

Chapter 7

Semi-structured Qualitative Interview Guide: Process and Considerations for Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explains how to develop semi-structured qualitative interview guide for a doctoral research project. Semi-structured qualitative interviews (SSQIs) combine the use of predetermined thematic open questions with a flexible approach to, in the interview, how they are ordered or phrased. Such flexibility gives the researcher opportunities to probe participants for further clarification, and to explore specific themes. In view of the exploratory nature of semi-structured qualitative interview, the chapter explains the importance for doctoral students to clearly set out the philosophical stances that underpin their research project and the ethical questions pertinent to their research. The chapter addresses the interview guide, particularly how it may be used to overcome challenges researchers might encounter during the data collection process. Within these areas, methodological rigor in commencing a research project is discussed to support doctoral students' growth as semi-structured qualitative researchers.

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INTRODUCTION

Semi-structured qualitative interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework formatted for a qualitative study. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that such a qualitative method can be used to understand any phenomenon that little is known. It seeks to contribute to a better understanding of social realities and draws attention to processes, meanings, and patterns (Bell et al.; 2023; Bercht et al., 2024). It also pursues more in-depth information that may be difficult to discover or convey quantitatively.

Qualitative research data is enriched with detail and insights into participants' experiences of the world and 'may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience' (Stake, 1995), therefore, more meaningful. Accordingly, it has been conducted in different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, political science, business management, education, and economics, for many decades. Its methodology is concerned with the theory, method, and conceptualization of procedures. Qualitative research and the doctoral students who apply it want to go beyond the concrete details of methods of data collection and analysis.

There are several types of qualitative interviews, ranging from unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2022; Crabtree et al, 2023). However, this chapter focuses on qualitative semi-structured interviews because of its standardization of themes and interview questions alongside a certain degree of openness from participants' responses. It permits interviews to be focused while giving the researcher the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up during the interview, which can further enhance understanding of the core research issues (Bercht et al, 2024). Furthermore, semi-structured qualitative interviews are suitable for examining uncharted territory with unknown but potential momentous issues, and participants need maximum latitude to spot useful leads to pursue them. It is more likely to draw out richer data than structured interviews (Lichtma, 2023).

Nonetheless, quantitative researchers regard the data obtained through semi-structured qualitative interviews as "unreliable, impressionistic, and not objective" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 12). In addition, the nature of semi-structured interviews might lead the researcher to ask leading questions, which can influence participants' answers. To quantitative researchers, interviews are considered nothing more than casual everyday conversations. However, in comparison with everyday conversations or philosophical dialogues, which usually place participants on an equal footing with the researcher, qualitative interviews can be characterized by an asymmetry of power in which the researcher oversees the questioning of voluntary participants.

It may seem that everyone can simply ask questions, but interviews conducted in a casual manner with little preparation could yield disappointing results (Bercht et al., 2024; Clark et al., 2021). Therefore, conducting semi-structured qualitative

interviews requires not only the use of various skills, such as intensive listening and note taking (even when participants are being audio recorded or digitally filmed), but also careful planning and preparation. To collect interview data useful for research purposes, it is necessary for researchers to develop as much expertise in relevant topic areas as much as possible so they can ask informed questions.

Therefore, compared to other research procedures in the social sciences, semi-structured qualitative interviews will enable the researcher to fully explore the research problem. 'If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 120). Semi-structured qualitative interviews provide rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences or perception of their world. The ability of qualitative data to fully describe a phenomenon is an important consideration from the researcher's perspective.

Rossmann and Rallis' (2003) delineation of 'best practices' for qualitative researchers further pinpoints the qualities that the qualitative researcher is expected to display commitment to. For example, comfort with ambiguity and highly developed emotional, interpersonal, and ethical intelligence and awareness. Such practices are not easily learned or taught but are more likely acquired over a period with the help of an expert mentoring research supervisor or if participating in communities of practice (Denzin et al., 2023).

