

**Conducting Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews:
Guidelines to Successful Interview (prepared for REPLACE 2
project partners)**

Draft (do not quote)

Prepared by:

**Dr David Beecham
Coventry University**

REPLACE 2

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What is the in-depth interview?

The in-depth qualitative interview has been adopted by many researchers within the social sciences, as a means to gain an insight into how people make sense of their world. Feminist researchers have advocated the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to give voice to those individuals who are marginalised within society. It is seen by many feminist researchers as a method which allows participants to describe their lives and experiences in their own words, to 'tell it like it is'.

In-depth interviews are conducted in order to gain a thorough insight about a particular issue. It allows researchers to explore individuals' experiences and how they attribute meaning to aspects of their everyday life. The in-depth interview goes 'deeper' by asking participants to expand on the 'taken for granted' or perceived social 'norms'. Only by exploring these 'taken for granted' do we get a glimpse of how complicated social reality really is.

This research project wishes to explore the beliefs that individuals hold about practicing or not practicing FGM. Although we could ask participants to complete a questionnaire, this would not allow us to understand why individuals make the decision to either have or refuse FGM. It is only by asking members of the community about aspects associated with the practice of FGM that we will be able to identify what they believe are the consequences of performing or not performing FGM. Furthermore, by exploring wider social issues relating to the family and being a member of the Somali or Sudanese community, will we understand the level of perceived control participants have over whether their daughters should be cut.

The Interview as a Social Interaction

Although it may feel like once you enter the interview room you and the participants are closed off from the rest of society, but this is not the case. Interviews do not take place within a vacuum; both you and the participants bring social identities, perceptions, meanings and beliefs about certain aspects of society to the interview. Both participants and, to a certain extent, the interviewer will bring certain preconceived ideas they have about the other into the interview room. You need to be aware of how participants social location or characteristics and how these influence the interview setting. For example, marriage status, occupational status, family position, age, educational status, geographical location, membership in the community, religious status, class and gender all influence the interview in some shape or form.

Having a different social position or status to those people you are interviewing, can make the interview process more challenging; however, it can also facilitate a good discussion. By being a different age from your participant, not sharing the same marital status can allow you to explore these differences. But some participants might feel uncomfortable discussing issues with someone they perceive as not being able to share the experience they are describing.

As with any social interaction, the interview is not immune to the effects of power. Interviewers need to be aware of the power dynamics that operate within the interview process, if they are to minimise its impact. Power is associated with social status, such as class, age, occupational status and position within the community. Thus, community or religious leader could utilise their position of power to influence the direction of the interview, essentially use the interview in order to voice a particular perspective. This could lead to the interviewer feeling intimidated and/or overwhelmed and to be afraid to ask certain questions or request that the participant expand on a particular point.

One also has to be mindful that as interviewers that your social position might affect the power relations within the interview process. Feminist researchers advocate that interviewers try to minimise power within the interview setting.

One way to achieve this is by allowing participants to choose the time and location that is most convenient for them. Also, allowing participant the freedom to discuss openly, and in their own words/language, the topics covered within the interview is seen as empowering the participant. It is vitally important that participants within this research as allowed to voice their thoughts and feelings about the practice of FGM. As an interviewer, you may hear things that you fundamentally disagree with, nevertheless, should not immediately judge the participant or voice negative comments during the interview. This is not to say that you should not ask why participants hold such opinions, but this should not be done in a non-aggressive manner.

Who should I Approach to be interviewed?

It is difficult to advise who you should approach to be interviewed before you have conducted the focus groups and revised the interview schedule/guide. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, we cannot be too rigid about our research sample. However, here are a few things to bear in mind when you are recruiting possible participants.

- Age:

Ideally we would like to interview women and men from across the age spectrum, from 18 years of age all the way up to and beyond 65 years old. Bear this in mind when recruiting participants.

- Position within the Community:

We would like the opinions of female and male community leaders.

- Children:

We would like the opinions of those women and men with and without child. Also, we would like the views of grandparents.

- Education:

If possible, we would like to interview people from various socio-economic backgrounds and education has a significant impact on an individual's life chances. Therefore, try to recruit people who have received different levels of education.

We would like to explore the opinions and beliefs of individuals who are employed in different occupations etc. However, this should not be a priority when recruiting interviewees. Because of the subject nature of the research, we need to be mindful that we cannot be too picky about who we approach to participate. What is important, however, is that you uphold ethical standards and inform the participant about the nature of the research project- hand them a participant information sheet (PIS) – when you first approach them. I shall return to the issue of Ethics shortly.

