

## INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES

### 1. Introduction

This chapter contains general guidelines for interviewing, procedures for handling special difficulties, special considerations for interviewing elderly persons, and specific guidelines including how to probe for answers.

### 2. Interviewer Roles

Although the ultimate goal of the research interview is standardized and reliable collection of data, the interviewer also plays an important role in serving as the human conduit of information from participants to the database. The way the interviewer conducts the interviews both facilitates and standardizes the gathering of the data. The following are some of the important roles of the interviewer:

#### 2.1 Represent the Study

- As an interviewer, you are the participant's link with the research project. While you do not act alone in the relationship with the participant, an unpleasant interview experience could tip the balance for a participant who is beginning to lose interest or is contemplating withdrawal.
- Always be polite. Remember, you represent the project and your co-workers. Call participants by name to make their experience more personal. Use titles (Ms., Mrs.) and last names unless the participant requests otherwise.
- Impart to the participants respect for the confidentiality of the information they provide by focusing your attention on them alone.
- The telephone interviewer who conducts the initial screening plays a very important role in the recruitment process. In most instances, the interviewer's ability to develop and maintain a positive rapport with the participant influences initial recruitment, the quality of the data obtained, and the willingness of the participant to remain in the study for the duration. It is important that all interviewers maintain a professional and friendly manner at every contact with the participant.
- Leave the participant with an overall feeling of well being. The goal is to make the participant's encounter pleasant enough to be worth repeating.
- Be friendly but not chummy. Use a manner of speaking that is natural to you. If your usual style is too casual, then with your supervisor's help, develop a genuine firm and even manner.

- Approach the interview with pleasure and assume that the participant will do the same. Most people like being asked about themselves and their well being; you are giving participants an opportunity to express themselves.
- Dress for a supporting, not a starring role in the survey scenario. Neatness and professionalism are the rule.
- When appropriate, keep contact notes on your conversations with participants for use by other research staff. Record participant information that another interviewer might reasonably be expected to know, not gossip kinds of information.
- Review contact notes before each new contact. Be careful when using comments recorded by another interviewer. There is a difference between "remembering" a participant and "talking about" a participant, which may be interpreted as a breach of confidentiality.

## **2.2 Manage the Interview**

- Control and focus the interview without dominating the participant. Your job is to get information, not to show what you know. The participant's answers to the questions are important. You convey that importance by your professional demeanor, by maintaining control of the situation, and by focusing on the content of the interview.
- Be politely firm and businesslike; timidity signals lack of confidence. If you communicate insecurity or hesitancy to participants, some of them will take advantage and assume a power position, others will feel sympathetic and assume a "mother" position. In either case, the participant's responses could be biased: The participant assuming the power position could distort strong opinions to keep the position; the mothering participant could try to make the interviewer's job easier by answering obligingly.

## **2.3 Collect Data**

- Understand the purpose and meaning of the data items on the forms. If you don't understand, ask for clarification.
- Take no personal stake in the content of the interview. Make sure your opinions and behavior neither add to nor subtract from the research intention of any items on the forms.

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## 2.4 Recruit New Participants

- Encourage participants to join and remain in the study, but don't oversell. Many people will agree to participate to end the phone call and then never return materials or show up for appointments.
- Leave the door open for participants who are reluctant to participate in the study so that you can make another try at a later time.
- Emphasize the contribution that a participant can make in a research study.

## 2.5 Clarify the Nature of the Research Setting

The participant should be informed that although the clinical center resembles a medical clinic, it is not a medical care facility. The participant should be aware that you as an interviewer are not a caregiver, helper, or advisor. The following characteristics distinguish clinical centers from medical care facilities:

- Personnel who staff the clinical centers are part of a research team.
- Research project interviewers are not caregivers, helpers, or advisors. The following is a sample explanation you can give to a participant:

*"Because this is a research study, when you go in for your physical examination, you may notice some similarities between our clinical center and your physician's office. This can create some confusion about what to expect when you come to visit us.*

*"We want you to know that we are not your primary care providers. While we perform some of the same procedures as your physician, we do not collect complete information on your health. Your family physician or primary care provider knows you best and can provide you with complete medical care or refer you to other physicians or specialists.*

*"We are concerned about you and your health, however, so we offer the following:*

*"We refer you to your family physician or primary care provider if we find something that we feel you should know about or should check more thoroughly."*

- Individuals who take part in the study are participants, not patients -- they join and remain voluntarily.
- Participants contribute to the content of scientific knowledge without gaining much for themselves.

