CHAPTER

8 STRUCTURE OF THE RESPONSIVE INTERVIEW

IN THIS CHAPTER:

INTRODUCTION

Responsive interviews are built around main questions, follow-up questions, and probes that together elicit the rich data that speak to your research question. ***Main questions*** begin a discussion about each separate part of your research question. ***Follow-up questions*** seek detailed information on the themes, concepts, or events that the interviewee introduces, while ***probes*** help manage the conversation by keeping it on topic, signaling the desired level of depth, and asking for examples or clarification. In this chapter, we describe how various combinations of main questions, follow-up questions, and probes work together to structure an interview.

MAIN QUESTIONS

Main questions provide the scaffolding of the interview. They ensure that the research question is answered from the perspective of the conversational partner. In some projects, the interviewer may ask only one main question; rarely does he or she ask more than a handful.

If you are just beginning a research project and don't know much about the topic yet, you probably will start by asking a main question to get a general orientation. For instance, if you were starting to research street gangs, you might begin by asking a gang member how he or she spends time or, more narrowly, what he or she did the previous day or week. These orienting main questions are called ***tour questions*** because they request the interviewee to show you around, tell you what normally happens or how something is done, or describe a setting and point out the highlights.

If you already know enough about a topic to dispense with an orienting tour, you can start by working out more detailed main questions. While these main questions are narrower than tour questions, they should still allow your interviewee plenty of scope to answer. Each of these more focused main questions examines a single component of your research problem. For example, from preliminary discussions, reading, and attendance at meetings of community developers, Herb learned about the different stages of funding and building an affordable housing project, so to begin to answer his research question on how these projects were accomplished, he worked out one main question for each of these stages.

Some research questions are posed such that their main questions are obvious. For example, in an evaluation project, the research question, how well is this program working? translates into main questions that ask about problems encountered and successes achieved for each of the program's goals. In life histories, main questions typically are worded to inquire about each stage of a person's life: childhood, school, marriage, raising a family, jobs, taking care of aging parents, and getting old.

If your project involves testing theories suggested in the academic literature, preparing main questions requires two stages. First, you have to ask yourself what the theory implies for the matter that you are studying; then you need to work out a set of main questions to ask about concrete illustrations that are implied by the separate parts of the theory you are testing.

For instance, one purpose of Herb's research on progressive advocacy organizations was to examine ideas suggested in the literature on resource dependency theory. This theory suggests that smaller organizations—in this case, the advocacy organizations and protest groups Herb was studying—that need funding from foundations, government agencies, and banks would modify their goals and choose projects to comply with the demands of the funders. To test this theory, he needed to ask questions that would track the role of the funders from the original idea to the final implementation of a project. He worked out a series of main questions asking his interviewees to discuss who was involved at each stage of the project. If his interviewees failed to mention the role of the funder, Herb followed up with a more explicit question.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Follow-up questions explore the interviewee's answers to obtain further depth and detail, to ask for clarifying examples, and to clarify concepts and themes. If, in response to a main question, the interviewee mentions an event, a concept, or a theme relevant to the research problem, the interviewer will follow up by asking for more information about that event, concept, or theme, sometimes immediately, other times at a more appropriate moment.

If the interviewee mentions an ***event*** that is central to the research topic, the interviewer can follow up by asking what happened, who was there, what was accomplished, what remained unsolved, or what was not even discussed. The researcher might ask about the reactions to the event—were people angry afterward, relieved, delighted? Or the interviewer might ask what came before this event, what set the stage, and what came after, what were the consequences. Follow-up questions obtain details on the immediate matter, explore the meaning of what happened, or try to place the earlier response within a broader context.

Sometimes, you ask follow-up questions to learn about the concepts the interviewees use to describe their work, their culture, or the process, event, or program you are studying. ***Concepts*** are the building blocks of meaning that reflect how your interviewees understand and see their world. Concepts appear as nouns or noun phrases that are particularly meaningful to your interviewees. Investigating the meaning of and importance of such concepts unlocks broader ideas, clarifies the perspectives of your interviewees, reveals tensions, or explains how they understand a situation. Concepts are the cultural lenses through which your interviewees view the world.