Where to Conduct the Interview?

As I highlighted earlier, you need to be aware of the power dynamics when conducting interviews and the location and environment in which an interview is conducted will have a tremendous impact on the interview process. This is particularly the case when dealing with such a sensitive issue as FGM. People will talk more when they feel more relaxed and at ease. Also, people are more likely to participate if the interview can be conducted at a time and location that is most convenient for them. Therefore, when recruiting participants, indicate that you would be happy to conduct the interview at a time and place which best suits them. At first suggest a neutral location, a place where both you and the participant would not feel inhibited and at ease. A participant might indicate that they would feel far happier for the interview to take place in their home. Although the participant might feel comfortable about discussing FGM in the safety of their own home, this could make you feel uneasy. If participants agree to take part but only if the interview can be conducted in their home or a place you are not familiar with, here are a few things that you need to consider:

1. Plan for a friend or a colleague to collect you after the interview
2. Let people know where you are: Notify colleagues at FORWARD or friends where you will be conducting the interview.
3. Let the participant know that people know where you are
4. If possible, check out the location before the interview takes places.
5. Once inside their home, make sure you assess the location and make yourself familiar with the layout of the building, for example, where the doors are etc.
6. If you start to feel uncomfortable at any point, be polite, but indicate that you will have to end the interview and leave the premises.

Your safety is a priority and do not compromise for the sake of an interview.

Telephone interviewing

After offering the participant the ability to choose the location and time of the interview they are still reticent about participating, you could suggest that the interview be conducted via telephone. Some individuals might feel uncomfortable about revealing their personal number. Others may prefer this option because they may feel less inhibited about talking over the phone. If they choose to conduct the interview over the telephone, here are a few things you need to do:

1. Make sure you have access to a telephone
2. The room in which the telephone interview is to be conducted is private
3. You test the equipment before the interview beginnings
4. Make notes whilst conducting the interview
5. Be mindful about silences: It is difficult to tell whether someone is thinking about the question they have asked you and formulating a response or has

simply finished saying something and waiting for you to ask the next question

6. It is difficult to know whether someone is distressed

Telephone interviewing may sound like an easy option, but it poses its unique set of challenges. A major difficulty is the lack of any visual cues which are a valuable source of information within an interview. For example, you can tell a lot about a person's body language or facial expressions when talking to someone, with these it makes it extremely difficult to judge whether a person is comfortable, distressed, unsure about what is being discussed etc. Therefore listen closely to participant's voice, whether they sound comfortable or upset etc.

Ethics

As I have already mentioned, when recruiting participants you need to inform them about the project. This is done by giving the participant a participant information sheet (PIS), this explains what the study is about, why they have been chosen, what will happen if they take part, the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part, informs them how the information they disclose will be kept confidential and includes the contact details of the researchers at Coventry University. Some participants may have difficulty understanding written English, Dutch, Somali, Sudanese and therefore you might have to explain this information verbally. If the participant agrees to take part in the study, this information should be relayed to them again before the start of the interview. Before the interview commences you should ask the participant if they consent to the interview being digitally recorded. Participants should be asked to sign a participant consent form indicating that they have been fully informed of the research project and understand the nature of their participation. Again, like the PIS interviews might need to verbally relay the information on the consent form, for those who have difficulty reading. If participants don't want to sign a consent form, but are happy for the interview to be recorded, then informed consent can be confirmed by the interviewer reading allowed the informed consent form and the participant verbally indicating that they agree to the five points.

Also, emphasise that participants are under no obligation to continue with the interview and that they can withdraw from the project at anytime without giving any reason.

In order to identify the participant for future reference, for example, if they wish to withdraw from the research project, ask them to generate a unique identification number. This could be their initials plus the month and day of their birth, for example, JS initials, 12 day, 10 month. Inform that this identification will only be used by the researchers and that their identity will be anonymised in the final report/ transcript.

Do not disclose the details or discuss the comments of another participant during an interview. This not only breaches past participants' confidentiality, but the present participant will doubt your ability to maintain their confidence. This is not to say that you can't talk in generalities, for example, if a participant asks you 'what have other people said' in relation to particular point, you could say 'well, a lot of participants have indicated that' etc.