### 3. General Guidelines

A data collection instrument is only as good as the interviewer's skills in using it, and good interviewing requires very special skills.

#### 3.1 Interviewer Preparation

Studies have shown that a participant often remembers more about the interviewer and how the interview was conducted than about the topics covered during the interview. This finding emphasizes important aspects of interviewing:

- An interviewer must be an understanding person capable of accepting what the participant says without showing reactions of either approval or disapproval; the participant must feel that their ideas are important, and that there are no right or wrong answers.
- An interviewer must not influence the participant by anything they say or do.
- An interviewer must help the participant feel that the interview is an important contribution to research.

For successful interviewing, you should have broad knowledge of the research project interview task as well as of the forms and how to fill them out. Your knowledge base should include the following:

a) Understand the nature of research interviewing:

An interview is a social interaction designed to exchange information between a questioner and a participant. The quality of the information exchanged depends upon the skill of the interviewer in handling that relationship.

b) Understand the scope of research interviewing:

The research project interviewer collects data that will answer research questions and aid in policy decisions in public health.

c) Understand the objective of the research interview:

- The research interview contains elements that separate it from other kinds of interviewing. Strictly speaking, the research interview is a relationship in which the interviewer has the practical, utilitarian goal of data collection. Research project interviewers must combine the utilitarian objective with the more social objective of participant retention.

- The retention objective is an important one, and social interaction should be a part of every interview. But it is also important that the interview not drift into lengthy conversation. Conversation of a general nature for the purpose of participant bonding should be confined to a few minutes at the beginning and the end of participant visits or phone calls.

d) Understand the significance of research interviewing:

The research project is dependent upon the reliability and validity of the data collected by its interviewers. Bias in interviewing can compromise data.

- The interviewer reduces the chance of bias by presenting neutral reactions to all answers and by maintaining a brisk, regular pace of question delivery. Regardless of how carefully worded the questions and how neutrally presented, research interviews are subject to bias from two sources: interviewer delivery and participant responses. It is the interviewer's job to minimize bias from either source.
- Interviewers can introduce bias into survey results by interpreting answers, favoring one answer over another, treating some questions as sensitive, reacting to liked or disliked participant characteristics, or using slanted probes or positive or negative filler words. To avoid these potential sources of bias, interviewers must perfect both neutral delivery and neutral response.
- Participants can bias their responses by trying to answer questions when they simply don't know the answers. Even when participants know the answers, they don't always give them truthfully. They often don't realize that they're not being truthful. Participants may bias their responses unconsciously by slanting answers to make themselves feel better, to give responses they think their friends would, or to provide answers they think the interviewer expects. The interviewer overcomes participants' emotional, unconscious bias tendencies by presenting questions at a regular pace and by maintaining neutrality.

e) Know the forms thoroughly:

- Follow all instructions and suggested scripts contained on the form itself and in the operations manual. Following or not following the instructions, scripts, or recommended remarks makes the difference between consistent and inconsistent data.
- Study the questions and data items on the forms so that you understand what they mean. Become familiar enough with them so that you can *ask* the questions instead of *reading* them, but don't try to ask questions from memory alone. Use the form as a reference at all times. Practice parts of the interviews

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that seem awkward or unnatural to you until you can ask the questions in a natural manner.

- Review the instructions for each form regularly. Do not rely solely on memory for detailed instructions on form use.
- Use the scripted parts of the interview as they are written. Discuss with your supervisor the content and flow of recommended remarks, especially when in doubt about appropriate procedures to follow in unusual situations. It is important to communicate to your supervisor and, if appropriate, the coordinating center for the study, any specific problems and suggestions for improvement.