Suppose you were interviewing military personnel. You might hear talk about "collateral damage," a concept that you learn means "unavoidable harm done to people or buildings that were just accidentally in the way when something else was the target." If you pursue this idea with follow-up questions, you might learn that this term reflects a *distancing* from the consequences of killing inoffensive and nonthreatening people and destroying infrastructure, such as water purification facilities, that ordinary people need. Military personnel handle what might otherwise provoke guilt by claiming that these unintended consequences are inevitable. Examining the meaning of this concept suggests asking further follow-up questions to look more generally at other ways that military personnel distance themselves from the consequences of what they are doing, and exploring how successful they are at making themselves feel good about what they accomplishing.

Concepts are not all that difficult to pull out of an interview if you listen carefully to what your conversational partners are saying, for the words often jump out. It may be more difficult to pull out themes on which you want to follow up. A ***theme*** is a statement that summarizes what is going on, explains what is happening, or suggests why something is done the way it is. Themes may not be stated in so many words by the interviewees, in which case you as the researcher have to work them out yourself by reflecting on the meaning of what your interviewees have said. We explain how to do this in Chapter 10.

If the themes expressed address your research question, you follow up on them, seeking more detailed explanations, looking for support, modifications, or refutations of what you think is going on. Sometimes you describe to your interviewee what you think is going on, summarize the theme, and ask how he or she responds. Other times, you think about the implications of the theme and then work out follow-up questions to further examine these implications. Using follow-up questions in this way provides additional evidence, making your results more solid and credible while enabling you to put together a more nuanced understanding of what your interviewees describe.

Novice interviewers are often impressed when more experienced researchers appear to work out follow-up questions on the spot as soon as some point is mentioned in the interview. These experienced interviewers seem to recognize a theme or concept, judge its importance, and work out wording, all without a pause. Actually, much of this activity only appears to be happening in real time; in reality, rather than being extremely quick, the interviewer is simply well prepared. Follow-up questions that appear to be composed on the spur of the moment usually result from an analysis of previously completed interviews. Before the researcher talked with Ms. Smith, he or she has already interviewed Mr. Jones and Ms. Earl, analyzed what they said, and figured out what questions should have been asked as follow-up questions but were missed during the original interviews. When these same matters are raised later by Ms. Smith, the researcher now recognizes them and is ready on the spot to ask the follow-up questions that were worked out when looking over prior interviews.

PROBES

Probes are questions, comments, or gestures used by the interviewer to help manage the conversation. Some probes encourage the interviewee to keep talking on the matter at hand to complete an idea or fill in a missing piece. Others request clarification. Some ask for examples or evidence for particular points. Probes help you figure out bias or slant. With probes, you can use the same wording, almost regardless of the substance of the interviewee's answers. "That's interesting, could you tell me more," a continuation probe, is appropriate whether the conversational partner has just described an encounter at a lawyer's office or a visit abroad.

Probes are easy to use and to word. You work out a mental list of standard probes you can use to ask people to keep talking, another list you can use when you need clarification, and a third list that elicits more evidence or examples. You choose from these prepared items the one that best fits into the conversation, varying the wording so you don't sound too repetitious. Probes are simple, short, and routine, for example, "Go on . . ." or "Can you give me an example?"

In the literature, the terms *main question, follow-up question,* and *probe* are not always used in a standard way. Some authors use *probe* where we use *follow-up,* but what you call each one is less important than what each accomplishes. In a responsive interview, main questions assure that you cover each part of your research question and provide an overall structure to the interview; follow-up questions get depth and detail on events or steps in a process, as well as the meaning of concepts, and themes; whereas probes encourage the interviewee to keep talking and stay on topic, ask for clarification, or ask for evidence and examples. Table 8.1 summarizes what each type of question accomplishes.

