe as you guide the respondent through a conversation until all of the important issues on the interview guide are explored. This, of course, is one of the most difficult aspects of the in-depth interviewing process. However, there are some strategies that have been used by researchers to improve the quality of the in-depth interview experience for both the researcher and the respondent. Some strategies include:

- **Active listening.** Listen and rephrase what was said to insure that you completely understand the meaning the respondent intends.
- **Patience.** Do not rush the respondent and allow him/her to speak freely while guiding the conversation to cover important issues.
- **Flexibility.** Be open to slight deviations from the topic, which may require rearranging/reordering the questions or coming up with new questions. If the respondent deviates too far from the topic, then carefully return him or her to the topic at hand.
- **Audio recording.** When possible, audiotape the interview for later reference and increased accuracy. Always ask permission of the interviewee before audio recording. Some researchers even videotape interviews in order to capture both the verbal responses and nonverbal cues -- after receiving the interviewers permission, of course.

4. Transcribing

Transcribing involves creating a written text of the interviews. This step involves bringing together all of your information-gathering approaches into one written form. Thus, you would write out each question and response (verbatim) from the interview using your recorded audiotape and notes including your side notes (observations, feelings and reflections). The side notes are differentiated from the respondent's notes, typically by highlighted text. Study and review the transcription, then denote the important information related to the study.

5. Analyzing

This important step involves determining the meaning in the information gathered in relation to the purpose of the study. You would study the important information and look for themes, commonalities, and patterns to try to make sense of the information. If more questions are raised that need clarity in order to serve the purpose of the study, then another in-depth interview is warranted to examine the issue more thoroughly.

6. Verifying

Verifying involves checking the credibility and validity of the information gathered. A method called triangulation is used as a means of checks and balances (An article on triangulation is available at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>). Basically, one type of triangulation would be to use multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of information. For example, if you are studying outcomes of your Parenting class on improving parental communication with their children. You would interview the parent who attended the training, the children, and the spouse or partner-if applicable. If each one says basically the same thing, then the weight of evidence would be that the information is credible and valid. Another simple way to triangulate would be to have a colleague read the transcripts to see if she/he/she came away with the same overall meaning.

7. Reporting

The final step of the process is to share what you have learned from the in-depth interviews with other internal and external stakeholders. Some reporting could be in the form of a formal written report such as the Report of Accomplishment or published Needs Assessment findings. Others could be oral reports such as at a Board of County Commissioners meeting. Regardless of the means by which the information is shared, the important point is to share it.

Summary

There are a number of ways to collect information for program planning and evaluation. The method you choose will depend on many factors.

This paper has presented the in-depth qualitative interview method that can be used with other qualitative and/or quantitative techniques. Or this method can be used alone if the process is comprehensive enough and inclusive of enough of the target audience.

Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. 2004. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Willis, G.B. 2004. *Cognitive Interviewing: A Tool for Improving Questionnaire Design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Further Reading

Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, I.S. (2004). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Willis, G.B. (2004). *Cognitive interviewing: A tool for improving questionnaire design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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