These complexities associated with the semi-structured interview are explored in more depth later in this chapter, specifically in relation to doctoral research and the interview guide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A systematic literature search was conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2024) to explore methodological papers that applied semi-structured qualitative interviews in their studies. Given the extensive literature on qualitative research methods that focus on a range of topics, issues, and their strengths, there are limited published articles that discuss in detail step-by-step guides for conducting doctoral semi-structured qualitative interviews. Searches for such literature came via Google Scholar and Scopus databases and were limited to peer-reviewed papers published in scientific journals, in English, between 1 May 2014 and 30 May 2024. The inclusion criteria applied were that the paper title or abstract mentions semi-structured qualitative interviews.

Published articles that focused on other types of qualitative interviews, such as structured, open, and case study interviews (Maher, 2013), were excluded as these were not the focus of this research. The content of the papers was analyzed

(Roller, 2019; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023) using the qualitative content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis is a method used to analyze textual data, detect patterns, similarities, and differences in the data, and understand what they mean (Krippendorff, 2018; Selvi, 2019). In this chapter, the authors identified patterns and phases of semi-structured qualitative interviews in fourteen published articles (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Semi-Structured qualitative interview (SSQI) articles identified

Author (s) and Date	Summary of the research content relevant to purpose of the chapter
Valencia et al; 2024	Recovery process of methamphetamine use disorder through semi-structured, qualitative interview
Gabriel et al; (2024)	Assessing Patient Perspectives on Pulmonary Telerehabilitation Using Semi-Structured Qualitative interviews
Naz, et al; (2022)	Outlines how the semi-structured interview is conducted in qualitative research
Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M. S. A., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022).	A methodological reflection of the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies.
Rabionet (2021)	Provides personal experience of learning about conducting Qualitative semi-structured interviews.
Kakilla (2021)	A discussion of the pros and cons of applying semi-structured interviews in qualitative research method.
Radford et al; (2021)	The impact of IBD fatigue on health-related quality of life: a qualitative semi-structured interview study
Fuller et al; (2021)	A content analysis based on semi-structured qualitative interviews
Janssens et al; (2019)	Semi-structured qualitative interviews in Europe and the USA
Smeele (2019)	Acceptance of contralateral reduction mammoplasty after oncoplastic breast conserving surgery: a semi-structured qualitative interview study
Pawa et al; (2017)	Building managed primary care practice networks to deliver better clinical care: a qualitative semi-structured interview study.
Bechet et al; (2016)	Hospital pharmacists seen through the eyes of physicians: qualitative semi-structured interviews.
Adams (2015)	It provides guidelines that can be used to develop an interview guide that adds structure to the interview process
Brown et al; (2015)	Supportive care needs and preferences of lung cancer patients: a semi-structured qualitative interview study.

The identification of previously published articles offered an essential basis for mapping previous knowledge of semi-structured interviews in the last ten years. The findings show that previous research based on the development of a semi-structured qualitative interview guide specifically for doctoral students is limited.

Although these articles in Table 1 offer great benefits for qualitative researchers, there is limited literature specifically on how doctoral students should develop a semi-structured qualitative interview guide.

Thus, the chapter's research question is: What are the development and procedural steps required to execute a rigorous doctoral semi-structured qualitative interview guide and data collection process?

Research objectives are:

- a. Are there challenges when developing semi-structured qualitative interview guides?
- b. What are the process and considerations when employing semi-structured qualitative interview for a doctoral study?

Next, the chapter will explain phases for the development of semi-structured qualitative interview. This includes reviewing previously acquired knowledge on the research topic. Understanding epistemological and ontological arguments underpinning semi-structured qualitative interview guide. In addition, ethical issues, drafting research questions the interview guide, field testing of the interview guide and data collection process are discussed,

REVIEWING PREVIOUSLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE

It is important to conduct an extensive literature review: by retrieving and using previous knowledge about a topic. Identifying what is not yet known about the topic will strengthen the call for further investigation. This phase also solidifies the doctoral researcher's acquaintance with the area of the research topic. It also requires doctoral researchers to critically assess the knowledge they have on the topic and to gain more information where it is required.