### 3.2 Appropriate Participant Orientation

- It is important that participants know that filling out a questionnaire and being interviewed are essential requirements for being involved in the study. Be prepared to answer such questions as:
  - "What is the study about?"
  - "How will it benefit me to be involved?"
  - "Where did you get my name?"
  - "How long will the interview take?"
  - "Whom else are you interviewing?"

The most effective answers are brief, direct, and truthful. The potential participant most often wants to confirm your identity and the legitimacy of your call, and is rarely interested in any in-depth details of the study.

- In a sense, our first "interview" with prospective participants is the initial phone contact. The tone you set in that interaction may carry over into all subsequent ones.
- A potential participant initially may not wish to enroll in the study.
  - Listen carefully to their reasons.
  - Be accepting, patient, calm, and reassuring as you try to persuade them to cooperate. With interviewing experience comes assurance, and assurance helps overcome resistance.
  - Getting cooperation from persons who are initially reluctant is important because their experience may be different from those of persons who cooperate readily.
- Although you may try to change their minds, you must respect the wishes and privacy of persons who really do not want to be involved. Again, only experience

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and discussion with a supervisor can train the interviewer in when to accept a refusal and when to try to overcome resistance based on misinterpretation of the purpose.

- Be straightforward about the time commitments involved — both for the home visit and the clinic visits. Participants should not come expecting to rush through everything so they can make another appointment.

### 3.3 Conditions of Interviewing

Strive to achieve the following conditions:

- All interviewing should be done in privacy. You cannot expect the same answers when a person speaks in front of others as when they speak to you alone. Also, an interview conducted with others present will take longer to complete. If others are present, make every effort to get them to leave the room. It is not impolite to indicate you were told to interview the participant alone.
- It is possible that an over-protective relative or a shy participant will not permit a private interview. In these situations you must focus on the target participant and minimize any participation from the other person.
  - It may also be possible to enlist the help of the participant in asking the other person to permit the participant to answer for themselves.
  - If the other person continues to insist on intruding, firmly state you have been told to get the participant's answers only, but that you could talk with the other person briefly after you have finished the interview.
  - Then be pointed in directing your questions to the participant and in maintaining steady eye contact with the participant.

Both of you should be seated comfortably in a quiet location. Try to be in a position that will:

- allow you to have easy eye contact with the participant
- enable you to be heard without raising your voice
- avoid light glaring in either the participant's or your eyes
- permit you to write unobtrusively

Always carry a clipboard with you for writing in case there is no table convenient on which to write

### 3.4 Delivery

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- a) Set the appropriate pace:
- Use a brisk, businesslike pace, but don't rush the participant or show impatience.
  - Vary from your established pace on cues from the participant. If the participant shows frustration or lack of understanding, then slow down. If the participant shows annoyance or jumps in with answers to anticipated questions, then speed up. But do not skip questions.
- b) Maintain a neutral tone:
- Speak distinctly, without unusual inflection that could draw undue attention to part of a question. Do not place emphasis on specific response alternatives.
- c) Maintain a neutral response:
- Record information faithfully regardless of whether you think it's good, bad, boring, or exciting. Keep your reactions to yourself, no matter what you may think of an individual or the feelings expressed. Practice *not feeling* a reaction; school yourself out of emotional attachment to the information you hear.
  - Inspire confidence by your detachment so that participants feel comfortable giving you the unvarnished truth. Do not indicate surprise, pleasure, approval, or disapproval of any answer by word or action. Do not smile, grimace, gasp, laugh, frown, agree, or disagree. Even a slight intake of breath or a raised eyebrow may indicate to a participant that you are reacting to an answer. Project smooth, gracious acceptance of information, no matter how outrageous the content.
- d) Deliver the questions thoughtfully:
- Make your delivery smooth, natural, and enthusiastic. Avoid sounding like a robot. Sound fresh for everyone. You may ask the same questions a dozen times in a day, but participants hear them only once in their interview.
  - Use the questions, scripts, or recommended remarks as they are written, without apology. Do not try to justify questions or to defend a line of inquiry; you are asking questions that have been asked of many other participants. Tell your supervisor if you find a problem with the wording of a question.
  - Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers; the only thing that matters is the truth from the participant.