At the end of the interview de-brief the participant by giving them a copy of the de-briefing sheet (explain this to the participant if they have trouble understanding written English/Somali/Sudanese) that includes information regarding the organisations who work within the area of FGM and who can give them advice or support if required. During de-briefing it is an opportune moment to ask the participants if they have any questions or concerns regarding the issues raised or their participation. Some participants might indicate that they wish to withdraw from the project at this stage. If this is the case, inform the participant that all information that they have disclosed will not be included in the project and the digital recording will be deleted.

Preparing for the Interview

So you have been successful in recruiting individuals to be interviewed and you have kept in contact with them to remind them of the time, date and location of the interview. But what do you need to do before the interview actually starts? Hopefully, the following pieces of advice should help you to conduct a successful interview:

1. Make sure that you are on time:

There is nothing more unprofessional than being late for an appointment. If you are unable to make it for some reason or are running late, notify the participant and offer to reschedule. Also give yourself plenty of time to conduct the interview, de-brief that participant and write a summary of the interview. You should allow yourself at least 30-40 minutes after the participant has left for you to write the report.

2. Check to see if the location is suitable:

If the interview is taking place in an environment which you have control, check to see whether there are any posters, notices on the walls, which could offend or influence the participants answers. Make sure no one will disturb the interview by walking into the interview room by placing a notice on the door indicating that a private interview is in progress.

3. Refreshments

Have refreshments ready, for example, two bottles of water or a cup of herbal tea etc.

4. Equipment check:

It is important that you have brought the correct equipment with you. You will need:

- a) Digital Recorder
- b) Spare batteries and/or mains adapter
- c) Microphone
- d) Notepad
- e) Spare pen/pencil

Before the participant arrives, check that the equipment is working by conducting a test of the recording level within the interview room. Not only does this check whether the equipment is working, it also allows you to see whether there is any noise interference.

5. Be familiar with the interview schedule
6. Have a box of paper tissues ready:

Participants may become upset during the interview; it is always a good idea to be prepared with paper tissues.

7. Be alert and keep in mind what is the purpose of the interview:

Interviews require concentration. Not only do you have to remember what participants have said in order to avoid repeating yourself, but you also have to listen closely to what is being said so that you can probe deeper if you need to. During the interview the participants might start talking about an issue which is not related to the questions or topics which you are discussing. That is why it's important to remember why you are conducting the interview and how you can guide the conversation back to the issues that you wish to discuss.

8. Have all documentation ready:

You will need the PIS, consent form and de-briefing sheet ready to give to the participant.

9. Relax and be confident:

Give yourself a few minutes before the participant arrives to relax and take stock of your situation. Even if you still doubt your abilities, be confident when conducting the interview. Displaying confidence can help, especially when you are interviewing individuals in positions of power within the community.

The interview

The participant has arrived, or you have arrived at the arranged location. You have done all the necessary equipment checks and preparations and, you have just finished explaining our ethical responsibilities and the interview has started. But how do you ask those difficult questions? What do you need to do during the interview? Hopefully, the comments below should answer these questions.

1. Listen and work through the answers:

You need to listen carefully to what the participant is saying, for their response might not actually answer the question. Alternatively, the participant may give you a vague response, to which, you might have to ask for clarification or further explanation. The most important thing to remember when conducting an interview is not to rush through the questioning. Don't just sit there and read off the questions on the interview schedule. Listening is equally as important as asking the questions.

2. Use appropriate language:

You should conduct the interview in the language that the participant is most comfortable with. But you should also avoid using complicated language; for instance, do not use academic language that could confuse participants. Not only is language important, but how you ask the question can have influence a participant's response. Ask questions in a calm, not aggressive manner, and be sensitive when probing participants for more information.

3. Let the participants tell their own story in their own way:

Don't interrupt participants when they are in the middle of a sentence or when they stop in order to collect their thoughts. For some participants, this will be the first time they have had change to express their opinions and experiences with someone who will actually listen and be interested in what they have to say.

4. 'Could you tell me':

This is always a good way of starting an interview or asking a participant to explain a particular point of view. For example, 'could you tell me about your experiences in coming to the UK/Netherlands'.

5. Reassure participants:

If participants become uncomfortable during the interview, reassure them that these issues are hard to talk about, but talking about them may help.

6. If a participant becomes distressed during the interview what do I do?

If the interviewee becomes upset during the interview, give them time to gather their thoughts and then ask them if they wish to continue.