A literature review is a comprehensive overview of prior research regarding a specific topic. The benefits of conducting a literature review are:

- i. It gives doctoral researchers innovative ideas on how to determine where there are problems or flaws in existing research.
- ii. It enables doctoral researchers to place their research into a larger context so that they can show what new conclusions might result from their research.
- iii. It enables doctoral researchers to focus only on the aspects of those studies that are relevant for the purposes of their research.

- iv. Reviewing the literature demonstrates that doctoral researchers have a firm understanding of the topic. This gives them credibility and instills integrity into their overall research argument.

If the literature on the area of study is limited, patchy, or there are aspects of a topic that have not yet been examined. Also, if there are perspectives on the research topic that limited academic published articles have considered, doctoral researchers should seek out supplementary information by consulting industry experts published reports, Government publications, and academic conference papers on the topic. In addition, the literature review generates a conceptual basis for the interview guide (Kallio et al.; 2016; Crabtree et al., 2023). Furthermore, the literature reviewed should be grouped according to prevalent themes to construct the main interview questions. These questions should be arranged progressively and logically to help the researcher prepare for participant interviews.

UNDERSTANDING EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL NOTIONS UNDERPINNING SEMI-STRUCTURED QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The next phase of preparing an interview guide is significant. This phase ensures that the chosen research paradigm aligns with the approach and questions in the interview guide. Any choice depends on the epistemological and ontological motivations of the research in general. In fact, an exploration of these motives should be initiated with the decision to conduct research because deciding if an inquiry seeks an output that is more akin to knowledge (epistemology), (reality (ontology), or both is crucial to the selection of methods. The SSQI doctoral researcher must be clear on the philosophy guiding the research.

Research in the social sciences can seem more appropriate for the deductive and positivist frameworks of quantitative studies associated with epistemology (Dudovsky, 2024). These frameworks, which want to discover what is objective and fundamentally the case for a particular area – e.g., what percentage of the market does this or that brand have, or what impact does social media have on the mental health of young people - tend to perpetuate the epistemological assumptions attributed to their more commonly used research tool, the survey, (Garrard & Hyland, 2020).

However, they also rely on the ontological assumptions challenged by the inductive and phenomenological paradigm that positivism is often contrasted with (Dudovsky, 2024). Where positivism is an epistemology, the world and reality are mind-independent and objective and can be experienced and observed. But, speaking broadly, in phenomenology, the world, reality, is subjective and socially

constructed, i.e., mind dependent. So, ontology is pertinent to both the deductive and inductive, but the relevance of positivist epistemology may be less clear for the inductive because, within that framework, knowledge is a matter of an individual's perception, whereas, in the deductive framework, knowledge is factual and objective.

The contrast is interesting because, typically, the qualitative interviewer settles on the semi-structured interview out of a desire to know (epistemology) a particular reality (ontology) that they believe they will gain better access to through the first-person narrative. As a result, the researcher uses the semi-structured qualitative interview (SSQI) to know another individual's subjective experience, i.e., consciousness (phenomenology). This knowledge that the researcher might gain may be considered objective (Bedwei-Majdoub, 2023; Kölbel, 2019; Mulder, 2024) because it is from another person and has become known intersubjectively. Cooper-White (2014, p882) defines intersubjectivity as 'the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, between two persons ... as facilitated by empathy' and subjectivity as 'the perception or experience of reality from within one's own perspective (both conscious and unconscious) and limited by the boundary ... of one's own worldview.' In this context, the SSQI doctoral researcher assumes it is possible to discover more about a mind-independent objective world via others' mind-dependent subjective perceptions of it. Therefore, despite its association with phenomenology, it is untenable to completely dissociate the SSQI output from the objective (as defined in a positivist orbit).

For this reason, the epistemological and ontological notions underpinning semi-structured qualitative interviews, therefore implied in interview guides, are compared in the simple table (below) that enables the doctoral SSQI researcher to develop an interview guide to achieve consistency between their objectives and questions. This approach is taken to emphasize the point that the contents of the interview guide must be properly attuned to these notions and paradigms. The semi-structured doctoral SSQI researcher should be able to explain, whether in a thesis or at their viva, how particular questions are openings to knowledge, reality, or consciousness.