### 3.5 Special Difficulties

At times you may confront some difficulties in interviewing. Some suggestions on how to handle special situations follow:

- a) A participant with difficulty hearing:
- Sit close enough to the participant so that you do not have to shout. Make sure your face is clearly visible and not obscured by hair, glare, or shadows for participants who might rely on lip-reading.
  - Slow down for participants with hearing problems and speak in lower-pitched (more bass-pitched, not soft-spoken or high-pitched) tones. If you need to increase the volume, move closer to the participant to avoid shouting. For some people the more you raise your voice, the more distorted the voice sounds to the participant and the harder you are to hear. The participant may also turn their "good" ear toward you. Take this cue to speak clearly and distinctly toward that side.
  - If necessary, let the participant read the questions from a blank form while you read the questions aloud.

- b) A participant with limited vision:

If the participant is so visually impaired that they cannot read the materials you hand them, read the materials to the participant.

- c) A participant with difficulty understanding a question:
- Take responsibility for making questions understandable.
  - Do not make participants feel that it's their fault if they don't understand a question.
  - Take away the burden of not remembering: participants shouldn't feel ashamed by lack of recall.
  - If a participant doesn't remember a date, lead a discussion back through some prominent seasons or events, repeating the phrase of the question as you go.
  - If a participant does not understand a question, repeat the question clearly, slowly, and without raising your voice, possibly changing the emphasis of the words or the tone of your voice. Repeat it twice if the participant has patience for it. After that, record whatever answer the participant offers and go on.

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Don't risk annoying the participant for the sake of an answer to a single question.

- *Under no circumstances are you to reword, explain, or interpret the question.* Encourage the participant to do the best they can. If they still do not understand, treat as missing data and move on.

d) A very talkative participant:

- Frequently you will encounter a participant who wants to talk at much length about themselves or in a social manner, or a participant who is not able or willing to focus on the individual questions. While being accepting of the person and their needs, do not hesitate to interrupt the participant gently but firmly, saying something like, "I don't want to take up too much of your time, so let me ask you now: (repeat question)."
- It also helps to lose eye contact with the participant, look down at the interview instrument, then look up and say, "Perhaps you can tell me more about that when we are finished. Now I'd like to ask you...," "Isn't that interesting. Now let me ask you this...," as a last resort, "Excuse me, but let's get back to the question: (repeat question)."

e) A participant who becomes upset:

- Very occasionally a participant will become upset or cry during the interview. Talking about cancer or heart disease can arouse emotion in many people. Participants who have recently lost loved ones, especially to one of these illnesses, may become upset with some questions.
- If this happens, decide where your responsibility as a person begins. There are no hard and fast rules. Remain calm but not distant or cold; let the emotion run its course. Have tissues available. Often participants who have experienced losses express strong motivation to continue with the project to contribute to the disease prevention effort.
- Generally, you should be sympathetic without becoming involved. Do not routinely probe as to why the participant is upset or crying. In some cases it may be helpful to divert the participant's attention from their distress back to the interview. In fact, it may sometimes be very reassuring to the person for you simply to say, in a matter-of-fact voice, "Now let me ask you... (next question)." In others, this may have an adverse effect. When the participant is able, return to the interview. If the interview is completed and the participant is still upset, don't leave them until they have regained composure. If necessary socialize to help accomplish this.

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- It is, of course, imperative that you not try to be a psychotherapist. It is one thing to be an understanding listener who conveys human sympathy but quite another to participate actively in drawing out material relating to personal problems. The latter should not be done. Each center should establish a channel through which a referral for counseling or emergency help might be obtained if necessary. Unless it is a matter of risk to the life of a person, however, no such referral can be made without the prior permission of the interviewee.
  - Stop the interview if a participant is clearly unable to finish the visit. Offer a quiet place; get a supervisor or manager to help. If you cannot reschedule immediately, be sure to arrange to call the participant within a few days—just to make sure everything is all right and to try to reschedule the visit.
- f) A participant who is unable to handle the interview:

In some very few cases it will be apparent that the participant is not physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally capable of participating in the interview, although they have agreed to do so.

