

Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews in Social Service Research: A Practical Guide

by Dr. Xu Jianbin, NUS Social Service Research Centre

Author

Dr. Xu Jianbin

Social Service Research Centre, NUS

Keywords: Research guide; semi-structured interviews; social service; cultural sensitivity

Use the following to cite this publication:

Xu, J.B. (2024). Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews in Social Service Research: A Practical Guide. National University of Singapore Social Service Research Centre

ABSTRACT

Semi-structured interviewing is an admittedly important method of gathering qualitative data that is extensively employed in social service research to delve deep into individual lived experiences and social service phenomena. This research guide aims to construct a practice framework to scaffold social service researchers and professionals to conduct one-on-one, face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured, and qualitative research interviews confidently and effectively.

This guide provides an overview of semi-structured interviewing, emphasizing its adaptive flexibility. It then unpacks the advantages of using semi-structured interviews in social service research. Next, this guide delineates the practical nuts and bolts of conducting the interview *per se* (e.g., building rapport, maintaining flexibility, probing further, and staying attentive) and underscores cultural and ethical sensitivity. These pragmatic elements have the potential to help social service research interviewers to actively listen to interviewees' unique voices and profoundly capture their nuanced experiences. Additionally, potential challenges and inherent limitations of semi-structured interviewing are noted in this guide. The guide concludes with several caveats, highlighting that it is sensible not to apply this guide rigidly, mechanically, and dogmatically because the guide is heuristic rather than prescriptive and normative.

There is reason to believe that conducting actual semi-structured interviews in social service research entails a synergy of the practical skills, professional values, cultural competences, and ethical capabilities of interviewers. Resonating with this belief, this research guide promises to empower social service research interviewers to navigate ethical, dynamic, reflexive, interviewee-centred, culturally sensitive, and semi-structured interview practice, whereby to yield reasonably rich, in-depth, and meaningful interview data.

Introduction

Social service research often seeks to explore and delve into complex social phenomena (e.g., suicide, ageism, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, family violence) and diverse human experiences (e.g., depression, stress, bereavement, death anxiety, substance abuse, divorce). To gain contextualized and nuanced insights into these phenomena and experiences, social service researchers and professionals may need to listen to the meaningful and heartfelt voices of service users. Qualitative interviewing can facilitate the uttering and understanding of these voices in that it is “more likely to tap the deeper meanings of particular human experiences” (Rubin & Babbie, 2017, p. 69). In the field of qualitative research, interviewing is among the earliest methods for collecting qualitative data and still the most widely used and recognized method, while semi-structured interviewing is often considered the most prevalent approach to qualitative interviewing (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Semi-structured interviewing emphasizes striking a dynamic balance between reasonable structure and relative flexibility in the process of interview, which enables the creative and coherent application of open-ended questioning and in-depth probing. Thus, it can empower social service research to venture into a relatively uncharted terrain to mine the rich nuggets of experience, meaning, and insight that may be out of the reach of other data collection methods. It can be said that semi-structured interviewing provides a flexible, reflexive, interviewee-centred, and effective approach to understanding context-bound social service phenomena and issues deeply, nuancedly, and holistically.

Before embarking on a semi-structured interview, an interview guide is often crafted. Such a guide typically contains the simple and open questions the researcher ideally intends to pose, which are arranged in an order the researcher perceives as suitable for the participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). However, it “allows creativity and flexibility to ensure that each participant’s story is fully uncovered” (Knox & Burkard, 2009, p. 567). While the topic of how to create an interview guide holds significance, this research guide is specifically dedicated to the topic of how to conduct the semi-structured interview *per se*. (For information on how to construct an interview guide, you can refer to Hill & Knox, 2021, pp. 21-13; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 59-62; Smith & Nizza, 2022, pp. 20-22.) Being distinct from developing an interview guide, conducting an interview itself relies on different skills (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The purpose of this research guide is to create a practice framework to scaffold social service researchers and professionals to conduct one-on-one, face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured, and qualitative research interviews confidently and effectively. The guide, which strives to assimilate the inherent merits of semi-structured interviewing, consists of four main sections: (1) strengths of semi-structured interviewing, (2) conducting semi-structured interviewing, (3) cultural and ethical sensitivity, and (4) challenges and limitations.

Strengths of semi-structured interviewing

An overview of semi-structured interviewing

According to Brinkmann (2015), semi-structured qualitative research interviews “are structured by the interviewer’s *purpose* of obtaining knowledge; they revolve around *descriptions* provided by the interviewee; such descriptions are commonly about *life world phenomena* as experienced; and understanding the meaning of the descriptions involves some kind of *interpretation*” (p. 25, italics in the original).

Being the typical method for qualitative interviewing, semi-structured interviews occupy a middle-ground position between structured and unstructured interviews (Brinkmann, 2015). When compared with unstructured interviews, which are characterized by free-flowing dialogue and communication, semi-structured interviews give the interviewer more power to steer conversation towards topics he or she considers significant to the research project (Brinkmann, 2015). As compared with structured interviews, which stick to prearranged questions, semi-structured interviews have the virtue of optimizing the knowledge-generating potential of conversation, given that they allow the interviewer (1) to have greater flexibility in probing into angles the interviewee considers relevant and (2) to play a more visible role of knowledge co-producer during the interview process (Brinkmann, 2015).