Pertinently, then, before developing interview guides and to promote the validity, reliability, and value of outputs, doctoral researchers should be clear on the justifications for their chosen research methodologies and tools, and how – with an attitude of reflexiveness while their own biases will be kept in check during the interview (Bedwei-Majdoub, 2021).

THE SSQI DOCTORAL RESEARCHER'S CONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Given that semi-structured qualitative interviews explore subjective perceptions and experiences of reality (Cooper-White, 2014), there is a clear sense that the doctoral SSQI researcher must be careful when setting out the methodology of the research, and when justifying the research tools applied. This is because from the epistemological and ontological perspective, and in view of the established role of phenomenology as the facilitator or connector between these fields, the researcher should use these frameworks to show how the research output can validly contribute to the knowledge of reality. Qualitative researchers can make this claim of contribution by illustrating that they have legitimately gained access to participants' subjective experiences within an intersubjective process. Moreover, they have been able to communicate intersubjectively, with the rigorous reflexiveness needed to recognize and control biases, using shared meanings. Following Kölbel's (2019) notion of approximate objectivity, it is possible for SSQI doctoral researchers to arrive at a shared meaning with interview participants when they keep a watch on biases by collecting and evaluating evidence.

Accordingly, Table 2 below summarises the key considerations when determining which research philosophy to adopt and the key points to note that justify the chosen position.

Table 2. Semi-Structured qualitative interviewer’s consideration of philosophy of methodology

	Phenomenology (the chosen methodology)	Epistemology in Positivism (for comparing with phenomenology to highlight the appropriateness and relevance of using SSQI)	Ontology (for explaining own worldview and potential biases and assumptions)
<i>The world/ reality</i>	Largely subjective, mind- dependent & socially constructed	Largely objective and mind-independent	<i>Ontological realism:</i> ontologically independent of the mind <i>Kantian ontological relativism:</i> what is known to human cognition rather than what is known as it is <i>Social ontology:</i> constructed through social interactions
<i>Broad Area</i>	The study of human experience	The study of knowledge	The study of being and beings
<i>Specific Domains</i>	Appearances & subjective experience: How do humans experience	Knowledge, reasoning, & understanding: How do humans know	Reality via structures of the world and the things that exist in it: What is ...
<i>Approach</i>	What appears to consciousness	Nature & limits of knowledge & cognitive success	Categories, concepts, properties, & relations between parts and whole, between particulars and universals
<i>Key themes</i>	Intentionality Phenomena Perception Self-consciousness (subjectivity) Consciousness of others (intersubjectivity) Time-consciousness Body awareness (Smith, n.d.)	What is knowledge? What is justification? Is knowledge justified true belief? Sources of knowledge (perception, observation, memory, reason, introspection) What is cognitive success & its limits? (Steup & Neta, 2020)	Material and immaterial existence and existences The categories of beings and entities in existence Identity & essences Properties of the social world The products of social interaction Mind-body relations (Epstein, 2024)

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Table 2. Continued

	Phenomenology (the chosen methodology)	Epistemology in Positivism (for comparing with phenomenology to highlight the appropriateness and relevance of using SSQI)	Ontology (for explaining own worldview and potential biases and assumptions)
<i>Access to what is objective v subjective?</i>	Approximate objectivity is possible through shared meaning	Some subjectivity in consideration of sources of knowledge	Social ontology aligns well with the notion of shared meanings in Phenomenology Ontological realism is complimentary to positivism as epistemology

