

# Ethnographical Qualitative Research via Interviewing: Part I, Countering Objections and Probing

Marilyn Books

An interviewer can ruin an interview by positively or negatively influencing the validity and reliability of questionnaire responses (Frey and Oishi, 1995, p. 27). In fact, an interview may never be staged in the first place if the researcher cannot surmount the obstacle of interviewee objection. These are but two of the challenges confronting Japanese university students who elect to write a graduation thesis (*sotsuron*) in the qualitative style based on in-depth interviews. The main purpose of the research was to produce a simplified interview manual for such students. The scope of this project was delimited to the objections voiced by prospective candidates and the use of probing, and was determined from interview results of “fella” researchers, largely from Canada, who definitively pointed to a need to train new recruits to the social sciences disciplines particularly discouraging *a priori* reasoning of the interlocutor. Following secondary research into the selected topics, primary research was conducted in the form of in-depth interviews, twenty in total.

**Key words :** Interviewing, countering objections, probing, ethnographical qualitative research

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## I Introduction

Altering the dimension of meaning of questions or responses through biased interviewing techniques or inappropriate clarifying and probing can positively or negatively influence the validity and reliability of responses. Thus can an interviewer absolutely ruin an interview (Frey and Oishi, 1995, p. 27). Indeed, an interchange may never transpire at all if the ethnographer finds the interviewee objection insuperable. While everyone asks questions every day, and everyone virtually interviews others daily, few people gain the expertise to carry out in-depth research interviews without training. In particular, students of second languages encounter great difficulties with the above-mentioned, resulting in such woes as item non-response and reduced response rate. Qualitative research has not only been accepted as an important methodology in the academic community, it is lauded and encouraged by research organizations and university committees, and one of the most popular qualitative methods adopted is to carry out lengthy face-to-face interrogations (Books, 1996a, 1996c, 1997a; Hodgson, 1987, 21). At more and more Japanese universities, students are urged to write a qualitative graduation thesis and often choose “the in-person survey.” Once mastered, an important benefit is that the system can be applied to every discipline from political studies to medicine, and to non-academic areas such as business and finance.

The main purpose was to produce an easy-to-follow interview manual for such university students. The end goal was to act as the advisor for a select group of seminar students who would employ the gleanings in partial fulfillment of the requirements for their Bachelor of Arts degrees. The manual should also help other students, other professors, and people in many other fields as mentioned above.

The scope of this preliminary project was delimited to the objections voiced by prospective candidates and the use of probing. Later work will choose from design, interview construction, administration, population, logistics, sampling, tabulation, and cross-tabulation. A careful screening of the literature and findings was made to “uncomplicate” the material for students of a second language. The scope was determined from my experience with previous years of seminar students attempting the interview style of research, plus my interview results of “fella” researchers, largely from Canada, who definitively pointed to a need to train new recruits to the field in those two aspects. Fella is a term I am adopting for my female contributors; by chance they were all female. They were researchers and authors—some with specializations as journalists, newspaper columnists,

and television anchorwomen.

A linguistic consideration was that since all of my present students are female, the use of the female gender of relevant terms was employed in this paper.

## II Definitions

Definitions have been provided here for some of the major terms, whereas some other definitions have been incorporated in the body of the text. If the definition came from Frey and Oishi (1995), only the page number was provided.

Detail-oriented probes: follow-up questions used to delve deeper into the participant's replies, employing the basic W5 and how questions (who, what, when, where, and why) in order to obtain a more comprehensive and explicit picture of some activity or experience. (Patton, 1990, p. 325)

Ethnographic interviewing: surveying based on the discipline of cognitive anthropology in which questions are specifically phrased to elicit cultural data (Marshall and Rossman, 1995, p. 81)

Interviewer tactics: those decisions the interviewer must make about ... questions and probes. Some of these decisions are part of the advance planning and some are made on the spot in the give-and-take of the interview process. (Gorden in Millar, Crute, and Hargie, 1992, p. 109)