“[E]very conversation is a coconstructed process” (McMullen, 2021, p. 60). Semi-structured interviewing seeks to enable an interaction that facilitates the unfolding of the interviewee’s personally meaningful stories and narratives in his or her own language (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To obtain rich and thick interview data, the interviewer needs to have deep engagement with the interviewee as well as the interviewee’s personal concerns; the interviewer needs to use both attentive listening and probing to dig deep into the interviewee’s life world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). During the interview, “the interviewer is present, involved and responsive and actively manages the depth of data collected, moving the participant from typical generic and superficial ways of talking to the more detailed and experiential” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022, p. 54). Here, an important mantra for the interviewer is: “Talk less and listen more” (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019, p. 1004). Semi-structured interviewing is well suited to exploring personal experiences, sensitive issues, or taboo topics, partially because it ensures confidentiality and allows the interviewer to develop an atmosphere characterized by freedom and trust (Brinkmann, 2015). Conceivably, a semi-structured interview, which often extends over a duration of one hour or longer, can offer “a snapshot of a person’s attempts to make sense of their experiences” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 66).

Advantages of semi-structured interviewing in social service research

In social service research, the rationale behind using semi-structured interviewing can be attributed to at least three virtues it can serve:

First, semi-structured interviewing can facilitate in-depth and nuanced exploration of complex social service phenomena and nuanced human experiences. This is partially because of its open-ended and fluid nature of interview questions as well as its emphasis on first-person accounts and on the dynamic balance between reasonable structure and relative flexibility. These characteristics combine to facilitate the comprehensive description and thorough exploration of subjective lived experiences and thus the generation of rich, intensive, and contextualized data. Such data can provide insight into the complexities, depths, dynamics, and nuances of specific social service phenomena and particular human experiences; they can shed light on the concrete social, cultural, and historical contexts of interviewees' lived experiences.

Notably, underscoring adaptive flexibility, semi-structured interviewing adopts a relatively loosely structured interview framework. In other words, the interview guide is not rigidly implemented, and the actual interview can be flexibly tailored to the circumstances and preferences of the interviewee. Hence, during the interview, the planned questions in the interview guide are to be asked but not necessarily in the original sequence (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Moreover, the interviewer has the latitude to rephrase the interview questions and engage in in-depth exploration of specific topics and issues based on the interviewee's responses and circumstances (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Particularly, leaving room for following up on certain clues, responses, and stories may facilitate the emergence of unexpected experiences, insights, and narratives.

Second, semi-structured interviewing can serve as a tool for empowerment. By nurturing the collaborative partnership between interviewer and interviewee and encouraging the interviewee's active participation, semi-structured interviewing can provide opportunities for marginalised, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and powerless service users to voice their needs, concerns, challenges, and issues freely, explicitly, and faithfully. They would thus feel heard, valued, respected, and empowered. Furthermore, semi-structured interviewing can dig deep into the structural and personal underpinnings of social service phenomena and issues, uncovering personal and environmental resources. This would foster interviewees' sense of empowered agency to navigate adversity and uplift themselves. Additionally, insights gleaned from semi-structured interviewing would lay the groundwork for understanding and addressing social service issues; they would pave the way for developing evidence-based social service and social policy.

Third, semi-structured interviewing can accommodate cultural diversity. Social service research often deals with culturally diverse service users, whose lived experiences are embedded in and thus informed by different cultural matrices. Under these circumstances, ethical and effective social service research calls for conducting research in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner. It makes sense to say that by virtue of its respectful sensitivity and appreciative attentiveness to the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the interviewee, semi-structured interviewing can resonate with culturally diverse service users, facilitating the generation of culturally embedded data.

Conducting semi-structured interviewing

Preparing for an interview

You cannot afford to take a cavalier attitude to preparing for an interview. Rather, you need to gear up for the interview in an active and proactive manner. The following are some suggestions for your preparatory work:

- During the recruitment process and the informed consent process, you should share with interviewees information on what a semi-structured interview is like and on the expected time commitment to the interview (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
- You may opt to provide the interviewee with a copy of the interview guide before the interview (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).
- It is judicious for you to learn and become familiar with the interview guide beforehand, because referring to it frequently during the interview session can distract both the interviewee and yourself (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), making it difficult for you to focus on the interviewee's responses (Smith & Nizza, 2022).
- It is wise to inquire of the interviewee about his or her preferred interview venue (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). The choice of an interview location should accommodate the interviewee's needs such as the need for privacy, quietude, convenience, comfort, and safety.
- Arrange for relevant devices (e.g., a digital voice recorder) and scrutinize and test them to ensure that they will work properly during the interview. You are advised to use a portable recorder in tandem with a smartphone to record the interview (Churchill, 2022).
- It is advisable to anticipate and address potential barriers (e.g., language barriers, physical barriers, cultural barriers) to interviewing.

Establishing rapport

Sankar and Gubrium (1994) highlight the importance of researchers' capacity to build rapport with study participants in qualitative research. In the interview practice, the interviewer-interviewee rapport has several manifestations in the interviewee such as feeling at ease in your presence, grasping your intentions, and having trust in you (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). If you omit to develop such rapport, you will end up failing to gather good data from the interviewee (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus, it is reasonable to say that the quality of the interviewer-interviewee relationship has a profound bearing on the richness and depth of data gathered. Rapport-building efforts should be made both before the actual interview and in the interview process (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019). Here are a few strategies for you to develop a trusting, respectful, harmonious, and collaborative relationship with the interviewee:

