

INTERVIEWING:

Listening to Groups and Individuals

The interviewing process involves collecting information by speaking with *respondents*, those being interviewed, and recording their responses. This can happen in either an individual setting or a group setting. Interviews can help you:

- Gain acceptance into the community, especially if key respondents, people who know a great deal about the community, and gatekeepers, people who can help you gain access to the community, agree to be interviewed
- Get substantial information on hard-to-reach populations, such as drug users or non-identifying gay men
- Locate additional key respondents or other individuals to include in the assessment
- Give an insider's perspective on the community that you are studying

Interviews can be invaluable in helping you gather information that cannot be found anywhere except in the community at hand—for example, a set of interviews can help you understand the underlying factors leading to HIV risk behavior in a certain population. Although anyone in the community can be interviewed, it is best to **start with the key respondents and gatekeepers**, as discussed in “Entering the Community”, p. 22. In addition to giving you valuable information on your target community, interviews with these participants will also help facilitate your entrance into the community.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews are conducted one-on-one between the participant and the interviewer. The interviewing can be either formal or informal.

Types of interviews: Formal interviewing involves asking a fixed, written set of questions on specific topics that are recorded in detail. Informal interviewing is less structured, and open-ended questions (questions that can't be answered with just 'yes' or 'no') are asked around a specific topic or topics in a flexible enough way so as to allow other issues to be addressed. For informal interviews:

- A checklist of topics is prepared in advance.
- Persons to be interviewed are identified and contacted. Interviews often happen at home or in a convenient location for the participant.
- The interviewer asks specific questions while observing the surroundings and the non-verbal language of the person being interviewed.
- The interviewer attempts to go beyond brief, superficial answers, seeking more depth through follow-up questions.
- The interviewer tries to avoid personal biases and keeps as objective as possible.
- Interviews should not interfere with the work or other activity of the person being interviewed.

- The interviewer should be patient and give the person being interviewed time to think without interrupting.

A formal interview is generally conducted the same way as described above, the only difference being that predetermined questions are asked in the same way in each interview.

Formal vs. Informal Interviewing

The advantages of the informal interview are that this technique is flexible enough to explore more complex issues that don't have predetermined responses. Because informal interviews result in a variety of responses, these interviews are often more information-rich than formal interviews. Formal interviews, on the other hand, can be better standardized to allow comparison between respondents, if that's more important to what you're trying to accomplish. This standardization can be less biased than the informal technique, since interviewers can't inadvertently change the questions or their intent.

The Results: Results from both types of interviews can be used for several purposes. Informal interviews are often used to create structured questionnaires with pre-set response categories based on the results of the initial interviews (for example, listing drugs that have been mentioned in the interview settings that the survey-taker will choose from). Interviews are also extremely useful for shaping programmatic and assessment decisions based on the needs of the community uncovered in the interview process.

Interview Participants: Recruitment for the interview process should first focus around identified key respondents and gatekeepers. Interview participants can be asked for the names of other possible participants (also known as *snowball sampling*; see Part III of this guide). If the topic is a particularly sensitive one, or if your organization is having trouble accessing the community, it may be necessary to provide some type of incentive to potential participants. These incentives can be nearly anything that members of the community would find valuable: bus passes, gift certificates, free samples, or, if you have the resources, a simple monetary payment thanking them for their cooperation. Before you undertake recruitment, select among the *purposeful sampling* choices on pages 33 through 35.

For qualitative interviews, there is no fixed number of interviews that you should set out to conduct, and time and resources may be limited. A good strategy to follow is to continue interviewing until you are getting little or no *new* information from each interview—meaning that the possible responses have likely been exhausted. Depending on your topic, this may be in the range of from 5 to 20 interviews; it's unlikely that you will need to conduct more than 25 interviews with members of any one group.