TABLE 8.1 Three Question Types

Main Questions

Purpose: Structure the interview to answer the research question

Always prepared in advance

Worded to match the interviewee's experiences

Follow-Up Questions

Purpose: To get depth, detail, richness, vividness, and nuance, helping to assure thoroughness and credibility

Explore relevant events, concepts, and themes

Designed in response to the comments or ideas introduced by the conversational partner

Worded to reflect prior answers

May be asked during the interview or at later opportunity

Probes

Purpose: To manage the conversation

Ask for elaboration, detail

Keep the interview on target

Ask for clarification, examples, evidence

Help reveal slant or bias

Worded simply, in a formulaic manner, independent of content of previous answers

BALANCING MAIN QUESTIONS, FOLLOW-UPS, AND PROBES

After your introduction, you normally start an interview with an initial main question. You may have other questions prepared, but whether you get to them or not depends on how long it takes the interviewee to answer the first one and the extent to which you follow up on parts of the interviewee's answers.

As you introduce subsequent main questions, be sure to show how each links to the others, to prevent the conversation from sounding choppy. You might say, "We have been talking about how the budget reform of 2004 came about. I would also like to know what you are doing now, whether there have been any recent changes in budgeting." If you have planned your main questions in a logical way, they will fit together.

Generally, you ask follow-up questions when what is said by your interviewee relates to your research problem but either requires further exploration to fully understand or suggests an idea that you had not anticipated that could be relevant to your research. You follow up to gain insight into concepts or themes that the interviewee has introduced that speak to your research question; and, of course, when you see there are missing pieces in a narrative of events, you follow up to ask about them.

In addition, you may also want to follow up when answers sound inconsistent, for inconsistencies often indicate underlying issues that should be explored. You don't want to sound as if you are cross-examining a witness on the stand, so you don't follow up every inconsistency; and when you do follow up, you do so gently. "You told me before that the hats were green, but just now you referred to them as blue. Are they sometimes green and sometimes blue, or do they just look blue to you sometimes?"

Inconsistencies can be important clues. Is a person inconsistent because he or she doesn't remember what happened? Or has time passed and the conversational partner had time to think on the matter, so the later answers are more informed, deeper, and more nuanced than earlier ones? Did the interviewee start off in a defensive posture that gradually fell away? Sometimes what appear to be inconsistencies are not, really; it's just that you lack the context to understand how the issues relate. Gently pursuing apparent inconsistencies can lead to a deeper understanding of the interviewee's perspective.

There are occasions when you should not follow up, even if something seems puzzling or wrong. Sometimes your interviewees provide self-justifying or socially acceptable answers rather than tell you what happened or what their role was (Lyman, 1998). Interviewers might inadvertently elicit such self-justifying accounts by giving an accusatorial or judgmental tone to their questions. Rather than trying to break down this protective response, it is usually better to reword the question and ask it later in a way that is less likely to evoke self-justification. For example, you might want to ask what happened rather than asking what went wrong.

You can decide to ask a follow-up question during the interview itself, or you can determine that it is better to wait for a subsequent interview, but if you are going to ask a probe question, you have to do it immediately. The frequency of probing usually diminishes as an interview continues. Probes are used to signal the level of depth you are looking for in an answer, and once the interviewee has gotten the message, you need not repeat it. If you are asking for clarification of key terms, especially technical ones, interviewees quickly get the idea that they need to explain technical terms without your having to ask.

In general, try to keep probes both unobtrusive and limited in number. One approach is, rather than verbalize a question, to simply wait quietly for the interviewee to continue, or nod or gesture in ways that communicate "More, please." You should probe for missing information or ask for clarification of garbled sentences only if you are pretty sure that what you are asking is important and will not come up later in the conversation. If you probe too often or too intrusively, you might stop the flow of the interview. An interviewer who says, "Yes, I understand" once or twice may convey support, but someone who does it 20 times comes across as mechanical and shallow. An interviewer who repeatedly asks, "How do you know that?" can create the image of distrusting the interviewee. If overused, probes can backfire.