- Cultivate an atmosphere of egalitarianism. Embracing egalitarianism typically involves exhibiting a spirit of humility and treating interviewees as experiential experts and equal partners (Brinkmann, 2015; Galletta, 2013; Gottlieb, 2021). Such an egalitarian approach would afford the interviewee a sense of ownership, agency, and empowerment.
- Make a conscious and conscientious effort to construct a safe, relaxed, non-judgmental, collaborative, and interactive environment for the interview, which can facilitate open, honest, respectful, and responsive communication.
- Show and convey respect, warmth, and friendliness to interviewees. Safeguard and care about their well-being and rights. Communicate a genuine interest in their experiences, perceptions, narratives, and stories (Brinkmann, 2015; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Gratefully acknowledge their participation and contributions.
- Prior to the actual interview, utilise small talk as a social lubricant to help the interviewee feel relaxed and connected. During small talk, try to identify experiences, perspectives, or interests shared by both the interviewee and yourself.
- Use appropriate facial expressions (e.g., smiling) and body language (e.g., nodding, maintaining eye contact) as well as conversational styles (e.g., a polite and inviting tone).
- Provide genuine self-disclosure to promote meaningful engagement with the interviewee. Your self-disclosure includes telling your name, position, and institutional affiliation as well as other relevant personal information such as ethnic and cultural backgrounds and research interests. Please note that your self-disclosure is for the purpose of building rapport rather than being the centre of attention (Padgett, 2017). And your self-disclosure should be minimal to avoid influencing the interviewee's responses and to keep the interview focused on the interviewee (Hill & Knox, 2021).
- Listen actively, reflectively, and empathically and refrain from interrupting the interviewee's talk gratuitously. Ideally, you may wish to strive for what Churchill (2022) termed "deep listening:" "in the hearkening that comes from 'dwelling' with the other, we are able to experience something of who the other person is through our deeply resonating mode of attunement to them" (p. 56). In other words, deep listening would lead you to vicariously immerse yourself in the interviewee's subjective realities to achieve profound resonance with and attunement to his or her lived experiences, thus gaining deep and unbiased insight into what he or she is. As Churchill (2022) stated, "we can only truly understand the other when we have been able to feel or suffer with the other" (p. 56).

- It is to your advantage to be cognitively and emotionally empathic, endeavouring to develop and sustain connectedness with the interviewee on a reasonably deep level. Particularly, you would do well to demonstrate what Churchill (2022) termed “empathic dwelling,” namely, “patiently ‘listening to’ or ‘staying with’” interviewees’ accounts to get attuned to interviewees’ “positioning themselves from a unique perspective within a situation” (p. 53). Walking in interviewees’ shoes in such a way can help you remain present and empathize with interviewees’ personally meaningful experiences, perceptions, and perspectives without pre-judgment. Such empathic understanding would strike a chord with interviewees, making them feel heard, understood, and respected.

Commencing the interview

Before the actual interview commences, you can do the following things:

- Greet the interviewee sincerely and warmly and introduce yourself briefly and effectively. Try to build rapport with the interviewee using the strategies described earlier such as small talk.
- Articulate relevant information about the research study and the interview patiently, transparently, and adequately to the interviewee, including but not limited to the purpose of the interview, the interview topics, and the time frame of the interview. Ensure that the interviewee fully comprehends the confidentiality and anonymity as well as the potential risks, discomforts, benefits, and contributions of participation. Ensure that the interviewee completely understands the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw from the interview *per se* or the research study itself at any time. Set aside time for the interviewee to ask questions and seek clarifications regarding the research study and the interview as well as your role as the interviewer and his or her role as the interviewee. Make sure that you have obtained informed consent from the interviewee including the consent to the audio-recording of the interview.
- It is worthwhile to emphasize that the interview does not intend to seek right or wrong responses (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). It is advisable to make the interviewee realize that he or she is nothing less than the expert on his or her own experiences (Brinkmann, 2015).

When you feel that both parties are ready for the formal interview process, you can use the following techniques to set the interview in motion and ease the interviewee into the interview:

- You can convey to the interviewee that it is time for the actual interview by gently asking: “Now, shall we start the interview process formally?”
- During the initial stage of interview, assisting the interviewee to become accustomed to talking is a top priority (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). You can first ask questions that invite the interviewee to describe an experience or episode, which can help the interviewee feel at ease talking (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As the interviewee warms to the interview, he or she can be invited to respond to questions that call for deeper analytical thinking (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).
- Bear in mind that “the gentle presence of the interviewer opens up a space of safety for the participants to reveal themselves, transforming the interview from an anonymous encounter to a more personal one for both parties” (Churchill, 2022, p. 45).

Harnessing adaptive flexibility

Flexibility is one of the important features of semi-structured interviewing (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). It allows a semi-structured interview to progress “like jazz music (improvising within structure) rather than classical music (set rules and regulations)” (Poulos, 2021, p. 37). The following tactics can be instrumental in harnessing the adaptive flexibility of semi-structured interviewing:

- An interview guide reflects the ideal ways of phrasing questions and of transitioning from generic topics to more specific ones, but it should be used with flexibility rather than rigidity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). During the interview, you do not have to adhere to the sequence of questions in the interview guide; you do not have to ask every question; and you do not have to ask each interviewee questions in the same manner (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Hence, you have the latitude to pose a question earlier than it is arranged in the interview guide as long as it is in line with what the interviewee has just uttered; you have the leeway to phrase a question in a way that accommodates the interviewee’s way of responding and level of understanding (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).
- Both the interviewer and the interviewee actively participate in an interview (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). As a co-participant, you will come to times when you had better follow the interviewee’s responses and concerns, because you must treat the interviewee as an experiential expert (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). This suggests that sometimes the interview may depart from the interview guide and embark on a course the interviewee has set (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). These unforeseen turns, which emerge spontaneously, may have a resonance for the interviewee, so he or she should have the discretion to bring the interview closer to his or her experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Hence, these turns often constitute highly valuable aspects of the interview, and therefore the interviewer needs to explore these concerns, even though they are not stated in the interview guide (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). According to Elliott and Timulak (2021), feeling surprised by unexpected things is among the greatest delights enjoyed by qualitative researchers.
- As Husserl’s concept of *epoché* (bracketing) suggests, you should refrain from getting attached to your preconceptions that may contribute to a distorted view of reality (Churchill, 2022). In this regard, the practice of reflexivity would be incredibly helpful. Reflexivity “requires that researchers continually reflect on how their own experiences, assumptions, and biases might be influencing what they research, what they or their research participants say or do, and how they interpret what their research participants say or do” (Rubin & Babbie, 2017, p. 461). For example, if you assume that older adults who live alone feel lonely, you need to be self-aware of the potential influence of this assumption on your interviews with solo-dwelling older interviewees. Such self-awareness would help you suspend the pre-existing assumption and stay open-minded to the unfolding of the interviewees’ personal narratives, allowing the interviewees’ lived experiences to emerge on their own merits (Churchill, 2022). You might then find that your assumption is untenable.
- Adapt your conversational approach to fit interviewees’ dispositions. For example, whereas some interviewees may be relatively reticent and thus need constructive prompting and guidance, others are relatively talkative without recourse to prompting.