Item non-response: frequency with which a given item simply is not answered, or the answer is uninformative, such as "don't know" or "no opinion," or may not seem to make sense. (p. 28-29)

Open-ended questions: ones that do not offer response choices. Respondents are completely free to frame their answer. (p. 26)

Response rate: the degree to which the surveyor is successful in obtaining cooperation from all eligible respondents in a sample, that is, how often they are reached and agree to participate. The most informative way to calculate the response rate is to divide the number of completed interviews by the number of eligible respondents, which could differ on important factors (e.g., education level); hence a non-response bias is introduced. Also, if the response rate is low, the sample may become too small to produce precise and reliable findings. (p. 26)

Tandem informants: interviewees who recommend parallel candidates as participants. (Spradley, 1979, p. 52)

### III Methodology

Two methodologies were employed, the first being that involved in conducting secondary research into the preferred ways to facilitate dealing with reluctant candidates and encouragement or clarification. This was followed by primary research; I conducted twenty long interviews of other authors, interviewers, and interview researchers to discover strategies used to accomplish this task.

### IV Research Findings

#### 1. Handling Interview Objections

The format for the presentation of the objections was adapted and expanded from the exercises in the appendix of *How to Conduct Interviews by Telephone and in Person* by Frey and Oishi (1995, p. 150). Many exemplary refusal utterances and their foils were offered by my interviewees who concurred with me that it is preferable to train learners in this skill rather than suggesting tandem informants; others came from years of counseling seminar students. I added the terms “graduation thesis,” “university project,” “term paper,” or “final paper” (*repouto* in Japanese) for the intended audience. The query to my co-researchers was, “Please tell me how you would respond if the person you wanted to interview said the following when you requested an interview.”

a. “I’m too busy now, but you can talk to my neighbor, Mrs. Smith. She likes to talk to people.”

1. Thank you, but this is for my graduation thesis, and I would like to interview not only people who like to talk, but also those who are less inclined to speak. Can you help me out with my paper, please?
2. If you are busy now, can I come to see you another time when you have time? I really need to ask some questions and interview a person just like you. Would you kindly cooperate?
3. Thank you for that suggestion, but it was your name that was specifically chosen at random. May I interview you at a later date, please, perhaps early next week?
4. Thank you, but my study does not require me to talk with the people who like to talk. You are exactly the person that I want to interview; so will you aid me with my project, please?

- b. "I don't know. How did you get my name anyway?"
1. Your friend told me that you were a good candidate, so I would like to interview you. It will be kept confidential. Could you cooperate with my *repouto* (paper), please?
  2. I heard of you from your ... (workplace, institution). I need opinions from people who have lived in different cultures for my final paper. I'll keep everything confidential, so would you participate, please?
  3. I got your name from ..., but I don't know anything about you. I will keep this anonymous, so could you help me, please?
- c. "I'm sorry, but I never give my opinion to others. How I feel about things is my business."
1. Your name will never appear anywhere, and I will be happy to provide you with a copy of the report. So could I interview you, please?
  2. I will keep everything to myself and never reveal who answered this interview. Your opinions are very important for my university research. Could you please participate in my interview?
  3. Your opinion will be valuable to the whole project because of your circumstances, so I really need you. Would you kindly consent to an interview today?
  4. I need information about individual emotions from a person who is of another culture as you are. Such people aren't in great numbers. I guarantee anonymity. May I please interview you?
- d. "Come in. We are having a little gabfest, but you can ask your questions anyway. I am sure my friends will not mind, and they can help out if there is a question I cannot answer."
1. Thank you, but I would like to know your opinions, not others this time. So could I interview you, please?
  2. Thank you, but I would like to do an interview privately so can I make an appointment and come another time when you are free, please?
  3. Thank you, but I need to interview people individually because I require information from a person exactly like you with your background. If you don't want to answer or can't answer, I don't mind but the academic study is set up for individuals. Can I please interview you at another time, let's say Tuesday morning?
- e. "I can't talk right now. Come back in three months when I have more time."
1. I hear you; you're busy today, and you probably think it's a long interview, but