- Judgment to discontinue the interview is to be made by you based not upon incorrect answers to any single or group of factual or other questions, but upon a trend indicating gross cognitive incompetence, inability to comprehend the questions, inappropriate answers, or grossly contradictory answers. These would indicate the instrument will not obtain meaningful information about the participant and is probably a severe burden to the participant.
  - Be alert, however, to distinguish the participant who is not oriented as to time, place etc., yet can give good information about their life, in which case the interview can be conducted.
- g) A participant who has strong objections to questions:
- Assume the burden of communication; take the blame for misunderstandings.
  - If a participant fails to grasp the meaning of a question, admit that perhaps you didn't deliver it clearly and repeat the question.
  - Do not give the participant the impression that the questions were too difficult for them to answer.
  - If the participant is angry, reluctant, or impatient about a single question or series of questions, respond in a non-defensive tone as though you have heard the objection before. Don't delay the interview any more than necessary; move on to the next question. If the participant pursues the objection, remind the

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participant that although the researcher had a purpose in including the question in the interview, the participant doesn't have to answer the question.

- If a participant hesitates or refuses to answer, repeat the question. Say, "Let me go over that again. If you don't want to answer, that's your choice; but my instructions are to ask each of the questions." Add that the participant's feelings or opinions about the question are important. If the participant still refuses, accept the refusal graciously and go on to the next question.
- h) A participant who is impatient with the length of the interview:

If a participant is anxious to finish the interview and says so, say, "I need only a few more minutes of your time. Your answers are important to us, and we'd like to have all of them."

- i) A participant who is curious about the research:
- Be ready with standard replies for people who want to know more about the research. Do not get involved in long explanations of the project, the forms, the research methods, or the outcomes of the study. Be sure to use standard responses.
  - Treat as extraneous conversation remarks from participants who want you to tell them why certain questions are included in the interview. Do not invent your own explanations.
  - For participants who persist, tell them that the researcher had a purpose for the question and that you must ask all the questions as they are written. Invite participants to talk to your supervisor if they wish to carry a discussion further.

### **3.6 Special Considerations for Interviewing Elderly Persons**

Interviewing older persons is basically similar to interviewing persons of any age. There is considerable variation among older people just as there is among persons of other ages. Most of the older persons you will interview will be able to respond to all questions.

- Many older persons have had little experience being interviewed. A major task of the interviewer is to clarify what is expected of a participant and to guide them comfortably through the interview. Most people are pleased to be chosen as participants and to know that their answers may contribute to solving the problems of other people. Your personality and ability to put the participant at ease are usually all that are needed for a successful interview.

- Ask all questions, but most particularly those of a personal nature such as age and education in a straightforward, matter-of-fact tone of voice; accept all answers without showing surprise, approval, or disapproval.
- An interview is a two-way street: the participant must understand you and you must understand them. Speak clearly and slowly. Speaking quickly will not speed up an interview but rather, it may confuse the participant and actually slow up the interview. Always listen very carefully.
- Gauge your pace according to the needs of the participant. Some elderly participants may require a slower delivery; others may be insulted by it.

#### **4. Specific Guidelines**

##### **4.1 Interviewer instructions**

Interviewer instructions are distinguished from questions to be asked of participants. They are not to be read to the participant.

##### **4.2 Introductions**

Sometimes an introductory sentence is used to ease into a question and maintain the flow of the questionnaire. Read the introduction to the participant as it is written.

##### **4.3 Stem and conditional questions**

- Stem or primary questions (those asked of all participants) are numbered and out at the left margin.
- Conditional questions (those asked of some participants) are generally enclosed in boxes. Arrows from the answer boxes for stem questions point the way to the conditional or to the next question.

##### **4.4 Response options**

Most of the questions have specific response options. (Yes, No, and Don't know are very common). The bubble corresponding to the participant's answer should be completely filled in. Only one box is marked per question, unless the instructions state otherwise.