- As the interview unfolds, you need to employ interview techniques to facilitate a transition from “discussing topics at a summary level” to “specific accounts of particular experiences and the associated thoughts and feelings” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 68).
- The interviewee’s initial responses may follow your questions; nevertheless, the interviewee’s concerns that pertain to the research question are expected to lead the interview partially (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).
- You should stay alert to the interview dynamics and be prepared to return to a topic discussed earlier when feeling that it is appropriate to dig deeper into the topic (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Probing for further exploration

It is fair to say that semi-structured interviewing accords great importance to exploring interviewees’ perspectives, thoughts, volitions, feelings, and experiences. Accordingly, you need to use probing questions to tease out detailed information and multi-layered meanings and to elicit nuanced understandings and fine-grained insights, while being mindful of the natural flow of dialogue. The following are several strategies to probe deeper into interviewees’ responses and narratives:

- You can consider formulating in advance prompts for relatively abstract or complicated interview questions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).
- Take pains not to ask biased or leading questions. For example, instead of posing this question: “How has your experience of being a person under hospice care influenced your attitudes towards death?” you can ask: “Has your experience of being a person under hospice care influenced your attitudes towards death? If so, how?”
- It is sensible for you to jot down follow-up questions (Padgett, 2017). Alternatively, mental note-taking of follow-up questions can be considered (Olson, 2011).
- While the interviewee’s flow of speech is ongoing, you can take brief notes on key aspects or words uttered by him or her that you feel are worth exploring further (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Later, when the interviewee’s speech comes to a natural end, you can take this opportunity to express your intention to probe into these aspects or words (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).
- Engage in intensive and coherent probing based on how the interviewee has responded to your questioning. You can follow up the interviewee’s responses with neutral probes (e.g., seeking clarification or elaboration on a particular point, asking for a specific example) to delve deeper into nuanced, latent, and implicit meanings. You may want to use such probing questions as: “Why?” “How?” “Can you tell me more about that?” “Tell me what you were thinking?” “How did you feel?” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 68).
- “Verbal responses that communicate empathic understanding (e.g., ‘So, you felt so understood by your sponsor’) by the interviewer are coupled with further inquiry and probing for further detail (e.g., ‘So, could you tell me what conveyed that sense of being understood?’). The interviewer wants to unfold the participant’s account and so facilitates the participant to elaborate and explain” (Elliott & Timulak, 2021, p. 38).
- Clarify what slang, emotional words, and metaphors mean to the interviewee, since different individuals can interpret these things differently (Levitt, 2021). For example, you can ask: “What do you mean by ‘life is a dream’?”

The following excerpt illustrates how an 84-year-old male interviewee explained his philanthropic behaviour. It demonstrates how leveraging the open-ended and interactive nature of semi-structured interviewing can encourage an interviewee to frame a detailed and coherent narrative.

Interviewer: Why have you donated so much money to build two temples?

Interviewee: I know clearly that my present life is limited to only several more years. Money means nothing to me. You know, Buddhist temples are places for moral education. As *The Lotus Sutra* [a Buddhist scripture] says, “Without light, we cannot see the treasures in darkness. Likewise, if *Dharma* [the teachings of the Buddha] is not preached to us, even though we are wise, we cannot understand it.” This world needs some stupid persons like me, so that it can make progress.

This narrative offers a glimpse into the impact of religious beliefs on the interviewee’s philanthropic behaviour. Based on this narrative, you can employ follow-up questions to probe meaningfully into particular perceptions, beliefs, and motivations of the interviewee to add richness, depth, and clarity to the narrative, insofar as such questioning underpins the overarching purpose of your research. The follow-up questions you can consider using include:

- [1] “Could you explain your statement that ‘money means nothing to me’?”
- [2] “Does this statement have to do with your thought that you have only several years left to live? If so, could you explain the connection between them?”
- [3] “What do you mean by ‘moral education?’ Why do you think that Buddhist temples can contribute to moral education?”
- [4] “As you mentioned, ‘Without light, we cannot see the treasures in darkness.’ Could you explain this saying? It seems that your act of donating has to do with this saying. If so, how does this saying relate to your act of donating?”
- [5] “What do you mean by ‘stupid’? You seem to think that your donation can contribute to the progress of this world. If so, could you explain why?”
- [6] “Could you tell me more about why you have donated money for building two temples? Are there other Buddhist beliefs that influence your act of donating?”
- [7] “What does being a Buddhist mean to you?”