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Table 2. Continued

	Phenomenology (the chosen methodology)	Epistemology in Positivism (for comparing with phenomenology to highlight the appropriateness and relevance of using SSQI)	Ontology (for explaining own worldview and potential biases and assumptions)
<i>SSQ Interviewer should use for...</i>	<p>Exploring how participants perceive or have experienced the phenomena being researched, and doing so in relation to the above themes</p> <p>Explaining and justifying use of the semi-structured interview, the questions used, the discussions during the interview, and the textual/content analysis of transcripts of the interview</p> <p>Contrasting with positivism as epistemology (to confirm its inappropriateness for the research being discussed, and the suitability of the qualitative mode)</p>	<p>Explaining assumptions about knowledge and addressing how they manifested in the research process</p> <p>Explaining or critiquing the validity of what participants claim to know</p> <p>Justifying own output as valid contribution to knowledge, and to do so in view of the integrity of the use of phenomenology</p> <p>Feeding into debates of objectivity/ subjectivity, what is knowledge and the sources of knowledge</p> <p>Using the above to emphasise the value of the research (axiology)</p>	<p>Explaining researcher’s own view of the world and reality to address biases, to explain approach to reflexivity, and to outline why readers should believe in (doxology) the context of research and its output</p> <p>Relating output to the business world and presenting or critiquing it as a snapshot of being and reality to explain the value of the research (axiology)</p> <p>Critiquing or reinforcing notion of reality or world as socially constructed</p> <p>Justifying area of further research put forward, i.e., as needed for a fuller picture of the “world” or reality researched.</p>
<i>Assumptions</i>	<p>There can be shared meanings through intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1999, cited in Woodruff-Smith, 2013)</p> <p>There can be immediacy of consciousness (Husserl 1991, cited in Mambroh, 2018)</p>	<p>Knowledge is possible.</p> <p>The world and reality can be observed and known</p> <p>There are limits to knowledge</p> <p>Objectivity can be approximate (Kölbel, 2019) and is evident in the ‘appropriateness and justification of knowledge claims’ (Bedweij-Majdoub, 2021, p113)</p>	<p>Depends on which ontology, e.g. in ontological realism the assumption is that there is a fixed and observable reality.</p> <p>But in social ontology, the social world is constructed through the products of human interaction.</p> <p>In Kantian ontological realism Reality is inaccessible but reality is what is in human mind.</p>

The onus is on the doctoral researcher to use semi-structured qualitative interviews to ensure an internally coherent research design that is reflected in the interview guide. The interview guide should inspire confidence that the methodology applied is justifiable. In terms of the philosophies presented in this section and how they

are referred to in the process of justifying the research design, they support the researcher's validity and reliability claims regarding the research output.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Ethical considerations in social science and business management research are paramount for avoiding any risk to the physical and psychological health and social well-being of participants (Denzin et al., 2023; Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, before commencing the fieldwork, the researcher should seek ethical approval from the Higher Education Ethics Committee (Mautghner et al., 2012).

The doctoral researcher must obtain a signed consent form from each participant. The process of obtaining consent consists of the following:

- (a) Consent should be given freely (voluntary), participants should understand what is being asked of them, and all participants must be competent to consent.
- (b) Participants need to be adequately informed about the research and have a power of freedom of choice to state their willingness to participate in the research.
- (c) Each participant should be informed that they have the option to withdraw at any time from the research if they no longer wish to participate (Bryman & Bell;2022; Saunders et al., 2009).

It is important to note that there are some instances when verbal consent or assent is used (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). Particularly, in communities where prospective participants may not know how to read and or write and they value more the spoken word than the written one. In such situations, it is important to read the informed consent statements and audio-record the verbal consent or assent of prospective participants.

By adopting an ethical approach in the entire process, the researcher would be conforming to credibility to demonstrate how the researcher proposes to ensure that the portrayal of participants' evidence matches the participants' perceptions (Goldim & Fernandes, 2023). Also, paying attention to trustworthiness criteria when planning and presenting the research proposal is vital to convince readers that the research is of a high quality.

DRAFTING THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide refers to a list of questions that the researcher intends to ask participants during the interview. Drafting the research questions is one of the decisive factors in the success or failure of the research project. How questions are

formulated exerts a strong influence on the design of the research. The interview guide should be formulated as clearly and unambiguously as possible and should start as early in the life of the research project. As soon as the literature review is completed the research questions need to be refined and more focused, and they should also be narrowed and revised (Flick, 2002, p.64).

It is important to create the agenda for the interview outline of planned topics and questions to be addressed in a sequential order. This process is typically guided by an interview guide which helps the researcher to direct the conversation toward the topics and issues the researcher plans to explore or examine. Interview guides vary from highly scripted to loose wording, but they all share certain features: They help the researcher to prepare what to ask about, in what sequence, how to pose each question, and how to pose follow-up questions. They provide guidance about what to do or say next after the participant has answered each question (Bell & Bryman, 2022; Crabtree et al., 2023).