7. Take notes:

The in-depth interview consists of more than just listening to participants verbal responses, you should also take note of non-verbal cues such as hand gestures, facial expressions and how a person is sitting. Sometimes, body language can tell us more than the actual answer to the question. During the interviews take notes about particular moments during the interview that made an impression on you, say for example, when the participant's body language and the answer they give to a question seem mismatched. Laughter and silences can also be very informative. Do not feel uncomfortable about long silences, the participant could simply be reflecting on the things being discussed. Use your judgement about when to move the conversation forward.

Things you should not do when interviewing:

1. Don't be busy taking too many notes and not listening
It is a difficult task taking notes, listening and thinking about possible further questions to ask the participant. However, don't worry about combining these elements will improve as you conduct more interviews.

2. Don't be frightened about not sticking to the interview schedule

The interview schedule is only a guide, it is not a prescriptive. If the participant decides to go off on a slightly different direction, don't worry. Explore these avenues, however, if they are unhelpful then simply guide the conversation back to an area which you are interested in.

3. Don't sit there and try to find out what the participant is really thinking

You will never know what the participant is really thinking about, or whether they are telling you the 'truth'. Simply listen to what the participant is saying and explore their understanding of FGM.

4. Don't simply listen for the things that you want to hear

An interview is not about getting what you want to hear from individuals. You need to listen to everything that they say, even if you do not agree with it.

5. Don't relate things back to yourself during the interview

Participants are bound to ask you questions about your experiences of opinions about FGM, it is up to you whether you want to disclose this information. By disclosing certain aspects of your life, it can produce a better rapport with participants, which in turn, can make for a better interview. It can also influence the participant's answers. Getting the balance right between openness and influencing the interview is difficult, some might say it's possible. Simply being aware of this dilemma will help you during the interview process.

6. Don't tell the participants that they are wrong

Even if you fundamentally disagree with what the participant is saying, do not pass judgement on them by telling them that they are wrong. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean you have to agree with them. If a participant says something that you disagree with or that is quite controversial, ask them to explain why they think that.

7. Don't try to make the participant like you.

The interview is not an audition for a possible friendship. If the participant doesn't really like you, or if you don't really like them, that's fine so long as the interview doesn't become too unbearable.

8. Don't change the subject abruptly

If a participant is talking about something interesting or expanding on a particular point, don't just change the subject abruptly. Guide the interview subtly back to a topic you want to cover.

What if I feel uncomfortable or threatened during the interview?

It is very rare that a participant becomes aggressive or offensive during an interview, however, they could ask you questions which make you feel uncomfortable. A participant could ask you about your personal life or make a judgement about you, which you find inappropriate. You could:

1. Challenge them by asking why they have asked such questions
2. Keep silent and let the comments and/or questions go unanswered
3. Try to avoid these situations occurring

By displaying confidence and projecting a professional manner within the interview will go a long way to prevent these incidents occurring. Of course, one can never be certain of this, even if one prepares thoroughly. If you do become totally uncomfortable or the participant starts emotionally or physically abusing you, then discontinue the interview and ask them to leave. Your personal well-being and safety is paramount.

De-briefing the participant and saying good-bye

After you have finished discussing the issues and the participant doesn't wish to add anything further, stop the digital recorder and begin de-briefing the participant. Hand them the de-brief sheet and explain what is going to happen next. Also ask if they are still happy to continue to participate. If they are still distressed after the interview, indicate that the de-brief sheet has the contact details of organisations that they may wish to contact in order to get support or guidance. Don't rush the de-briefing, answer the participant's questions. Also, have your notepad and pen at the ready because sometimes participants can say the most insightful things when the digital recorder has been switched off. Thank the participant once again for their time. Saying goodbye can be very strange, especially if the participant has disclosed very personal topics during the interview. After the participant has left you may feel emotionally worn out, however, you should write the report of the interview immediately whilst all the information is fresh in your mind.

Writing the Report

It is extremely important that you do this immediately after the interview, whilst you can still remember vividly what aspects of the interview really had an impact on you. Look over the notes that you took during the interview, play the interview back to yourself and listen for things that you didn't notice when you were conducting the interview. Particularly pay attention to how you asked the question and whether you feel they need to be changed, or is there another area of your interview technique that could be improved? Writing the report allows you to reflect on your performance and the interview as a whole. Make a note of your initial thoughts relating to the issues discussed and the common themes, if any, which emerged. These reports, together with the field notes, will be very helpful to the research team when it comes to analysing the transcripts of the interviews.

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