We rarely have to formally probe for ***slant***—that is, ask questions that reveal the biases and perspectives held by the interviewee. Usually, in the informal chat that precedes an interview, conversational partners describe their background or give their opinions on issues other than the research topic, giving the researcher clues to slant without the need to probe for it. But if you need to explore where the interviewee is coming from, usually one slant probe is sufficient.

Let's look at an example of how main questions, probes, and follow-ups combine. The following excerpt is from Irene's contracting project. Leann is interviewing two people at once (more about doing this in Chapter 11). After she described the overall research question, and the interviewees balked at trying to answer something so broad, she narrowed it down, posing the first main question. The excerpt shows a main question, a follow-up, a probe, and the next main question.

Le : OK, well let's just pick a couple of contracts, with the city of———, some of these smaller service contracts. Like street cleaning or janitorial services.

P : Two good ones.

Le : OK, what can you tell me about them. *What have your experiences been with them?* [Tour question as a main question]

B : Janitorial is a very challenging one because of defining what cleaning means and what a high level service means, there is a tendency for bidders or proposers to bid prices that are unrealistically low, that bring in people who have questionable skills and often little communication ability. And *for some of those reasons we only contract out part of the services,* there are certain buildings that we retain in house in order to ensure security and a higher level of performance. But there are many facilities that we contract out. We actually handle inside.
[Two voices together here, hard to make out]

P : We now do four or five sweeps a year with outside contractors.

B : Right, right.

P : And we supplement it with our own.

Le : *How do you determine the scope of a contract, when you are looking at like something like cleaning?* [Follow-up question; they talked about contracting out part of the service, she asks *how they determine* the scope of the contract, that is, how much will be contracted out]

P : Well it may take an enormous amount of time and effort and then we find that, over time, based on what we learn or the mistakes we made or what we have been faced with in the contracting, we may find that some contractors in fact can't produce what they say they can, and they may end up being terminated, or they may find they need to supplement their employee base with additional personnel to meet their obligations, it really runs the gamut. We would typically look at it in terms of giving contractors certain buildings so that it is very defined what facilities they are after, for example, our downtown area is cleaned under a contract, by workers who are there at nighttime, walking through the downtown cleaning the streets with brooms and cleaning up garbage cans, we contract that out as part of a custodial service.

Le : OK. [Continuation probe]

P : We have hired custodians, for a certain specific city buildings, we have I think 25, 35, maybe 55, buildings.

B : Yes.

P : Some of them are specified for outside cleaning, some are not, the City Hall for example, we do it with our own team, our full time employees here.

B : Right. Police headquarters we do with our own team.

Le : OK, *are they renewable, what is the term of these contracts, do you have to rebid them, are they renewed automatically?* [Second main question]

INTERVIEWING PATTERNS

How you combine main questions, probes, and follow-up questions varies depending on the purpose of the interview as well as the stage of your research. The structure of your first interview on a cultural topic with a stranger—a handful of broad-scope main questions with a limited number of focused follow-ups—would differ dramatically from, say, your fifth interview on a controversial political topic with a conversational partner who is now a friend. For the latter, you'd probably jump right in with just one fairly focused follow-up question on the topic and explore the response in great detail from a variety of angles.

Some interviews are dominated by the initial main question or two. If you are doing a one-shot interview (no possibility of follow-up), and the time allotted for the interview is short, asking one or two main questions is about all you can do. Similarly, exit interviews and evaluation interviews usually contain a small number of focused main questions. In exit interviews, main questions ask why someone left a job, what the problems were, and what was good and bad about the job. In an evaluation study, researchers are looking for answers to some predetermined questions, such as how the new policy or program impacted clients, what problems the program encountered, and how these problems were dealt with. Main questions would focus on each of these three areas. Life histories trace out the standard stages of growing older, such as attending school, dating, finding a job, getting married, and coping with illnesses. A life history interview would be structured around a small number of main questions, one for each of these stages. Oral histories explore how individuals experienced a historical event, such as a war, coup, or epidemic, to understand that event from the interviewee's perspective. Oral history interviews typically are built around a small number of main questions that ask about specific events—battles in a war, or the draft, or how the war impacted the home front—with few follow-up questions but with numerous probes, some for clarity and others for examples or evidence.