The rigorous development of semi-structured qualitative interview guides produces trustworthy results (Blandford, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2022). The development of this requires the use of various skills, such as self-awareness and careful planning, including highly developed interpersonal, emotional, and ethical skills (Bell & Bryman, 2023; Blandford, 2013).

FIELD TESTING OF THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Field testing is a technique where the preliminary interview guide is assessed with the potential study participants. This helps the development of a semi-structured qualitative interview process and provides crucial information for the implementation of the interviews (Bell et al; 2023; Turner, 2010). The importance of an interview guide is to generate exclusive, in-depth, and spontaneous responses from participants (Crabtree et al, 2023; Krauss et al., 2009). It should be noted that the participants often have a disposition towards being ‘good’ informants, which can affect the validity of their responses. Thus, the quality of the information is a product of the researcher’s skill and preparation, as well as the quality of the interview guide (Denzin et al; 2023).

Start with the pilot test with a few participants (five to eight) can be the decisive step in refining the interview questions and guide. Assessing the interview questions helps the researcher to reformulate the interview questions to be included in the guide and to amend the order in which they are offered (Crabtree et al., 2023; Selvi, 2019).

These considerations will improve the quality of data collection (Selvi, 2021). Field-testing the interview guide also provides critical information such as clarity about what the question is asking, removing incongruous leading questions

(Bercht et al., 2024), and highlighting any interviewer bias (Crabtree et al., 2023). Moreover, field-testing with the interview guide could produce useful information about research integrity: it improves the pre-assessment of research ethics and the researcher's ability to conduct data collection (Maher, 2016; Tate et al; 2023). Furthermore, field-testing helps the researcher to become familiar with the interview questions and to establish participants' understanding of the questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It helps the researcher to decide if the format of the interview questions could be re-formulated to be more practical.

Moreover, the effectiveness of the interview questions could be assessed, and follow-up questions could be refined to improve and added to interview questions (Crabtree et al, 2023). It helps to make the questions more relevant (Chenail, 2011; Krauss et al., 2009) and determine whether they truly elicited the participants' varied perceptions and experiences of events (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). In addition, field testing enables the researcher to decide how much time would be needed for each question (Crabtree et al., 2023) or if there were other flaws or limitations in the interview questions design (Denzin et al., 2023). After the first interview during field testing, the researcher should reassess the sequence of questions and identify what works well, and what needs to be modified. Some questions and topics may need to be added, subtracted, expanded, condensed, recast, or reordered (Maher, 2013).

Ongoing reassessments of the interview guide will enable the researcher to pinpoint areas for improvement early, and this will promote the development of an appropriate and well-crafted interview guide. When planning the field testing, it is important to consider questions of recruitment and relationship management such as:

- i. Who the appropriate participants are and how they should be recruited
- ii. Where and when to collaborate with participants in data gathering
- iii. How to engage with participants from the start to the end of the research project

Creswell and Báez (2020) explain the importance of selecting the appropriate participants for interviews. They suggest that the researcher should employ sampling strategies such as criterion-based sampling or critical case sampling to recruit participants who will be willing to provide the most credible information openly and honestly to the research project. It might be easier to conduct the interviews with participants in a comfortable environment or a venue requested by participants where they do not feel restricted or uncomfortable sharing information.

Furthermore, approaches to recruitment depend on the purpose of the research project and the kinds of participants needed. Approaches include:

- a. **Direct Contact:** approaching individuals in the workplace, with authorisation from line managers if needed, or approaching people in public spaces, with due regard for safety, informed consent, etc
- b. **Mediated Contact:** an introduction by someone else, such the Head of Department in a company, friends, acquaintances, or other participants.
- c. **Advertising:** on noticeboards in physical space, through targeted email lists, via online platforms, social networks, and social media.