- it isn't. In that case could you please make it some time next week?
2. This is a short interview, and it has to be completed in two weeks. Besides, it has been difficult to find such a perfect candidate as you. May I interview you earlier than that, please?
  3. I understand. It's not a long interview. Would you have a short time that is sooner than that, perhaps early next week?
  4. I understand that you are busy, but three months from now is too late. You are a special person, and I need you in particular. Can I interview you sooner, please?
  5. (If three months were all right): That's fine, could you please tell me when you have time then, in June?
- f. "I don't know anything about the topic. You can talk to my wife. She is familiar with it."
1. Thank you, but I am glad to interview people who don't know about this topic. In fact, I need that; so then, could we proceed today, please?
  2. Thank you, I'm sure your wife is very knowledgeable, but it doesn't matter if you don't know about the topic. I don't expect you to know all about it. I really need your input; so could we please ...?
  3. Thank you, but it's OK that you feel you don't know about the topic. My questions are not difficult. [This isn't a test or anything like that.] Now may I please interview you?
  4. Thank you, but I only need to know how you feel, not how much you know about the topic. There are no right or wrong answers. Can you help me, please?
- g. "I don't care about the topic. I want to tell you how I feel about another issue."
1. I understand, but I need your opinion on this topic. Can I talk to you about your issue after the interview, please?
  2. I would like to interview people who have different feelings about the topic, and that includes people who aren't interested in the topic; so I would like to interview you, please.
  3. You can talk about your issue, too, but can we talk about my topic as well? May I have your kind participation?
- h. "There is no need for you to come to my house. Can't we do this interview over the phone?"
1. I would like to go and meet you because interviewing on the phone might cause misinterpretations. Can I make an appointment and come to see you, please?

2. I would like to interview you face to face. Would you mind my coming to your house to have the interview?
  3. I need to do an in-person interview because the phone is just not the same. Actually, it's better for you, I've found. Can you grant me an interview in person next week Monday, please?
  4. Actually, there are some things that you need to look at, so it can't be done on the phone. Can we make an appointment in the next day or so, please?
- i. "I can't do this at my apartment. Let's meet at Johnny's Bar down the street."
1. Thank you for that suggestion, but I'm afraid the place would be too noisy to do an interview, so could I interview you at another place where it is quiet, like a coffee shop?
  2. Thank you for that suggestion, but I have to record this interview on tape so can I talk with you at a more quiet place, like the Renoir? Besides, it will probably take less time.
  3. Thank you for that suggestion, but I would have to conduct the interview in a place with fewer distractions. So could we arrange something tomorrow or the next day, please?
  4. Thank you for that suggestion, but Johnny's Bar is a lively place so I wouldn't be able to hear your voice clearly. How about a place that is quiet like Royal Host?
- j. "Just how did you get my name, and what happens to the results?"
1. One of my friends knows you and she suggested my interviewing you. Your opinion will be useful data to my research. All names will be changed, so the real identities will never be revealed. I can send you a copy of the results. Could I interview you, please?
  2. I got your name from your friend. Your name will never be mentioned but your opinions will be important information in my research. So then may I interview you, please?
  3. Your name was drawn at random (describe the process). Everything will be anonymous. I could send you the final paper. So could we set a day now, please?
  4. I received your name from your friend but I don't know anything about you. The contents of the interview will be used only for my study, and will be anonymous. Can I please interview you?

k. "I'm sorry, but I'm not feeling very well."

1. I'm sorry to hear that. What about if I called back in a few days?

2. I'm sorry to hear that. I would be glad to call back in a few days. Would that be OK?

l. "Oh, I think I'm too old."