##### **4.5 Open-ended questions**

The questionnaire may contain questions that do not have a series of response options, i.e., are open-ended. If an answer does not seem meaningful or complete, you can encourage the participant to expand or elaborate their answer by "probing."

- Probing must be nondirective, i.e., a question or statement by the interviewer that does not suggest an answer, but does stimulate further communication. ALL of us use nondirective probes every day when we say: "What do you mean?" "Tell me about the...?," "In what way?," "Yes?," "Why?," "I'd like to hear more about that...," "Uh-huh...," or "I see...." (See below for more details about probing).

#### **4.6 Change of answer**

Please see the Forms Protocol for how to deal with changes in answers.

#### **4.7 Other (SPECIFY) responses**

Some questions combine the features of both precoded close-ended and open-ended questions. In addition to the precoded answer categories, provision is made to record an answer that does not fit into any of the precoded categories:

- "Other (Specify)." The word "Specify" or "Describe," enclosed in parenthesis, is an instruction to mark the code for "Other" and to write in the verbatim handwritten response.

#### **4.8 Response cards**

It is often easier for a person to answer a multiple choice question if the choices are on a card that is handed to the participant listing the response options.

#### **4.9 Editing**

All answers must be obtained and recorded at the time of the interview. Nothing is to be written in afterwards. Check the questionnaire to see that all questions are answered completely while you are in the presence of the participant.

#### **4.10 Account for every question**

All questions are to be asked in the order in which they appear and exactly as they are printed. Ask every question unless there is a SKIP instruction. Never assume you know the answer. Record an answer for every question. Most questions generally include DON'T KNOW and REFUSED response options.

#### **4.11 Be sure the participant's answer fits into a response category**

If the participant replies in an ambiguous way, like "sometimes yes, sometimes no," to help them resolve this to a single answer, you might ask, "If you had to choose, is it usually yes or no?."

#### **4.12 Do not question the validity of the participant's responses**

If it appears by their response that the participant misunderstood a question, please repeat the question exactly as it is written on the questionnaire.

#### **4.13 Special considerations for "frequency" questions**

- Clarify the time span: Many questions ask about behavior "during the past twelve months" or "during the past year." From time to time reemphasize "past 12 months." It is usually a good idea to restate the time frame as "since this time last (May)."
- Obtain specific frequency responses: Frequency questions are generally precoded to translate unstructured answers into categories.
  - People don't usually think about the frequency of their behavior, and, therefore, some participants have difficulty in answering.
  - Repeating the question, stressing "about how often...", sometimes helps.
  - If the participant answers in a very general way, like "whenever I have time" or "pretty often," ask about how often this is on the average.
  - If the participant still cannot answer, read the categories and allow them to choose the most appropriate one.

#### **4.14 Time frame for questions**

Responses should apply to the participant at the time of the interview:

- Some questions are meant to assess the participant as they are at the moment, much like a snapshot of a person. If a participant is currently doing things differently than they usually do, decide for yourself whether the current situation is very temporary.
- If the participant's situation may or may not be temporary, code according to current functioning (e.g., if the participant is receiving help with activities of daily life because they are incapacitated with a broken hip, rate as "with help," because one cannot determine how long the condition will continue or if they will resume their former level of functioning.)

### **5. How to Get Adequate Answers**

#### **5.1 Ask the questions exactly as worded and in the same order as they appear in the questionnaire**

Minor changes in wording can completely change the meaning of a question. Unless each interviewer asks the questions exactly as shown, the answers may be meaningless. One exception to this rule is that for certain factual questions you should watch for inconsistencies and try to get the correct fact.

## **5.2 Don't try to explain the question**

Be neutral. As indicated earlier, if a participant does not seem to understand a question, repeat the question slowly and clearly.

Give the participant time to think about the question. Unless you have other information about handling specific questions, the only acceptable answer for a participant who wants to know what a question means is "Whatever it means to you." Never explain the meaning or purpose of a question unless the interviewer instructions authorize you to do so.

## **5.3 Don't define terms used in questions**

Some participants may ask you what we mean by a word used in a question. Leave the matter of definition to the participant, except where the written instructions authorize a definition or alternative wording. Instead of offering your own definition (while another interviewer is suggesting a completely different definition to someone else), simply say "Whatever you think it means" or "just whatever it means to you" or "However you use the term."