What matters is that the approach to recruitment is effective in terms of recruiting both a suitable number of participants and appropriate participants for the overall aim and objectives of the research project (Goldim & Fernandes, 2023; Saunders, 2012). Two questions that come up frequently are how many participants should be included in a research project? The answer is “it depends” – on the aim and objectives of the research, and the available resources.

In practice, there are often pragmatic factors that determine how many participants to involve in a research project. One might be the time available: it can take a long time to recruit each participant, to arrange and conduct data gathering, and analyze the data. Another might be the availability of participants who satisfy the recruitment criteria, for example, performing a particular role in an organisation or having a particular experience (Bell & Bryman, 2022).

Throughout the recruitment and interview process, it is important to remain aware of participants’ motivations for participating and their expectations of the outcome, whether this is, for example, the expectation of novel interaction designs or simply to gain the experience of participating (Bell et al., 2023). If doctoral researchers intend to conduct interviews with diverse groups, questions should be tailored to each specific group. They should ensure they budget enough time to carefully draft and edit the interview guide and questions, allowing for several iterations and feedback from the supervisory team.

When introducing sensitive topics where participants may have reasons for sharing or withholding certain information, or for behaving in particular ways, it is also important to be aware of motivations and their effects on the data that is gathered. Such considerations imply the need to (i) review data-gathering techniques to maximize the likelihood of gathering valid data and (ii) reflect on the data quality and implications for the findings.

USING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DATA COLLECTION PROCESSES

Qualitative data gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews to uncover detailed narratives and individual experiences related to participant's perception of events. It is necessary for the researcher to have assessed the interview guide prior to scheduling interviews with participants (Bell et al; 2023). The interview process provides a useful way for the doctoral researcher to learn about the world of others. It has been found to enable reciprocity between the researcher and participants (Bell et al., 2023; Galletta, 2013;). Interviews conducted in a haphazard manner with little preparation could lead to disappointing results and will be both a wasted opportunity and a waste of resources (Clark et al., 2022; Crabtree et al., 2023).

The semi-structured qualitative interview allows the researcher flexibility for posing questions, so the interview is like having a conversation whilst maintaining focus on issues based on the main research topic. Additionally, the researcher can ask follow-up questions based on the participants' responses (Bell et al., 2022). In doing so, the researcher is creating a space for participants to share information and their experiences as openly as they wish.

In comparison to other types of interviewing, the semi-structured qualitative interview technique gives the doctoral researcher a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing actor (Blandford, 2013; Crabtree et al., 2023). Moreover, the researcher has a bigger influence on focusing the interview on issues crucial to the study (Bell et al., 2022). The standard interview process is as follows:

During the interview, start with a comfortable conversation to break the ice:

1. Use introductory questions: "Can you tell me about [...]" "Do you remember an occasion when [...]" "What happened in the episode mentioned?"
2. Putting positive questions first: "What are the good things about X?" or "What do you like about Y?" The advantage of this approach is that some participants, once they start with a critical tone, find it difficult to say anything positive, as if they may be worried that they would be contradicting themselves or down-playing their grievances. Next ask questions of areas that need improvement, always maintaining a neutral, nonjudgmental voice tone.
3. Decide in advance which questions are vital and which ones are optional. In theory, semi-structured qualitative interviews can be lengthy. As part of the preparation strategy omit questions asking for simple facts that can be retrieved from an organisation's website or public domain (unless you want to assess participants understanding of those facts).