1. I really need older people's opinions. It's required in my project, so could I please interview you today?

2. The opinions of older people are not only important, but they are necessary. So may I have your kind participation?

3. I actually need your opinion. In order for the results of this survey to be representative, I have to have older people participate. In addition, it gives you the opportunity to voice your concerns and thoughts. So then, may I please interview you today?

My informants and my observations tell me that, as a general observation, the most powerful comebacks convey these messages (phrases not actually used):

a. "I need you. You are my target audience. You are special."

b. "This will be kept secret."

c. "I will prove the anonymity to you. I will give you my completed report."

Additionally, acknowledging the respondent's position with "Thank you," "I understand," or "I'm sorry to hear that" goes a long way toward winning over the candidate. The addition of "Please" or "kindly" at the end is another softener that is useful. A direct, explicit request informing the potential interviewee what is desired (participation) is necessary at the end of any response. Although "May I please interview you?" is acceptable, it behooves the researcher to convey the sense of being in the other person's shoes. Hence expressions like "Would you kindly participate?" or "Could you help me out, please?" or "Could you kindly cooperate?" may produce a greater response rate.

The above list of objections and counters are not exhaustive, but pinpoint the most common failure points of the prospective interviewer. We move on to the second most problematic area in the interview process, probing.

## 2. Probing

Probing is an essential and difficult skill to master. In rudimentary terms it could be

described as using follow-up clarifying questions, or a technique used to get more information when a response is unclear or incomplete. To probe the interviewee in Douglas' *Creative Interviewing* is to "gently nudge her with the reins" (1985, p. 138). Komter prefers to use the words "prompt" and "completer" throughout her interview book. Probing should form part of the arsenal of interviewer tactics. Probes motivate the respondent to say more, to alleviate item non-response; they are useful in obtaining complete responses. They get the interviewee talking, and happy to expand on topics and also motivate interviewees to reply to more sensitive questions. Frey and Oishi present this explanation of sensitive queries:

Ones that a respondent may be uncomfortable answering. Questions about finances, sexuality, illegal behavior (e.g., drug use), or embarrassing events (e.g., filing bankruptcy or being arrested) may be considered "sensitive" by respondents. (1995, p. 28)

Jucker, in *News Interviews*, encourages probing as a means of extending the interviewer's utterances, thereby lengthening that of the participant, as he delineates the Matarazzo effect:

There is a correlation between the average duration of utterance of the interviewer (DOU[A]) and the average duration of utterance of the interviewee (DOU[B]), i.e. the longer the questions are on average in an interview, the longer will be the average duration of the answers. This is the Matarazzo effect. (1986, p. 34)

Mishler reiterates that for generations, researchers have tried to standardize questions and responses to minimize the effects of unavoidable variations in interview contexts. Then he abruptly states, "The thrust of my argument is that these efforts have failed." He continues on to wholeheartedly support the use of probes (1986, p. 26-27). Oppenheim supports probes but cautions on the timing in order not to inadvertently influence the speaker, if the probe is in the form of additional categories, and "if we are interested in the subjective meanings attached to the concept [word or theme]" (1992, p. 53). He recommends using probes after a more global, wide-ranging question.

Clarification is a type of probing, used by interviewers when the answer is not complete or is imprecise, or when a respondent has not understood the question (Frey and Oishi, 1995, p. 27). One of my first interviewees offered this overall advice:

Listen and steer the conversation with as few words as possible. Ask more closed and probing questions to cover the areas about which you are not clear. Probe until you have resolved the query.

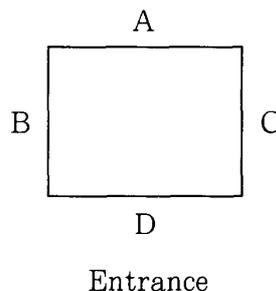
This section contains the responses of my interviewees, offering their best techniques. It demonstrates that probing is not just paraphrasing and repetition; it also involves using visual aids, offering explanations, expressing ignorance, and setting the stage.

