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Qualitative Research Interviews: Structured, Semi-Structured, Unstructured

Derek Jansen, MBA
Grad Coach
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Abstract

Interviews are among the most widely used methods of collecting qualitative data, and the degree of structure chosen for them shapes the data a study obtains and the analysis it can support. This article describes the three main types of research interview as points on a spectrum. Structured interviews ask every participant the same predefined questions in the same order; unstructured interviews begin with a broad prompt and let the participant direct the conversation; semi-structured interviews combine a guide of core questions with probes and a flexible order. For each type, the article sets out how it works, what it offers and what it costs, and the kinds of study it suits. A single topic, the boundary between work and home life among remote workers, is then run through all three approaches to show how the questions differ. The article offers two questions for choosing an approach and analyzes how a master's thesis justified its use of semi-structured interviews. It is intended for students and early-career researchers planning interview-based research, and for the educators who teach qualitative research methods.

Keywords: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews; types of interviews in qualitative research; qualitative interviews; interview guide; probing questions; qualitative research methods; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

Interviews are one of the most common ways of collecting qualitative data, and the format of the interview shapes the data collected and the analysis that follows. A format that is too rigid for the research question can produce answers too shallow to analyze; a format that is too loose can produce transcripts too scattered to compare.

Research interviews can be divided by their degree of structure into three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2005, as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Comparing the three side by side, with the gains and costs of each made explicit, makes the choice easier.

This article is written for students and researchers planning interview-based research and for those who teach qualitative methods. Section 2 compares the three approaches. Sections 3, 4 and 5 describe structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews in turn. Section 6 runs a single topic through all three approaches to show how the questions differ. Section 7 offers two questions for choosing an approach and analyzes how a completed thesis justified its choice.

2. The Three Approaches Compared

The three approaches sit on a spectrum, from fully scripted to fully open. Table 1 summarizes how each works and the trade-off it involves.

Table 1. Structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews compared.

Approach	How it works	The trade-off
Structured	The same fixed questions, in the same order, with few or no follow-up questions	Easy to compare across many people, but answers stay shallow
Semi-structured	A guide of core questions, with planned and unplanned follow-up questions (probes) and a flexible order	A comparable core plus depth, but harder to pace
Unstructured	One or two opening prompts, after which the participant directs the conversation	Rich and unexpected data, but scattered and slow to analyze

3. Structured Interviews

In a **structured interview**, every question is written in advance and **every participant is asked the same questions in the same order**. Structured interviews are close to surveys delivered orally rather than in writing. Fixing the questions and their order is meant to limit the influence of the interviewer and the instrument on the results (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). That rigidity provides consistency: answers are easy to compare, and interviews move quickly, so more participants can be interviewed.

The cost is depth. Because the questions and their order are fixed in advance, the interviewer has little or no room to add questions in response to what a participant says, as the interviewer in a semi-structured interview can (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). An interesting answer cannot be pur-

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sued, and anything the researcher did not think to ask about is missed. Responses also tend to stay on the surface.

Structured interviews suit studies that need **specific, comparable data from a relatively large number of participants**, such as a study checking whether a pattern holds across several groups. Because every participant answers the same questions, the data are easy to analyze side by side. Closed answers can be summarized with descriptive statistics, and short open answers can be coded into categories and counted through content analysis. With closed answer options, however, a structured interview yields largely quantitative, survey-like data rather than the open accounts that qualitative interviews usually aim for, so it suits qualitative research less well than the other two types.

4. Unstructured Interviews

At the opposite end of the spectrum, an **unstructured interview** has no script. The researcher opens with a broad question and then generates further questions in response to what the participant says, so that **the conversation is guided by the participant's responses** (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

That freedom can produce rich and unexpected insights into matters the researcher would not have thought to ask about. The costs lie in control and time. Because conversations wander, the interviewer must judge when to follow a new topic and when to steer back to the study's concerns. This carries the risk of losing either continuity or useful information. The method is slow, since it takes time to gain access, earn the participant's trust and build rapport, a relationship in which the participant feels at ease talking openly. Because the questions differ from one interview to the next, the resulting data take considerable effort to analyze systematically (Patton, 2002, as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Unstructured interviews are **best suited to exploratory studies**, in which little is known about the topic and participants are invited to define what matters. Studies of personal experiences of trauma, or of the realities of starting a business, are typical examples. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) add that unstructured interviews are a poor fit once the researcher already understands the phenomenon in outline and wants to examine specific aspects of it. Semi-structured interviews or surveys then collect the data more efficiently. Because each conversation takes its own shape, unstructured data often suit analysis that builds categories from the data rather than from the questions asked. For example, in one study reviewed by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), the interviews were analyzed with grounded theory, an approach of this kind.

5. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews sit between the two. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) describe them as interviews that "include a short list of 'guiding' questions that are supplemented by follow-up and probing questions that are dependent on the interviewee's responses" (p. 5). The interviewer **starts with a guide of core questions** but is free to change their order, probe further and follow themes as they emerge. That flexibility allows a study to gather comparable data on its core

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questions while still capturing depth. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) identify the semi-structured interview as the most common type of interview used in qualitative research and in the healthcare context (p. 2).

The difficulty is the skill it demands of the interviewer. The interviewer must cover the core questions while responding to the flow of the conversation, and must also **manage the time available**. Time can easily run out, particularly with a talkative participant. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) recommend pilot testing the interview guide, noting among other benefits that "having a good sense of the guide helps you to pace the interview (and not run out of time)" (p. 5).

Semi-structured interviews work well when a study needs **both comparability and depth**, for example when studying how a policy affects different groups of people. The shared core of questions makes patterns easier to compare across participants, which suits thematic analysis, an approach that looks for patterns of meaning across a whole data set. Even so, the choice of analysis should follow from the research question and qualitative design (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 7).

6. Example Questions for Each Approach

The difference between the approaches is clearest when a single topic is run through all three. Boxes 1, 2 and 3 apply each approach to one topic: how remote workers manage the boundary between work and home life. The questions are illustrative, written for this article rather than taken from a real study.

Box 1. Example structured interview questions, written for this article.

1. On a typical workday, how many hours do you work from home?
2. Do you have a separate room or space for work? (Yes / No)
3. How often do you check work messages after your working hours end? (Never / Sometimes / Often / Always)
4. On a scale of 1 to 5, how well do you separate work from home life?

Every participant is asked exactly these four questions, in this order, and most answers come from a fixed set of options. The answers are therefore easy to count and compare, much like survey responses, but they reveal nothing about why a participant answered as they did.

Box 2. An example semi-structured interview guide, written for this article.

1. Can you walk me through a typical workday, from start to finish? *Probe: When does work start and stop for you?*
2. How do you keep work from spilling into home life? *Probes: Can you give me a recent example? What happens when that breaks down?*
3. How has your approach changed since you started working remotely? *Probe: What prompted that change?*

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Here the core questions are fixed, and each comes with probes to use or omit depending on the answer. **The depth comes from the probes**, which can be planned in advance or used as unplanned follow-ups to what the participant says (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, Table 5).

Box 3. An example unstructured interview opening, written for this article.

> *Opening prompt*: Tell me about what working from home has been like for you.
>
> *Follow-up cues*: Follow up whatever the participant raises. For example: You mentioned your children. Can you tell me more about how that affects your day?

An unstructured interview has no set list of questions, only an opening prompt. The researcher may still bring a written list of topics, called an aide-memoire or agenda, which serves as a reminder of what to cover without fixing the order of the conversation (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The researcher decides the topic; the participant decides what matters within it.

7. Choosing and Justifying an Approach

7.1 Choosing an approach

The choice of approach depends on what the research aims and questions require. This article proposes two questions, asked in order, as a starting point for choosing an approach (Figure 1). The first asks whether the study needs standardized answers that can be counted and compared across many participants. If it does, structured interviews fit. If not, the second asks whether the topic is little known, so that participants should define what matters. If it is, unstructured interviews fit. If the answer to both is no, semi-structured interviews fit. If either answer is uncertain, semi-structured interviews are a reasonable default, as they keep a fixed core while leaving room to probe.