Other interview types focus more on the follow-up questions. In exploratory studies, you listen for unanticipated material and then plan to follow up on any new ideas or perspectives you hear to examine their relevance for your study. In these cases, the follow-up questions may dominate the discussion. If your goal is to either test or derive a theory, a general explanation that goes beyond the handful of cases you have looked at, you probably will follow up each time an interviewee describes a matter that seems relevant to the theory to see how well what is said supports, fails to support, or modifies the evolving theory.

The first few cultural interviews, as well as early interviews on topical matters that you know very little about, carefully balance main and follow-up questions. Each interview usually begins with one or two main questions that encourage your conversational partner to present an overview of the broader matter. Then, as you learn more, you use follow-up questions to focus on those times mentioned by your interviewees that are most relevant to your research question.

Some interviews illustrate extreme patterns. Herb's favorite is the one in which he describes his research topic to his interviewee, and before he can pose his first question, the interviewee launches into a descriptive answer that covers much of what Herb planned to ask about. Herb's presentation of the research topic was treated by the interviewee as the main question. The opposite pattern occurs when the interviewer asks one brief follow-up question and gets one brief answer. For instance, a lawyer for an organization Herb was studying in an earlier interview had described a lawsuit the organization was filing. When Herb met the same individual later on at a conference, Herb asked one follow-up question about the status of the lawsuit and learned it had been thrown out for lack of standing. The entire interview involved one quick question and a 15-second answer.

Most often, though, interviews can be placed into one of four patterns, which we have named opening the floodgates, main branches of a tree, river and channel, and picking up the twigs. In practice, though, actual interviews often combine several of these types. Keeping these patterns in mind, however, helps you plan ways to balance main questions, follow-up questions, and probes in differing circumstances.

Opening the Floodgates

The opening-the-floodgates pattern is most common early in a study when the researcher initially is naïve about the matter at hand but is pretty sure the conversational partner is well informed. The goal is to obtain a broad overview that suggests what needs to be explored in depth later.

Opening-the-floodgates interviews are structured around one or two broad main questions designed to encourage the conversational partner to talk at length and in depth. For instance, you might ask a lobbyist to describe the politics surrounding a legislative bill or ask the chief financial officer of an organization how a budget was determined. You could ask a teenage aficionado of computer games what the games are about or the director of a social services agency how it survives during hard times. If the researcher and conversational partner are both aware of an event that appears to illustrate an important theme, asking what the event signifies can be the main question. "What was really going on at that meeting, do you think?" or "Was that some kind of turning point?" The hope is that a single main question, when asked of a knowledgeable conversational partner, will be like opening the gate holding back a river, allowing the waters (information) to rush forth.

Many of Herb's initial interviews are of the open-the-floodgates variety. For example, Herb began his project on advocates for housing for the poor by asking political activists how their organizations framed—that is, how they gave public definition to—the policies they supported, a question that evoked long, detailed answers. In subsequent interviews, he asked follow-up questions on the examples that had been given, exploring in particular the common tactics that several of his interviewees had raised in their initial responses.

Main Branches of a Tree

In a main-branches-of-a-tree interview structure, you divide the research problem into roughly equal parts and plan to cover each part with a main question (a branch). In an evaluation interview, a researcher might want to know how a job training program increased the participants' skills and confidence and may also want to learn what impact the training program had on the trainees' income, family stability, and choice of place to live. Main questions would be prepared, each dealing with one of these effects. The researcher would ask these main questions and then follow up to obtain the same degree of depth, detail, vividness, richness, and nuance on each part of the evaluation.

In preparing questions in the main-branches model, you need to be sure that the core questions are logically related to each other, parallel in the scope of what they ask, and that in the interview you provide sensible transitions from one question to the next. If it is not obvious how the questions are linked, you explicitly show how before asking the next one. For example, if you were interviewing in a retirement community, you could introduce your questions by saying, "I am interested in life here at Golden Acres, how you relate to the staff and to the other residents." Then, you would ask about relationships with the staff, ask some follow-up questions, and then move to another branch by saying, "Okay, I think I have a grasp of the relationship between the residents and the staff. Can we turn now to the relationships between you and the residents?" That way, the interview sounds coherent.