## **5.4 Don't leave a question until you have an adequate answer or have an adequate answer or have determined that a participant can't give a clearer answer**

## **5.5 Don't accept a "don't know" without probing at least once**

A participant may answer a question by saying "I don't know" when what they really mean is they never thought about it or they need time to think.

- Give them a chance to collect their thoughts and express them.
- With skillful help, with encouragement and time, an inarticulate participant may provide an answer to the question.
- In general, if a participant can make a judgment in favor of a response other than "don't know," the usefulness of the data is greatly increased.

## **5.6 Use neutral probes that do not suggest answers**

Probes are needed to obtain more complete and detailed answers.

- All probes must be non-directive. That is, your probe must not suggest any particular answer to the participant.



- Probes should be used whenever the participant is hesitant in answering the questions:
  - when they seem to have trouble expressing themselves
  - when they seem too shy to speak at length
  - whenever there is any reason for the interviewer to think that the participant has not given a complete report of their thinking
  - reassuring probes are needed when a participant seems to lack confidence.

### 5.7 Probing for answers to closed-ended questions

In closed-ended questions, the need for probing arises when the participant gives an answer that is not included in the response categories.

Example: The question, "Have you felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?", asks the participant about general depression. You read the instructions and the question, and the participant says, "Well, everybody has those feelings sometimes."

Repeat the response categories, "Would you say you were down or depressed: Not at all, A little, Enough to bother you, Quite a bit, Very much so, or Extremely so?"

Participant: "Well, I was blue for a day or two."

Ask the participant to choose the category that fits best and repeat the categories.

### 5.8 Probing for answers to open-ended questions

In open-ended questions two problems call for probing: the need to *clarify* a response and the need to *get additional information* in a response.

- The following are examples of neutral probes to clarify:
  - “What do you mean by that?” “Why do you say that?” “In what way was it a problem?” “Could you rephrase that?”
- The following are some examples of neutral probes to get additional information:
  - “Are there other (repeat the phrase from the question)?” “How else would you describe (repeat the phrase from the question)?” “What else (repeat phrase from the question)?”

**5.9 Many interviewers forget to use two of the most effective neutral probes: silence and repeating the original question**

- **The value of silence** in an interview is very important. The interviewer who can wait patiently and quietly with an interested expression on their face will soon find that 15 seconds of silence will elicit an answer to the question.
- **Repeating the question is another safe way of probing.** Be sure to repeat only the question as stated in the questionnaire. This is particularly useful when the participant answers a question irrelevantly. Without pointing out that the first answer was irrelevant, simply say "Isn't that interesting. And now let me ask you this (Repeat the question)." In some cases you must remind the participant of your frame of reference when you repeat a question. For example, if you ask "How long have you lived in the Bay Area?" a participant might say "I've lived in California all my life. You know, there really aren't many native Californians my age." Instead of coldly ignoring what the participant has said, acknowledge the answer, and repeat the question. In the above example, you might say "Is that so! And how long have you lived in the Bay Area?"

**5.10 Other neutral probes that you will find useful are:**

- "How do you mean?"
- "In what way?"
- "Please give me an example." OR "For example?" OR "For instance?"
- "Please explain that a little."
- "How are you using the term   ?"
- "How come?"
- "Tell me more about that."
- "What makes you feel that way?"
- "I just want your impression."
- "I just want your opinion."
- "Anything at all -- even little things?"
- "What else can you tell me about that?"

- (Repeat the ambiguous term on a rising inflection, which suggests a question)
- “If you had to choose, which would you say?”

### 5.11 Generally speaking we avoid some neutral probes in favor of others

- Instead of "Anything else?" which invites a "no," you'll find "What else?" or "What else can you tell me about that?" is more likely to elicit more answers.
- Instead of "Why?," which some people interpret as critical, you'll find "What makes you feel that way?" or "I'd be interested in your reasons" accomplishes the same purpose and is less likely to be threatening.
- Some of the kinds of questions used in ordinary conversation must be avoided because they suggest answers:

**Don't ask:** “Do you mean A or B?” (unless you have asked a precoded question). This is not neutral because it suggests two possible answers and there may be others that do not occur to the interviewer but would occur to the participant if they were left to their own devices.