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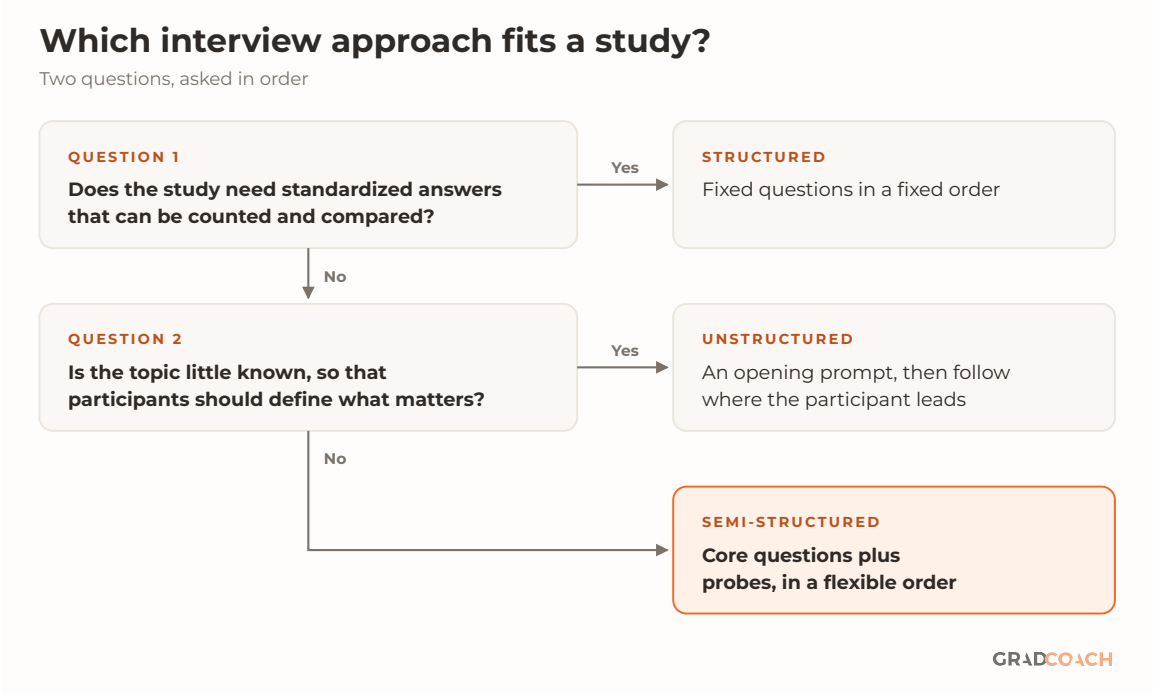


Figure 1. Two questions for choosing an interview approach, asked in order.

7.2 Justifying the choice: a thesis example

Whichever approach is chosen, the methodology chapter or methods section must justify it. A master's thesis in development sociology from Cornell University, based on interviews with smallholder farmers in Malawi, provides a clear example. In the extract, "these questions" refers to the household-level factors of food security that the interview guide was designed to explore. These factors included some that the project's earlier baseline survey had covered only in part or not at all, such as seed access, market relations and coping mechanisms. The passage gives one reason for flexibility and another for structure:

> Semi-structured interviews were deemed the best approach to answering these questions; their flexible nature of probing allows the researcher to probe respondents further when answers hint at a relevant story, uncover an unspoken logic, or need further clarification (Maxwell, 2005). Yet the breadth of issues that are related to food security status and determinants required a structured approach to interviewing to ensure adequate detail about each household's food security status, systems of production and provisioning, [...] within a reasonable timeframe (approximately an hour per interview).
>
> Madsen (2019, p. 39)

The ellipsis replaces the words "and their internal"; the source sentence is incomplete at that point. The quoted passage makes three moves, which are set out in Table 2.

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Table 2. Three moves in a justification of semi-structured interviews (Madsen, 2019).

The move	Where it happens
Ties the choice to what the study needs to find out	"deemed the best approach to answering these questions" (p. 39).
Gives a reason for the flexibility, with a source	Probing allows the researcher to follow up "when answers hint at a relevant story, uncover an unspoken logic, or need further clarification (Maxwell, 2005)" (p. 39).
Gives a reason for the structure	"the breadth of issues [...] required a structured approach to interviewing [...] within a reasonable timeframe (approximately an hour per interview)" (p. 39).

A justification of a semi-structured design should **address both halves**: why the study needs room to probe, and why it still needs a fixed core of questions.

Once an approach is settled, the next step is to turn it into a written interview guide and to pilot test that guide before the main interviews (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

8. Conclusion

Structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews differ in how much of the conversation is fixed in advance. Structured interviews make answers easy to compare but leave them shallow. Unstructured interviews, directed by the participant, yield depth and unexpected insight at the cost of time and ease of analysis. Semi-structured interviews combine a fixed core of questions with probes, offering comparability and depth but demanding skill in pacing. The choice should follow from the research aims and questions, and the methods section should justify it. For a semi-structured design, the justification must cover both the flexibility and the structure.

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