Such probing-oriented questioning would help the interviewee elaborate and reflect on his philanthropic behaviour, thus eliciting his subtle thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, it is appropriate to explore the sociocultural context (e.g., “Did your cultural background influence your decision to donate?” “What were your family members’ attitudes towards your decision to donate?”) and the dynamic process (e.g., “Could you help me understand the process of your donating?” “What were you thinking when you completed the donating process?” “How were you feeling when you completed the donating process?”) of his donating, which would yield a more contextualized and comprehensive understanding of his philanthropic behaviour.

The example above illustrates how to plumb the underlying meanings of an interviewee's responses and narratives. Now, consider the following example to gain an understanding of how to probe deeper into nuanced life experiences to elicit an impartial story. A female interviewee, in response to your question: "Could you tell me what it is like to be a caregiver?", describes her caregiving for her spouse with Alzheimer's disease in a negative light, poignantly complaining that the heavy caregiving burden (e.g., difficulty navigating the healthcare system, feeling inadequately supported) has overwhelmed her. To fathom the underlying meanings of her responses, you can use probing questions that align with the overarching purpose of your research such as:

- [1] "Could you tell me more about your caregiving experience?"
- [2] "What does your caregiving mean to you?"
- [3] "How do you feel about your role as a caregiver?"
- [4] "Has your experience as a caregiver changed the way you think about yourself? If so, how?"
- [5] "Could you share what has kept you going with your caregiving?"
- [6] "Have you found any aspects of your caregiving rewarding? If so, could you tell me about these aspects?"

Such open-ended questioning serves to delve deeper into the interviewee's multifaceted and multilayered experience of caregiving. Thus, if the distressed interviewee has indeed derived benefits (e.g., heightened self-worth, strengthened resilience, increased patience, deepened relationship with the care recipient) from her caregiving experience, such probing can bring to light these positive nuggets of meaning that may otherwise remain buried. Hence, by illuminating both the thorny and rosy pictures of caregiving, such probing can reveal the bittersweet nature of the caregiving journey. Without such probing, you could likely fall prey to a one-sided lens that would woefully steer your focus to the interviewee's bitter moments of caregiving while blinding you to her sweet moments of caregiving.

Staying attentive

"Key to effective interviewing is the researcher's attention to the participant's narrative as *it is unfolding*" (Galletta, 2013, p. 76, italics in the original). You can consider adopting the following strategies to maintain attentiveness during the interview:

- The interviewer's closed questioning, leading questioning, and being judgmental as well as a hasty pace typically characterize an ineffective interview (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Therefore, make sure to raise open-ended, exploratory, neutral, and unbiased questions, to avoid making judgmental statements, and to optimize the pace and rhythm of interviewing. Furthermore, refrain from seeking confirmation of your own presuppositions and assumptions. Also refrain from agreeing or disagreeing with the interviewee's statements.
- Take care to use clear, non-judgmental, non-stigmatizing, and non-condescending language. Avoid using jargon and difficult words. It is good practice to employ person-first language. For example, you should use such a phrase as "the person with depression" instead of "the depressed person."

- Sometimes, you need to paraphrase the interviewee's words (e.g., "If I am not wrong, you were saying...") to check whether your understandings of the interviewee's responses ring true to him or her.
- Try to devote considerable attention to the interviewee's nonverbal cues (e.g., avoiding eye contact, clenched fists, furrowed eyebrows, watery eyes) and verbal cues (e.g., quivering voice) that may indicate underlying emotions. Nonverbal cues or the way in which the interviewee responds may suggest that the interviewee is not comfortable with a certain line of questioning (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Under these circumstances, adjusting, rephrasing, or discontinuing the line of questioning can be considered (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
- If you perceive a disturbing reaction from the interviewee, you need to address it before proceeding with the interview (Bryson & McConville, 2014). For example, you can express your concern by saying: "I can see that this is upsetting for you," and then kindly allow the interviewee the necessary time to gather himself or herself (Bryson & McConville, 2014, p. 78).
- When the interviewee exhibits apprehension or hostility, you should invest time in reassuring him or her and addressing the barrier (Bryson & McConville, 2014). Bryson and McConville (2014) have suggested several questions to consider: "Do they respond well to humour? Are they quite formal and disdainful of any hint of flippancy? Are they shy? What lingering fears or apprehensions might they have? What impression are they forming of you? Can you find some common ground" (p. 69)?
- Honour and tolerate the silence of the interviewee during the interview. Treat pauses as natural things and silence can only be broken if the interviewee is perceived as getting stuck (Padgett, 2017). "Timing is critical: not to respond too quickly and thus cut off thinking, nor too slowly and thus increase anxiety" (Gitterman & Germain, 2008, p. 161).
- If the interviewee goes off at a tangent, you must attend to this digression tactfully, guiding him or her back on track. For instance, when the interviewee deviates from talking about his or her concrete circumstances and particular experiences and instead concentrates on general human experiences, your use of questions will help him or her revert to his or her personal lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Additionally, you may find it helpful to utilize this statement: "That idea is really interesting, and I'd like to hear more about it after the interview, but let's return to the interview focus for now" (Levitt, 2021, pp. 44-45).

Concluding the interview

To facilitate the conclusion of the interview, it is good practice to make the interviewee feel heard, respected, and valued. What follows are several strategies to do so:

- Towards the end of the interview, be careful not to rush the interview or abruptly terminate the interview. It should come as no surprise to find that the interviewee may raise an eyebrow over such an anti-climax.
- You can harness the flow of interactive engagement developed during the interview, which can place you in a better position to wrap up the interview smoothly.
- It is not unusual for the interviewer to recapitulate briefly the main points of the interview content.
- Check whether the interviewee has anything else to share. Kindly allow him or her to raise any concerns and articulate any reflections.
- Respectfully thank the interviewee for his or her time and generous sharing as well as valuable contributions.
- Reaffirm your commitment to research ethics.