**Don't ask:** "Do you mean (such and such)?" because many people tend to say "yes" to any suggestion either because it's easy or because they think it's the right answer.

**Don't ask:** “Then you feel (such and such)?" Even though you're trying to summarize what the participant has already said, you may be placing the emphasis on the wrong part of their answer.

### 5.12 Watch your tone of voice (and facial expressions in face-to-face interviewing)

How you ask a question or probe can be just as important as the wording of the question. Be careful that a tone of censure or criticism does not creep into your voice. "What makes you feel that way?" is, for example, usually a good way to get people to explain their reasons, but "What makes you feel THAT way?" may suggest that only the insane would hold such a view. Similarly, your face may give you away.

### 5.13 Watch for vague answers

Some participants find it hard to verbalize and may have difficulty expressing their ideas. When people take refuge in vague generalities, probe for examples to help them clarify their ideas.

### 5.14 Guard against ambiguous answer

Certain terms may mean very different things to two or more people.

- Always ask yourself whether you are sure you know what a participant meant by an answer and whether another interviewer would have interpreted a given answer in exactly the same way.
- If anyone uses terms or phrases that could be interpreted differently by different people, you must go back to the ambiguous phrases and ask them: "How are you using the term \_\_\_?" "What do you have in mind when you say \_\_\_?"

While this is a particular problem in open-ended questions, some participants will give vague answers to precoded questions, which must be probed.

### 5.15 Avoid "depends" or "qualified" answers

Never accept a "depends" or "qualified" answer the first time it is offered as a response to any question. Participants often use phrases such as "well, that depends," "yes, but...," "I really see both sides of that question". When a participant gives a qualified answer, we advise one of the following probes:

- Repeat the question (unless the response was such that it will sound as though you weren't listening).
- Preface the question with a phrase like: "well, in general," "on the whole," or "taking everything into consideration."
- Remind the participant that we want to know which statement comes closest to their views; use an introductory phrase such as "Well if you had to choose" or "Even though you're somewhere in the middle, which way do you lean?" and repeat the question.
- Occasionally a participant will answer with a genuine qualified or depends answer, which cannot be pushed into an existing code. If the participant insists upon answering in qualified terms after you have sufficiently probed, simply record verbatim their entire response.

### 5.16 Clarify one response before asking for more

"What else?" is an excellent probe for getting people to offer additional ideas on a subject. But before asking for other answers, use clarifying probes to encourage participants to explain what they have already said. If you don't clear up one response before asking for more, you'll wind up with a series of vague or ambiguous responses that are uncodable.

**5.17 Make your probe consistent with the purpose of the question**

Knowing a few neutral probes and asking them correctly is not enough. You must choose a probe that is appropriate for the particular kind of inadequate answer given.

- As we noted above, there is no point in probing "what else?" if the participant's previous answers were vague.
- Similarly, "Tell me more" may get you farther and farther away from your goal of getting the participant to choose one of several possible answers, and "If you had to choose..." would be a better candidate.
- If the participant has answered fully but used an ambiguous term, you will want them to clarify that term by using a probe like "How are you using the term?" rather than asking them to explain, which might encourage them to explain things that are clear without clarifying the ambiguous term.
- In the same way, a person who lacks confidence will not gain it simply because you repeat a question, whereas "I just want your opinion" or "What's your impression?" will be more likely to encourage them to answer.
- Some participants who are unsure of themselves may be more likely to respond to "Tell me any problems that occur to you -- even little things."

**5.18 When in doubt as to what is needed, get more rather than less than may be needed**

If you get more data than we need, we can ignore it. But if you get less than needed, we must either return to the participant or code "DK." In order to avoid the unnecessary loss of important data, bear in mind the following rules:

- When in doubt whether to ask a question, ask it.
- When in doubt whether to probe for greater depth, probe.
- When in doubt whether to record, record.