4. Moving on to other questions: to refer to the use of key questions to finish off one part of the interview and open another. “I would now like to introduce another topic [...]”
5. Follow-up questions: to direct questioning to what has just been said by nodding and repeating significant words from the participants.
6. Specifying questions: to develop more precise descriptions from general information from participants: “What did you think happened there?” “How did you react to what you heard or saw?”
7. Direct questions: to elicit direct responses “Having received that information, what did you do?” After any unrecognised acronyms from participants, prompt them to elaborate by asking, “Could you expand on that?” Ask what acronyms mean when used by participants. It is good to do so before moving to the next question. If the information provided by participants is unclear, do not hesitate to obtain a clarification. When participants drift into extraneous territory, wait until they finish before gently bringing them back to a priority topic.
8. Indirect questions: use these to pose ancillary questions such as “How do you believe managers thought of these actions by staff members?”
9. Silences: allow pauses so that the participants have ample time to reflect and break the silence themselves with significant information.
10. Interpreting questions: rephrase participant’s answer to clarify and interpret rather than to explore current information “So you mean that [....]?” “Is it correct that you felt that.”
11. If English is not a participant’s first language avoid using acronyms. Take care not to talk down to them.
12. Search for ways to remove any stigma that might attach to certain answers. Rather than asking them to identify what is “bad,” ask about “areas that need improvement or further development”
13. Some participants may refer to certain documents that the researcher may not yet have. Keep a list of any such documents that are of interest (and not subject to privacy restrictions) so these items can be collected immediately after the interview from participants if possible or, if not, ask for a digital copy or these documents to be sent in the post. The post-interview thank-you note/email can serve as a convenient vehicle for a reminder for participants to send the documents
14. Demographic questions such as marital status, their age, their level of education, their income, are best saved until the end because these questions raise fundamental identity issues such as revealing one’s personal profile, it might be best to ask these questions in the broadest usable categories, instead of exact amounts (for example, asking participants to select from among large income ranges rather than asking for precise annual income).

15. Probing questions: Keep your questions open-ended to draw out more narratives. Probing also allows for interaction between the researcher and participants to build a rapport (Hair et al., 2019). Probing questions are non-verbal and verbal. Non-verbal probing refers to maintaining silence and letting the participant to think aloud (Bell et al., 2023; Kallio et al., 2016).
16. Verbal probes include repeating or rephrasing the participant's words, expressing interest with verbal agreement, or giving the impression that the researcher is aware of some relevant information. Furthermore, probing assures the reliability of data through by getting the participants to clarify and elaborate on some pertinent issues that they voiced. This would enable the interviewer to elicit valuable and additional information by further exploring the participant's responses and guiding them to remember something from their memory, and clarifying any discrepancies that may arise during the interview
17. The researcher should prompt the participant for more descriptive answers by using what, who, where, when, and how questions, and in some cases, why. For instance: "Could you say more about that matter or issue?" "Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?" "Do you have further examples of this?"
18. Using open-ended questions allows for enriched data to be collected from participants. From time to time, it can be constructive to restate concisely in one or two sentences, using the participant's own words of what was said. This technique of active listening reinforces that the researcher has understood the points made.
19. Ensure that all interviews are digitally audio-recorded with the permission of each participant. This enables the researcher to have a record of the interviews and interrogate information provided by participants for detailed analysis.
 - .20. At the end of each interview, give participants the opportunity to indicate any additional information that they consider relevant to the research.

CONCLUSION

Semi-structured qualitative interview is an exciting data collection method. It yields rich data once the doctoral researcher is clear on why they should choose it over other data collection methods. Moreover, once the philosophy of methodology has been decided and articulated in clear and justifiable terms to coagulate the research process. It is important to note that the semi-structured qualitative interview guide and process are non-linear and require constant reflection and reframing of the research project, including the revision of research questions. The steps and

considerations outlined in this chapter facilitate this reflexivity. The considerations outlined should be noted by doctoral researchers when designing a qualitative semi-structured guide. Employing the step-by-step guide provided in this chapter will assist doctoral researchers in overcoming challenges during the data collection process to ensure a valid and reliable research output.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

An Interview Guide: A document that enables the researcher to structure the way they conduct interviews with participants. It helps the researcher to know what to ask about and in what order

Doctoral Students: are individuals registered in a doctoral degree programme in a university or Higher Education Institution.

Intersubjectivity: the cognitive connection between people sharing experiences, knowledge, perspectives, perceptions, understanding etc. with each other

Qualitative Research: involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a an unknow or generate the latest ideas for research.

Reflexiveness: questioning and making explicit the assumptions that ground the methods of the discipline and concurrently the investigator's role in delimiting or even constituting the object of study,' (Suleiman, p4). Reflexiveness is used to control the impact of bias on interactions with participants and when analysing transcripts from those interactions. Reflexiveness helps researchers become more aware of their assumptions and presuppositions.