Post-interview debriefing and support

Upon switching off the recording device, you may feel a sense of completion. However, your obligations as the interviewer do not terminate here. To preserve the well-being of the interviewee, it behoves you to debrief the interviewee, taking care to inquire of him or her about the experiences of being interviewed. Of particular concern is to ascertain the impact of the interview on the interviewee and gauge his or her emotional state. You may need to ask the interviewee questions such as: “How are you feeling after undergoing this interview?” “How did you feel during the interview?” “Do you have any concerns about your participation in the interview or the research study?”

You should consider referring the interviewee to somebody for advice, guidance, and even psychological support if he or she is in distress (Smith & Nizza, 2022). According to Levitt (2021), to ensure the safety and well-being of interviewees, “it might be helpful to provide or have on hand mental health or other referrals (e.g., advocacy organizations, shelter information, support groups) if they might be relevant to your study topic” (p. 50).

Cultural and ethical sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity

It can be said that culture shapes human behaviour. For instance, in their study of grandparenting among Singaporean Chinese, Low and Goh (2015) found that participants were motivated by such Chinese cultural factors as “the desire to maintain harmonious relationships and remain connected,” “the concept of *gu rou* (flesh and blood),” and “the desire to *chuan zong jie dai* (continue the family lineage)” to engage in grandchild care (p. 311). Hence, it stands to reason that interviewees’ cultural beliefs can inform their life stories. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews should be conducted in a culturally competent manner. Here are several strategies for doing so:

- According to Azzopardia and McNeill (2016), “Cultural competence can be understood as an ongoing process whereby one gains awareness of, and appreciation for, cultural diversity and an ability to work sensitively, respectfully, and proficiently with those from diverse backgrounds” (p. 283). Thus, you should acknowledge and appreciate cultural diversity and respect the interviewee’s cultural values, beliefs, expressions, and experiences. You should honour diverse religious or spiritual beliefs and practices. For example, Buddhists among Singaporean Chinese may impute their psychological conditions to misdeeds in the past life (Lee & Bishop, 2001).
- View your own cultural biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions through a reflexive and reflective lens, being mindful of their potential influence on the interview process. Otherwise, you might misread the interviewee’s responses and narratives. You may find it valuable to keep a reflexive journal to critically self-examine your own cultural and other preconceptions.
- Take care not to fall in the trap of ethnocentrism, namely, “the belief in the superiority of your own culture” (Rubin & Babbie, 2017, p. 116). Seek not to impose your own cultural values and beliefs on the interviewee and interject your personal judgments about the interviewee’s cultural values, beliefs, expressions, and experiences.
- You should hone your skills in intercultural communication (e.g., utilizing culturally appropriate greetings and wording, having a clear sense of the interviewee’s culturally shaped communication characteristics, understanding cultural taboos about certain topics and issues).
- It is constructive for you to harbour cultural humility. Cultural humility can enable you to refrain from standing on a privileged position in the interview interaction, promoting an egalitarian and empowering relationship between the interviewee and yourself.
- Moreover, cultural humility would motivate and inspire you to learn, understand, and appreciate diverse cultural traditions, norms, values, and beliefs (Gottlieb, 2021).

Ethical sensitivity

Throughout the interview process, your ethical responsibilities should be consistently prioritized (Smith & Nizza, 2022) and you should take pains to ensure the ethical conduct of the interview. Semi-structured interviewing in social service research may raise ethical concerns and issues that demand recognition and resolution.

- Ethical considerations include risk, informed consent, and confidentiality (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Treat interviewees' personal information and interview data with strict confidentiality. Take care to anonymize interview data: Any personal identifiers (e.g., names, employers) should be replaced by pseudonyms; consent should clearly include permission for publishing anonymized and verbatim interview excerpts (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The interviewee should understand that he or she has the right to choose not to answer questions he or she does not feel comfortable with, the right to suspend the interview whenever he or she desires, and the right to revoke his or her consent to the post-interview use of the interview data (Smith & Nizza, 2022).
- Strive to resist the temptation to cater for your own research interests and instrumentalize the interviewee. Rather, you should always prioritize the well-being and interests of the interviewee and preserve the dignity, worth, privacy, autonomy, and uniqueness of the interviewee.
- Take to heart that researchers should not only design studies in a manner that minimizes potential harm, but also have the responsibility to identify any occurrence of harm during research, rather than assuming that there is no likelihood for harm to occur (Olson, 2011).
- It behoves you to observe the ethical requirements and standards stipulated by a relevant ethics review board, if your research study has been approved by the board.
- It is necessary to maintain an appropriate professional boundary. You should enact the single role of interviewer throughout the interview and refrain from assuming a role of therapist, because the interviewee has not given consent to receiving therapy (Levitt, 2021).

It is worth noting here that as part of ethically responsible interview practice, you should perceive, validate, and handle with empathy, sensitivity, and tact the interviewee's distressing emotions if they arise during the interview. As Levitt (2021) noted, when discussing a topic that is sensitive or distressing to the interviewee, he or she may be willing to answer some of the questions related to the topic while feeling uncomfortable with others. It is good practice to reassure the interviewee that he or she has every right to refuse to answer any question he or she feels ill at ease with (Levitt, 2021). If the interviewee weeps or becomes emotional in the midst of the interview, this should cause no concern as long as such expression is acceptable to him or her (Levitt, 2021). If the interviewee expresses the need to take a break, have some water, or resume the interview on a different day, you should be supportive of such a need (Levitt, 2021). Such supportiveness helps to preserve the interviewer-interviewee rapport and promote the interviewee's openness to elaborate (Knox & Burkard, 2009). To dig into their own thoughts and emotions pertaining to difficult and emotionally challenging topics, what interviewees often require are both time and an attentive listener (Hill & Knox, 2021). Thus, the discussion on such topics can be arranged later in the interview, which would facilitate the unfolding of emotionally evocative stories and experiences. Anyway, it is vital to follow the fundamental principle that interviewees' needs should override research goals (Olson, 2011).