River and Channel

The main-branches-of-a-tree interview is about obtaining breadth, to assure that each subtopic is covered. In contrast, you choose the river-and-channel pattern when you want to explore an idea, a concept, or an issue in great depth, following it wherever it goes even if other matters are ignored. You might never get to ask some of the main questions, because you followed up on one and then continued with further follow-up-up questions rather than returning to the other main questions. It is as if you picked one channel of a river and followed it wherever it went.

The river-and-channel model is best when you want to explore one theme in depth and detail and are willing to focus on that issue, at least for the time being, to the exclusion of other themes. This approach is often used when your conversational partners differ in the areas of their expertise; you follow up on what each individual knows that is relevant to your research topic. Then, later on, you talk to other interviewees who are informed about your other questions. For example, if you were studying a group that is pushing for reforms on environmental policy, you would ask different main questions—follow different channels—of the data analyst, the lobbyist, and the public relations person. With each one, you would explore his or her area of expertise in depth; later on, you would put together the information from the separate interviews.

The same river-and-channel approach would apply if you were collecting cases or examples and wanted to learn about the details of each case. To start down one channel, you would ask one main question about your first example, then ask numerous follow-up questions, until you understood that example; then you would do the same thing with a different example with another interviewee. For instance, Herb collected examples from a wide range of organizations on the variety of ways each organization built homes and businesses in poor communities. At the end of a series of interviews, he had collected a set of examples that, when put together, suggested broader patterns that answered his research question about community renewal efforts.

Picking Up the Twigs

Follow-up interviews with the same conversational partner in which you ask for more detail or explanation are often obvious continuations of the first interview. As such, they readily fit into either the main-branch-of-a-tree or the river-and-channel model. But sometimes in longer-term projects, toward the end you have a series of important but as-yet unanswered questions that have little relationship to each other. They are like twigs that need picking up. If you have good relations with some of your interviewees, you can go back to them, explain what you are missing, and see if they can fill in some of your blanks. Such brief interviews are often conducted on the phone or by e-mail.

CONVERSATIONAL GUIDES

Interviews can be exhausting and stressful for the interviewer because there is so much to think about all at once. One way to lower your anxiety is to prepare in advance a ***conversational guide.*** Conversational guides—protocols, jottings, question matrices/checklists, or outlines—remind you of what main questions to ask and of whom you want to ask them. Sometimes the guides include possible follow-up questions. Writing down the main questions can be useful to make sure you cover, or at least try to cover, all of them; in addition, you may also need to write out the main questions if your interviewee wants to see them in advance.

If your conversational guide includes possible follow-up questions, you might not actually ask them. Usually, follow-up questions that you work out in advance don't exactly match what the interviewee has just said, so to use them you have to reword them to fit into the conversation.

Having a conversational guide in hand does not require you to follow it; if circumstances warrant, you should ignore it. On numerous occasions, Herb has shown up at the offices of people he was going to interview with written questions in hand, only to find that after the initial greetings, the conversational partner dominated the conversation, presenting matters he or she wanted to share at that moment. Herb's conversational guide became irrelevant, though many of the questions he would have asked were answered anyway, and those that were not could be asked in a later interview. It is far more important to listen to what the interviewee wants to say on a topic than to go down your prepared list of questions.

For some projects, having a protocol in hand is useful. A ***protocol*** is the most formal of the conversational guides. It is written out in full in advance and can be shared with the conversational partners and submitted to institutional review boards. We rarely use full formal protocols, and so instead we present two illustrations of protocols others have used.