Group Interviews: Focus Groups

A focus group is a group interview guided by a monitor during which a number of people are invited informally to discuss an issue or what they think of possible intervention(s) in a community. Focus groups are used to gather information on the attitudes, motives, and beliefs of a population or community, and like informal interviews, are an excellent way of getting information-rich responses. The groups are also frequently used to acquire

background information on a target population and to determine a community's demographics, perceived needs, and risk behaviors.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Focus Groups

Advantages of the focus group method include the fact that researchers can quickly gather a lot of information and observe much interaction in a short period of time—focus groups are more economic in terms of time expended than are individual interviews. The group situation also allows the researcher to gain insight into the manner in which issues are seen and debated among community members, which may in turn affect the researcher's choice of assessment or intervention. Problems with the focus group method include the fact that the group setting may affect how participants respond to questions; the logistics of getting everyone together in the same place; and the challenge of insuring equal status among group members so that they will speak freely. To address the logistics problem, consider interviewing people where they naturally gather if you want input from people in a certain area.

Planning a Focus Group

Prior to the meeting, a detailed guide of what will be asked and discussed in the group should be developed. (See **Activity 2**, p. 31 for a way to do this.) The guide helps the focus group facilitator to concentrate on the most important questions to obtain the maximum amount of relevant information.

Project staff should get written or verbal consent from participants prior to starting the meeting. A facilitator directs the meeting using questions in the guide, observing gestures and non-verbal communication and keeping the meeting moving; a note taker/recorder records the overall reactions, opinions, and responses of the participants. The recorder may participate in the discussion as well, especially if the facilitator has not covered important questions in the guide.

Participants: One of the most important things to remember in choosing focus group participants is that they should be as homogenous (alike) as possible. For each focus group, choose members of the same culture, age, viewpoints, ethnicity, or whatever characteristics you feel may influence the topic under discussion. This strategy helps to make sure that the members of the group will participate in the discussion—in more varied groups, one or two members will tend to take the lead in discussions, and voices of other participants may be easily drowned out. In more homogenous groups, people feel more comfortable in sharing their feelings and opinions.

See the “Sampling” section that follows to learn about strategies on how to approach putting together focus groups. A good strategy is to keep participants within each group to having the same characteristics, but you can use the sampling strategies to mix up the characteristics of the *groups*, depending on what you want to know.

Size: The size of the focus group should be from approximately six to ten participants. With extremely sensitive or emotional subjects, however, it may be wise to limit the number of participants to four or five to encourage participation (Cote-

Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999). You may have to recruit extra participants in order to account for no-shows.

Length and Number of Groups: The focus group should last approximately one and a half to two hours. Focus groups longer than two and a half hours should be avoided; participants get bored with the subjects and the quality of their responses declines.

As with interviewing, you should continue to hold focus groups until no new information emerges and community opinions on the topic have been assessed. Generally, this will take at least 3 to 4 focus groups.

Incentives: Even more than in interviews, incentives are often provided to members of focus groups. Monetary incentives can be given, as can other types such as those listed in the interviewing section. Other things that may increase participation in the focus groups include providing refreshments and childcare during the group session. Each participant should be given a reminder phone call the day before the session to check if s/he is still planning to attend.

Questions: As discussed earlier, a question list to follow should be prepared in advance of the focus group session. Questions progress from more general to specific ones on the topic, with allowances for clarification and probes along the way. The facilitator should begin with a “get to know you” question to help break the ice and get participants comfortable in the focus group situation. For a hour and a half to two hour focus group, a *maximum* of twelve questions should be planned (Cote-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999).

Facilitator(s): The facilitators’ main job in a focus group is to keep the participants on task. Because of the nature of the session—participants are being asked to speak about subjects that they likely have strong feelings about—the discussion may easily wander, and the facilitator should concentrate on the list of questions and topics. It is helpful to have two facilitators, one to act as a moderator and the other to take notes on the discussion and record observations. Both of them should sit in the circle with the participants and not outside of it. It’s extremely important for both facilitators to remain objective—if participants ask for the moderator’s opinion on a topic, s/he should remind the group that s/he is acting as a facilitator, and it’s the community’s opinions that are important to the assessment.

Whether you are conducting focus groups or individual interviews, it’s important to either pilot test your questions (individual interviews) or have a coworker familiar with the topics check over your focus group question list. As an interviewer, the most important thing that you can do is listen. Let the participants talk, and don’t interrupt them during their discussion. Establish a communicative atmosphere that will help you collect the information you need.