a. Visual aids

A visual aid is one such “clarifier” as mentioned in the section above. Visual aids are items that interviewees can look at to help them understand questions, especially complex questions, ones that require lengthy explanations or contain numerous response categories. Participants can keep track of the response options, and answer them more accurately. As such, aide-memoires such as charts, maps, pictures, and lists, are valuable tools for in-person surveys. I have discovered that in a “cold-call interview”—one in which the interviewee is not provided with the questions in advance (although they are made aware of the general topic) — three or more lengthy responses is all that many participants can handle orally. The ethnographer briefly departs from the oral modality, hands the printed question to the participant along with a pencil or pen. Here is a visual in which the respondent was required to write the “title” of the people in different places.

Please arrange these four people of different status in each chair.

- a. A person of higher status (Example: a professor)
- b. Yourself
- c. A person of equal status (a fellow student)
- d. A person of lower status (freshman)





Contrast questions are often asked by the ethnographer who endeavors to find out what an informant means by the various terms used in his lexis, as meaning emerges from the contrasts implicit in any language. Contrast questions enable the ethnographer to discover the meaning which informants employ to distinguish the objects and events in their world. A typical contrast question would be, "What's the difference between a bass and a northern pike?" (Spradley, 1979, p. 60)

c. Expressing Ignorance

This is a useful ploy to probe the subject. It can be done in many ways, one of which Spradley describes. The questioner says or implies that she does not know about something, even a simple thing like the job of a waitress. This prepares the way for the informant to give a more thorough ethnographic explanation. The ethnographer asks the informant "to agree that the ethnographer is truly ignorant." Spradley considers this a special kind of descriptive question called a "grand tour question," explained below (1979, p. 61-62).

d. Setting the Stage

Before asking the actual open-ended question, the researcher states that she is going to ask one, thus preparing the informant. The descriptive "grand tour question," is not a simple statement, but repeated phrases, expanding on the basic question. Expanding allows the informant time to think, to prepare her answer. Another ploy that can transpire concurrently is to express cultural ignorance, usually prefacing the repetition of questions.

Ethnographer: Well, let me begin with a simple question. I've never been to Brady's Bar and I don't know what takes place there on a typical night. Even when I've been to other bars, it's usually for an hour or so, never an entire evening as a waitress would spend. Could you start at the beginning of an evening, say a typical night at Brady's Bar, and describe to me what goes on? Like, what do you do when you first arrive, then what do you do next? What are some of the things you would have to do on most nights, and then go on through the evening right up until you walk out the door and leave the bar? (Spradley, 1979, p. 62)

Whatever answers the participant provides is an opportunity to reiterate the

descriptive question. Some interviewees will talk for fifteen or twenty minutes without stopping; others pause to be sure they are doing the right thing.

Yet another strategy that sets the stage is that of Douglas in which he warns of probing, and reveals the outline of the interrogation.

I also tell them the general evolutionary structure of the interview—that we are going to go from the facts, to some probing by me and maybe to a cooperative search for a more general, mutual understanding (1985, p. 91).

#### e. Repetition and Paraphrasing

Another important ethnographic element is repeating. In several different ways the question or explanation is repeated. Drake terms this “restatement” and offers that it is one of the most effective devices. The ethnographer, having listened to the utterances of the participant, phrases them in wording of his own (1989, p. 5). Repetition is often used for structural questions, which enable the ethnographer to discover information about domains, the basic units in an informant’s cultural knowledge. They allow us to find out how informants have organized their knowledge. Structural questions usually involve detail-oriented probes, examples of which are: “What are all the different kinds of arguments they got into?” and “How would you characterize all the stages in getting to an agreement?” Structural questions are often repeated, so that if an informant identified six types of activities, the ethnographer might paraphrase and encourage expansion, “Can you think of any other kind of activities you would do as a conflict resolver?” (Spradley, 1979, p. 60). Hodgson (1987) purports the value of probing by repetition in this closing anecdote in a medical setting:

I remember being told about a medical survey where an interviewer, following a questionnaire, asked an obviously asthmatic man, “Do you suffer from shortness of breath when you walk upstairs?” To which he replied, “No.” Since she felt this was a curious answer from someone who seemed to have difficulty breathing at all, the interviewer broke away from her prepared questions and asked the subject why he responded in this way. He replied that he didn’t *suffer* from shortness of breath, because he always took good care to go upstairs very slowly! He had understood the question to be about how much discomfort his breathing problems caused him, rather than what his breathing problems were. He was keen to point out how much he had

adapted his behavior to cope with his medical condition (p. 79-80).