In talking with Mexican immigrants, Shinnar (2007) worked out the following list of questions:

1. Please tell me about your work. What do you do? Describe a typical day at work. What do you usually do on a typical day?
2. How do you feel about your work? Do you like your work? What do you like about your work? What do you dislike?
3. How did you get your job? What jobs have you had before this one? What motivated you to change jobs? How is your life different/better in this job compared to the job you had before?
4. Would you want to do a different kind of job? Do you sometimes think of doing a different kind of job? Did you ever act on this desire?
5. What prevented you from acting on this desire? What happened that prevented you from changing jobs? If you would apply for another promotion/transfer today, what would you do differently?
6. Would you want to be a supervisor or manager? What are some of the reasons for not wanting to be a supervisor? What are some of the reasons you feel that being a supervisor is desirable? What would you need to do to be promoted or to become a supervisor or manager?
7. Please describe your relationships with people at work (coworkers, supervisors, managers, guests). Please tell me about your managers, how would you describe your relationship with them? Please tell me about your coworkers, how would you describe your relationship with them? Please tell me about the customers/guests, how would you describe your relationship with them?
8. If a family member from Mexico wanted to come to Las Vegas to work in a hotel, what would you tell him/her? What advice would you give him/her? What reasons would you give for coming/not coming to work in Las Vegas?
9. Can you give me some examples for how working in Las Vegas is better/worse than working in Mexico/other U.S. city? What differences have you found between work in the U.S. and Mexico? Where would you rather work—in the U.S. or Mexico? (p. 369)

Davidson (2003), in his study of people making the transition from mental health facilities into the community, lists nine main questions in his protocol, some of which include potential follow-up questions. For example, he used as a main question, "Has anything been particularly difficult for you once you were discharged from (the state hospital)?" and included the following potential follow-up questions: "Have you had any symptoms or psychiatric problems? Have you felt more lonely or hopeless? Have you had any problems with your health? Has it been harder to get along day to day (e.g., eating, or filling your time?) Has it been harder for you to see or talk with your doctor or other healthcare providers?" (p. 79).

If the interviewee anticipates and answers a question you have prepared before you ask it, be sure to mentally cross that one off your protocol so you don't ask that question again and sound as if you were not listening. Also keep in mind that in responsive interviewing, the questions you put on your protocol change as you hear and explore new material. In your initial protocol, you might have had a single question about budgets of nonprofit organizations; but in your first interview, you may have learned that there are major differences among operating budgets (paying basic salaries, lights, heat, rent), service budgets (helping clients with their problems or whatever it is the organization does), and policy advocacy budgets (paying for work to change laws and regulations). These distinctions are important enough that you should revamp your protocol to make sure you include questions on each type of budget.

How many of the questions on a research protocol need to be covered in an interview? Ideally, you would like to cover them all, but that rarely happens. Failing to get through all your questions is not a cause for worry because it usually means you are receiving rich descriptions. If you have some important questions left over, you either schedule a second interview or obtain the missing information from different conversational partners. In his study on community-based housing and economic development projects, Herb had three main questions prepared, one on how the project was chosen, one on community response to the project, and one on technical problems in implementation. When a conversational partner spent all the allotted interview time answering only one of these questions, Herb covered the other topics with other interviewees or in later interviews with the original person.

Though formal protocols have their advantages, there are times when you require a less formal guide. The simplest is a set of what we call jottings, items that are just jotted down while observing a meeting, watching an event, or doing an interview. These notes suggest main questions you might ask later or follow-up questions you don't want to forget. Unless the circumstances are exceptional, one should not interrupt a conversational partner, especially one who is on a roll, to ask a follow-up question. Instead, as the interviewee talks, jot down the follow-up question and then, when he or she is finished, ask it.

Written questions, whether formal or informal, are useful, but they can be distracting to an inexperienced interviewer. If you rely on them mechanically, going quickly from one question to the next without really listening to what the conversational partner has said and adjusting your questions accordingly, you may sound like a computer following a script rather than a human engaging in a conversation. To provide overall order and direction to the interview yet allow for spontaneous conversation, some researchers just prepare a checklist of issues that they want to discuss but do not actually write out the questions.