Challenges and limitations

Challenges of conducting semi-structured interviews

When conducting a semi-structured interview, you may encounter challenges such as: the challenge to remember issues that require further exploration, the challenge to be non-intrusive, and the challenge to refrain from exhibiting excessive excitement and thus leading the interviewee unintentionally (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Additionally, it is a challenge to conduct a fruitful interview within a given time frame. Effective time management involves trying to remain focused on the essential topics within the planned duration, while allowing room for the interviewee to respond readily and unrestrictedly without feeling rushed. Other challenges that may arise during the interview include communication barriers (e.g., the interviewee's weak voice, different accents) and environmental distractions (e.g., abrupt noise, interruption by someone).

The interviewer's professional power may underpin power asymmetry during the interview interaction, which constitutes a challenge that cannot afford to be neglected because such power imbalance tends to undermine the interview dynamics. To make the interviewee feel empowered and motivated to share his or her life experiences readily and faithfully, you should strive to maintain a balanced power structure by, among others, treating him or her as an equal partner and an experiential expert (Brinkmann, 2015; Galletta, 2013) and respecting his or her right of autonomy in deciding what to share. These endeavours would contribute to the creation of a power-sharing and interviewee-centred atmosphere that facilitates equal, open, transparent, and unencumbered dialogue and communication.

It appears justifiable to say that fathoming cultural nuances can be challenging although rewarding. A critical point here is that lacking awareness of or misreading cultural nuances may lead to a limited or distorted portrayal of cultural reality. For example, if you do not penetrate diverse cultural meanings of the afterlife, you might fail to probe into interviewees' particular beliefs about the afterlife, thus losing sight of the multi-perspectives on the afterlife that may inform their death-related service needs and preferences. It is thus important for you to foster a spirit of cultural humility and to strive to be culturally sensitive, attuned, and responsive.

Plausibly, a plethora of challenges are poised to cascade down on you. The onus is on you to cleave through the waves of challenge and forge ahead while ensuring that your interview remains anchored to research ethics. It is advisable to anticipate challenges and address them proactively and realistically. You also need to brace yourself for unanticipated challenges and problems. Worthy of emphasis here is that it is unwise to embrace semi-structured interviewing as a solo endeavour. Rather, with peer or supervisor support (e.g., guidance, feedback, moral support, emotional support), you would be better positioned to rise to the challenges of interviewing and venture into the interviewee's life world.

Limitations of semi-structured interviewing

The utilisation of semi-structured interviewing in social service research is driven by multiple advantages as encapsulated in the section “Strengths of semi-structured interviewing.” However, a flourish of trumpets for semi-structured interviewing in social service research must be tempered by a keen awareness of its limitations.

- Although semi-structured interviewing tries to promote the articulation of authentic voices by interviewees, there may be respondent bias, which “refers most typically to the need to appear socially desirable” (Rubin & Babbie, 2017, p. 450). Therefore, interviewees may paint socially desirable pictures of their experiences, failing to provide genuine responses and narratives. Additionally, given that there may be unreliable memory or recall bias, the accuracy of retrospective self-reports cannot be guaranteed.
- There is little doubt that interviewer bias is present. Germane here is Heidegger’s assertion that “our being-in-the-world is always perspectival” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 18). For example, an interviewer may inadvertently hold an ageist stereotype of an older interviewee, which could distort his or her perception of the interviewee’s subjective reality. To ensure the rigour of research and the trustworthiness of semi-structured interviewing, interviewers are advised to engage in reflexivity, namely, reflecting critically on and staying mindful of their own assumptions, preconceptions, and biases (Galletta, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2017).
- Semi-structured interviews tend to be time-consuming. It is understandable that sometimes an interviewee may perceive a semi-structured interview as tedious and thus his or her enthusiasm would be prone to evaporate.
- Semi-structured interviews provide a platform for interviewees to share their subjective experiences through oral storytelling. However, such verbal storytelling, as compared with written storytelling, permits less profound deliberation and less extensive elaboration. Thus, it might produce fragmented, condensed, truncated, or one-dimensional narratives. Therefore, you need to acknowledge that while verbal data generated through semi-structured interviewing illuminate some aspects of lived experiences, there is a realistic possibility that they obscure other aspects of lived experiences.
- Not all interviewees get used to the conversational format and the semi-structured nature of such interviewing. Moreover, not all interviewees find it comfortable to discuss emotionally taxing issues or taboo subjects.
- Semi-structured interviewing generally demands sophisticated skills from interviewers. Interviewers need to be skilled in building an interview alliance, balancing structure with flexibility, probing for further exploration, dealing with sensitive topics, and so on.

Conclusions

By endorsing the importance of flexibility and depth in exploring the lived experiences of interviewees, semi-structured interviewing has the virtue of offering an interviewee-centred lens through which social service researchers and professionals can gain profound, nuanced, holistic, and situated insights into these experiences. In particular, the flexible and in-depth nature of semi-structured interviewing is instrumental in fleshing out interviewees' spontaneous responses and unexpected accounts, delving into the points and plotlines of interviewees' narratives, casting light on otherwise unnoticeable aspects of interviewees' life worlds, and unravelling the implicit and latent meanings of interviewees' lived experiences. Consequently, "the lived experience of others is revealed in its density and complexity, in its ambiguity and ambivalence, in its emotionality as well as its rationality" (Fay, 1996, p. 27).