Interview Question Development

Asking the right questions in your interview is an important part of the assessment process. The questions will influence the willingness of the subjects to fully

participate in your interview, and they will determine how much good information you will get out of the interviews. Following is a technique that your group can use to help you focus on the questions you'd like to ask.

Activity Two: Creating Questions by Brainstorming/the Delphi Technique

The objective of this activity is to help you develop a list of issues, topics, and questions for interviewing that you can later use to group, prioritize, and finalize your interview questions. The task involves what's commonly known as "brainstorming" to have the group come up with a large number of ideas that can then be pared down into a reasonable list of questions.

Step 1: Appoint a recorder who won't participate in the session, but who will record the group's ideas.

Step 2: Post the original questions that you want the assessment to address. Think of issues and topics that you want to tackle in the interview related to this question or these questions. Think adventurously, and include even ideas you might think are crazy. Encourage quantity—the more ideas the better. The group should be encouraged to suggest anything that pops into their heads.

Step 3: The recorder writes down each idea on a single card or piece of paper (1 idea per card).

Step 4: When brainstorming is finished, place the cards on the wall in a group by one or all of the participants. Again, put ALL the cards up—don't exclude the outlandish ideas yet. A large bulletin board and pins are useful for this.

Step 5: The group then must agree on how to cluster the cards. This clustering then helps form the basis for subdividing the ideas into themes. Prioritize the themes and the questions within each theme, and use this as a guide to creating your interview questions.

Source: Pretty et al., 1995

When you are conducting informal or open-ended interviews, how you phrase your questions can have a big impact on the responses you get. Are you leading the participants into giving you a particular answer through the way in which you ask the question? Are participants refusing to answer your questions because they consider them insensitive? A few simple rules can help you ask more effective questions:

❖ *Ask open-ended questions.*

An open-ended question requires the respondent to reply with more information than a yes or no answer. For example, “Do people inject drugs in your area?” will be answered with one word, but, “Tell me about the drug use that you see in your area,” will probably get you a lot more information. Questions that ask *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* are generally good open-ended questions.

❖ *Listen and learn, sensitively.*

Allow the participant to fully respond to your question without interruption. Leave a few seconds’ pause between asking the next question or probing for more information to make sure that s/he doesn’t have anything else to say. Be sensitive to a person’s beliefs and culture, and avoid making any remarks or asking questions that could be interpreted as derogatory.

❖ *Avoid leading questions.*

A leading question is one that virtually guarantees that the respondent will reply with the answer that the interviewer was looking for. For example, “Wouldn’t you prefer to have more health care options in your area?” By stating a question like this, the interviewer is making it clear that there is a “right” and a “wrong” answer to the question, and isn’t truly measuring the individual’s own opinions and beliefs.

❖ *Probe for more information.*

After a respondent answers a question, take a minute to think about his/her reply. Did you understand everything that was said? Do you feel like you know the person’s beliefs on this topic? Is there anything else you would like to clarify or expand upon? By asking “probing” questions during the interview, you can get more rich information on certain topics from your respondents, and you can tailor the interview, as it is occurring, to exactly the type of information that you find most relevant and useful (Pretty, 1995).

Sampling Schemes for Interviewing

Interviewing is a form of *qualitative* research, and the goal of the effort is to produce information-rich responses from a wide variety of subjects. This method is different from *quantitative* research, where the goal is to obtain a random sample of participants meant to represent the demographics of the population at large. The purpose of the interview is to gather a lot of information from the community on one particular topic, and sampling schemes (guides as to who to interview) can help determine who to recruit for the assessment. A discussion of the philosophy behind “purposeful sampling” and a list of different ways to sample for interviewing follows.

Purposeful Sampling, or “Deciding Who to Talk With”

Purposeful sampling can be described as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 169). Individuals selected are “experts” in aspects of what is going on in their own community by virtue of living there and/or socializing with a particular group of people.