Checklists change rapidly, especially during the earlier stages of a study. For example, Herb started his study of community development with a checklist that looked something like the following:

1. Descriptions of the community projects
2. Organizational history
3. Relationships with government

After a few interviews, Herb learned that the organizations he was studying received help from other community groups and joined with them to form lobbying coalitions. He also learned that the directors of these community groups held strong beliefs about what should be done to improve communities. He modified his checklist by adding these three items:

4. Relationship with other community organizations
5. Coalitions
6. Beliefs about what should be done

Especially when you are not asking all your interviewees the same question—if, for example, they know different things or have seen different parts of a process—it can be very useful to write yourself a master checklist of what you need to find out as well as who is likely to know it. This checklist then acts as a guide as you draw up each particular interview. There may be several people who know one piece of information you are looking for but only one person who knows another piece. When you are interviewing the only person who knows something you need to find out, you must ask him or her about that matter, a point your checklist makes quite clear. As you obtain particular pieces of information, you can cross those items off your list.

Herb keeps a master list on which he writes down the topics and ideas to explore, logs whether or not he has done so, and notes with whom among his various conversational partners a particular issue should be raised. He updates this list regularly, checking off the pieces of information he has collected and adding any new items that he now feels should be discussed. Irene maintains an overall topic outline with major and minor points she wants to raise. She prepares a new outline for each interview after looking over prior interviews and background documents to find out what else she has to learn.

Working out outlines to prepare for each interview, rather than writing down a list of specific questions, helps you distinguish between the core topics you want to cover and possible examples that can be raised when needed to help stimulate discussion. You can use a main heading in the outline for each of your main questions and subheads for examples you could raise. We find having this backup helps keep us calm.

The following excerpt from one of Herb's working outlines illustrates how they work. The Roman numerals represent topics Herb planned to cover in main questions. Succeeding letters and numbers in the outline suggest either follow-up questions or examples that can be used if the broader questions fail to stimulate conversation:

I. Organizational problems
- A. Maintaining qualified staff with low salaries
  - 1. Ms. Jones, who just quit to work at a bank
- B. Working with a community board
  - 1. Scandal of board member getting priority on apartment
  - 2. Last fund-raising campaign
- C. Obtaining funds for basic organizational expenses

II. Exemplary projects
- A. The façade improvement project (mentioned in report)
- B. The cooperative furniture factory

Before an interview, Herb prepared main questions for each of the Roman numeral topics. For II, for example, he prepared the following question: "Could you describe the most interesting (successful, least successful, controversial) project your organization has done?" From his prior interviews and documentary research on the specific organization, he knew that if the conversation floundered, he could prompt his interviewee to continue by mentioning particular examples such as the façade improvement project or furniture manufacturing cooperative that he had included in the outline and knew about from examining documents.

Whether you use protocols, outlines, or checklists, the conversational guide is a freehand map to the conversation, pointing out the general direction but not specifying which nooks and crannies will be explored. Guides enable the researcher to balance the need for predictability with the freedom to explore unanticipated topics. Guides can help prevent getting lost in cascades of follow-up questions.

Besides helping you structure the questions, the physical guide also acts as an interviewing prop. Holding a guide on a clipboard makes you look prepared. Giving a copy of the guide to the interviewees may calm them, because they see what you are going to ask. However, the downside of giving interviewees a guide beforehand is that they may race through the written questions without giving the interviewer much chance to follow up.

CONCLUSION

Research interviews are structured around three types of questions: main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. Together, they assure that you ask the questions to cover the overall topic and then pursue what you hear to get the depth, detail, and richness you need. Your follow-up questions and probes enable you to get sufficient examples and enough evidence to draw convincing conclusions.

To give you confidence that you will remember what to ask, you can prepare a conversational guide, but remember, there is no need to follow it rigidly. Responsive interviews require spontaneity, and sticking too close to your written guide can prevent you from responding to what you hear. While a formal protocol with questions written out might help in dealing with IRBs and is useful to hand to interviewees who want to see your questions, it is best left in your lap during the interview, to be used only as an overall guide.