When a neophyte interviewer encounters a tight-lipped interviewee she often becomes fixated with the use of repetition and paraphrasing, but this section introduced several other novel, catchy ways to entice a participant to produce and/or elaborate responses.

The issues of the use of gestures; specific wording of probing questions; responding approvingly; pausing briefly after the participant has spoken; and giving an opinion are not included in this short report.

## V Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions

A few people have a natural talent and without any training can interview brilliantly and make reliable decisions. Most people don't fall into that category but, because we have spent a fair proportion of our lives in talking to people, we quite naturally believe that we are good at it. A good interview is a conversation with a clear purpose. What we often don't notice when comparing our everyday conversations to an interview is that, in everyday conversations, we very often don't know what the purpose is before we start. Unfortunately research interviews often go wrong for the same reason. Hodgson adds that sometimes the interviewee doesn't know what the purpose of the meeting is, either (1987, p. 21).

These problems and others were addressed in this paper, and various solutions to counter them were offered, guided by the contributions of this project's interviewees, many noted in their fields. Taken on total, one of the biggest problems facing an interviewer is how to handle interviewee rejection. In particular, the assurance of confidentiality surfaces frequently. According to Frey and Oishi, confidentiality is:

Assurance given respondents that identifying information known about them (e.g., name, telephone number, and address) will not be revealed in any way. The issue with confidentiality is the ability to convince respondents that their identity can and will be kept secret. When respondents fear that confidentiality cannot be ensured, response rates may be lower. Problems with sample coverage and response rates affect the generalizability of a survey's findings because those who are interviewed may be different from those who are not. (1995, p. 26)

Occasionally I registered surprise at certain suggested responses to possible objections that may be given by my interviewees, but was assured by the other experienced interviewers that, indeed, they utter these comebacks, and that they work. There is general agreement that the three most puissant aspects to convince the prospective interviewee to cooperate are confidentiality, exclusivity, and evidence, as mentioned above.

As for general conclusions about dealing with objections to the interview by reluctant persons, it could be said that as a matter of course that the purpose of the interview should be stated at the outset. This is so even if an objection was not presented. Thereby, objections are erased and acceptance is more likely. The researcher should start by telling each interviewee what is going to happen, what the expectations are, and how long she estimates the whole procedure will last, even if they have already been told in an email or verbally on the phone. Additionally, the survey conductor can outline the interview plan as well.

Also, in relation to probing, by setting an early pattern in the interview of getting the interviewee to talk freely, when it progresses to the harder probing parts, it will be easier for the interviewee to relate honestly the information that is required.

Answers to sensitive, complex, and open-ended questions may compromise validity and reliability if not asked in a way that ensures respondent comprehension. Visual aids and certain questions and response options help to enhance comprehension. However, when the interviewer is skilled in techniques, questioning is standardized, and validity and reliability are increased, making responses more comparable from one respondent to the next. Data quality is thus enhanced.

The purpose of this research was to gather and develop successful interviewing techniques to pass on to seniors in seminar, and indeed, an interview mini-guidebook was begun. The procedures uncovered in the publication should help the interviewers avoid many of the pitfalls associated with the act and art of questioning. Other professors who are entrusted with counseling senior students in writing their graduating theses can be guided by the trials and errors revealed in this study. With the interview such a popular and valuable research tool, it is of paramount importance to master it. Interviewing is a skill, and like any other skill it is possible to learn to do it consistently and competently.

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