Michael Quinn Patton (1990) has described several different types of purposeful sampling strategies that may be helpful to you in focusing the assessment:

- ❖ **Extreme case sampling:** Individuals selected using this method represent “extremes”; e.g., the most successful and the least successful. Someone using this strategy might interview both those who have succeeded in getting off drugs and those who haven’t even attempted to do so. Or, they might interview the consistent condom users and those who’ve never used a condom. The logic of this method is that something may be learned from both ends of the spectrum that can help in understanding those in between.
- ❖ **Intensity sampling** is similar to extreme case sampling but doesn’t seek out the extremes but the most intense cases, based on prior information and judgment. In HIV work, it may be those who have the strongest feelings about HIV prevention methods, such as using or not using a condom or reducing or not reducing the number of sexual partners.
- ❖ **Maximum variation sampling:** This sampling method is based on the assumption that “[a]ny common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program,” (p. 172) the last referring to the use of this method in program evaluation. To begin to use this method you must first identify the “diverse characteristics or criteria for constructing the sample.” Then individuals are selected that might fit those criteria. To continue with the condom use example, someone using this method might choose the consistent condom user, the non-user, the occasional user, and the person who uses with a casual partner but not his/her main partner. In this case, the group members will be diverse instead of alike.

- ❖ **Homogenous sampling** is the opposite of the maximum variation sample. Instead, a small homogenous (individuals with similar attributes) sample is used to explore the subject in depth.
- ❖ **Typical case sampling** seeks out the “typical case,” for example, the typical condom user. These characteristic individuals are usually selected with the help of key respondents, after what is “typical” is clearly defined.
- ❖ **Stratified purposeful sampling** has the purpose of capturing major variation as opposed to identifying a common core. Those within each “segment” of the sample are homogenous. (Note: Since the sample size is small, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population in the same way as a stratified *random* sample might be. See the “Random Sampling” section, page 65 for an explanation of this.)
- ❖ **Critical case sampling:** A “critical case” is one who, according to Patton, “can make a point quite dramatically or [is], for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things” (p. 174). For example, one social network of heroin users might be interviewed with the assumption that what is going on with them may also be occurring with other similar groups of heroin users in the neighborhood. If one group is more accessible and willing to talk and other are less accessible, they may provide insights applicable to other social networks of heroin users, with limitations. If a group of heroin users who are accessing social services are having problems, working with them may illuminate the more serious difficulties faced by those more marginalized. This strategy would be used when there is no good way to access a broader group.
- ❖ **Snowball sampling**, a method of identifying individuals to interview by referrals from others, is described in more detail in a later section of this book. Please see “Sampling Strategies,” page 66, for discussion of this method of sampling.
- ❖ **Criterion sampling** means interviewing only those who meet certain criteria established ahead of time. For example, “African American adolescents who access family planning” might be established as the criteria.
- ❖ **Theory-based or operational construct sampling:** This is a more formal research version of criterion sampling, based upon pre-determined theory.
- ❖ **Confirming and disconfirming cases sampling** is used as a method usually in the exploratory phase of a project. Individuals who can confirm a hypothesis—for example, that lack of assertiveness is why a woman cannot get a man to use a condom—are interviewed. Then, those who do not believe the hypothesis are interviewed; e.g., those women who don’t think assertiveness has anything to do with a partner’s condom use.
- ❖ **Opportunistic sampling** is “following where the data leads” (Patton, 1990, p. 179). This method employs the flexibility that new information may lead to new sampling decisions that emerge as the process evolves.

- ❖ **Purposeful random sampling** is when a random procedure is used to choose those to interview. This might involve using one of the sampling methods described later in this manual, including survey by roster or snowballing, to create a list of individuals from which a random sample is chosen.
- ❖ **Sampling politically important cases** is usually used for garnering information on public policy.
- ❖ **Convenience sampling** is simply interviewing individuals who are fast and convenient to reach. This is the most common and *least desirable* sampling strategy.

Each of these sampling schemes can be used to recruit participants for individual interviews, focus groups, and many other types of assessments. If you are using focus groups, remember to keep the groups homogenous to encourage free discussion.