There is no foolproof recipe or no single best way to conduct semi-structured interviews in social service research. Performing such an interview is believed to entail a synergy of the practical skills, professional values, cultural competences, and ethical capabilities of the interviewer. By constructing a practice framework of semi-structured interviewing, this research guide seeks to scaffold social service researchers and professionals to actively listen to interviewees' unique voices and profoundly capture their nuanced experiences. Aspiring to illuminate the heart and soul of semi-structured interviewing in social service research, the guide delineates and elucidates practical strategies to prepare for, commence, proceed with, and conclude a semi-structured interview, to build rapport, maintain flexibility, probe further, stay attentive, and debrief the interviewee, and to cultivate cultural and ethical sensitivity. Additionally, the guide identifies several challenges of semi-structured interviewing such as managing time effectively, addressing power asymmetry, and fathoming cultural nuances and discusses the strategies to surmount these challenges. All these strategies are grist to the mill of semi-structured interviewing in social service research. It is hoped that this guide can serve to empower social service research interviewers to navigate ethical, dynamic, reflexive, interviewee-centred, culturally sensitive, and semi-structured interview practice, whereby to generate reasonably rich, in-depth, and meaningful interview data.

In closing, it may not be superfluous to offer three caveats. First, this guide provides heuristic and rule-of-thumb guidelines rather than prescriptive, normative, and hard-and-fast rules. Accordingly, you must guard against treating it as a one-size-fits-all Procrustean bed that carries fixed and uniform standards. Rather, you would do well to gear it towards the specific contextual situations of social service and tailor it to interviewees' particular circumstances and unique experiences. To orchestrate and optimize your conduct of semi-structured interviewing, you may want to leverage other textual resources on semi-structured interviewing (e.g., Bryson & McConville, 2014; Knox & Burkard, 2009; Galletta, 2013; Olson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Whiting, 2008) in conjunction with this guide. Second, semi-structured interviewing is not without limitations as noted earlier. Therefore, you may wish to consider triangulating semi-structured interviewing with another appropriate data collection approach to enhance the quality of your research data. Third, "[i]t is important to remember that it is never possible to achieve a perfect interview technique and that you will always miss things out, but also to acknowledge that your technique will improve with practice" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022, p. 64). Accordingly, it is good practice to anneal your interview skills and wisdom in the crucible of semi-structured interview praxis.

REFERENCES

- Azzopardi, C., & McNeill, T. (2016). From cultural competence to cultural consciousness: Transitioning to a critical approach to working across differences in social work. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 25* (4), 282–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2016.1206494>
- Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Qualitative interviewing*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199861392.001.0001>
- Bryson, A., & McConville, S. (2014). *The Routledge guide to interviewing: Oral history, social enquiry and investigation*. Routledge.
- Churchill, S. D. (2022). *Essentials of existential phenomenological research*. American Psychological Association Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
- Elliott, R., & Timulak, L. (2021). *Essentials of descriptive-interpretive qualitative research: A generic approach*. American Psychological Association Press.
- Fay, B. (1996). *Contemporary philosophy of social science: A multicultural approach*. Blackwell.
- Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. New York University Press.
- Gitterman, A., & Germain, C. B. (2008). *The life model of social work practice: Advances in knowledge and practice* (3rd ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Gottlieb, M. (2021). The case for a cultural humility framework in social work practice. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 30*(6), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2020.1753615>
- Hill, C. E., & Knox, S. (2021). *Essentials of consensual qualitative research*. American Psychological Association Press.
- Knox, S., & Burkard, A. W. (2009). Qualitative research interviews. *Psychotherapy Research, 19* (4–5), 566–575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503300802702105>
- Lee, B., & Bishop, G. D. (2001). Chinese clients' belief systems about psychological problems in Singapore. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 14*(3), 219–240, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070110088834>

- Levitt, H. M. (2021). *Essentials of critical-constructivist grounded theory research*. American Psychological Association Press.
- Low, S. S. H., & Goh, E. C. L. (2015). Granny as nanny: Positive outcomes for grandparents providing childcare for dual-income families. Fact or myth? *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 13(4), 302–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2015.1111003>
- McGrath, C., Palmgren, P. J., & Liljedahl, M. (2019). Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. *Medical Teacher*, 41(9), 1002–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2018.1497149>
- McMullen, L. M. (2021). *Essentials of discursive psychology*. American Psychological Association.
- Olson, K. (2011). *Essentials of qualitative interviewing*. Left Coast.
- Padgett, D. K. (2017). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Poulos, C. N. (2021). *Essentials of autoethnography*. American Psychological Association.
- Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. R. (2017). *Research methods for social work* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Sankar, A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1994). Introduction. In J. F. Gubrium, & A. Sankar (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in aging research* (pp. vii-xvii). Sage.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Terry, G., & Hayfield, N. (2021). *Essentials of thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Whiting L. S. (2008). Semi-structured interviews: Guidance for novice researchers. *Nursing Standard*, 22(23), 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.7748/ns2008.02.22.23.35.c642>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Publications Team

Review Editor: Dr Rosaleen Ow

Editorial Assistant: Nurul Fadiyah Johari

NUS Social Service Research Centre

Faculty of Arts and Social Science

National University of Singapore

The Shaw Foundation Building, Block AS7,

Level 3, 5 Arts Link,

Singapore 117570

Email: ssr@nus.edu.sg

Phone: 6601-5019

Website: <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/ssr/>