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Difference between structured and unstructured interview pdf

Difference between structured and unstructured interview. What is structured and unstructured interview.

An unstructured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking participants questions to collect data on a topic. Also known as non-directive interviewing, unstructured interviews do not have a set pattern and questions are not arranged in advance. In research, unstructured interviews are usually qualitative in nature, and can be very helpful for social science or humanities research focusing on personal experiences. An unstructured interview can be a particularly useful exploratory research tool. Known for being very informal and flexible, they can yield captivating responses from your participants. NoteUnstructured interviews differ from other types of interviews because none of the questions are predetermined in topic or order. The other three most common types of interviews are: What is an unstructured interview? An unstructured interview is the most flexible type of interview, with room for spontaneity. In contrast to a structured interview, the questions and the order in which they are presented are not set. Instead, the interview proceeds based on the participant's previous answers. Unstructured interviews are open-ended. This lack of structure can help you gather detailed information on your topic, while still allowing you to observe patterns in the analysis stage. When to use an unstructured interview It can be challenging to know what type of interview best fits your subject matter. Unstructured interviews can be very challenging to conduct, and may not always be the best fit for your research question. Unstructured interviews are best used when: You are an experienced interviewer and have a very strong background in your research topic. Your research question is exploratory in nature. While you may have developed hypotheses, you are open to discovering new or shifting viewpoints. You are seeking descriptive data, and are ready to ask questions that will deepen and contextualize your initial thoughts and hypotheses. Your research depends on forming connections with your participants and making them feel comfortable revealing deeper emotions, thoughts, or lived experiences. Even more so than in structured or semi-structured interviews, it is critical that you remain organized and develop a system for keeping track of participant responses. Since the questions are not set beforehand, the data collection and analysis becomes more complex. Differences between different types of interviews Make sure to choose the type of interview that suits your research best. This table shows the most important differences between the four types. Advantages of unstructured interviews Unstructured interviews have a few advantages compared to other types of interviews. Unstructured interviews are very flexible and structured much like a daily conversation. This fosters an open environment, where new topics and ideas can flow. The more natural flow of unstructured interviews can help your respondent feel comfortable and at ease. Increased rapport can somewhat mitigate the power differential inherent to the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. Relatedly, more empowered respondents may be less likely to bias their responses towards what they perceive to be socially desirable. For this reason, unstructured interviews are often a popular choice for research into sensitive or traumatic subjects. The flexibility of unstructured interviews can allow for the flow of new ideas, but also lessen their reliability and generalizability. It can be difficult to compare responses between participants if they do not all receive the same questions, making the analysis stage challenging. Due to their length, unstructured interviews often have very small sample sizes, which can lead to various types of sampling bias and selection bias. The open-ended nature of unstructured interviews can make it tempting to ask leading questions, which can lead to various types of research bias in your responses. In this conversation-like setting, it can be more difficult for the interviewer to keep their reactions or true opinions to themselves, leading to observer bias or demand characteristics. It can also be challenging for participants to answer fully or truthfully, leading to social desirability bias, recall bias, and a Hawthorne effect. Unstructured interviews can be very time-consuming, in both the interview stage and the analysis stage. Encouraging lengthy, detailed responses can add richness to the data, but also leads to much more time spent transcribing and analyzing, and the risk that important data can get lost in the shuffle. Relatedly, it can be challenging to keep unstructured interviews "on track," with the risk that tangents and side questions can derail your research objectives. This can decrease the internal validity of your research. Unstructured interview questions It can be challenging to ask unstructured interview questions that get you the information you seek without biasing your responses. You will have to rely on the flow of the conversation and the cues you pick up from your participants. Here are a few tips: Since you won't be designing set questions ahead of time, it's important to feel sufficiently comfortable with your topic that you can come up with questions spontaneously. Write yourself a guide with notes about your topic and what you're seeking to investigate or gain from your interviews, so you have notes to refer back to. Try to ask questions that encourage your participant to answer at length.



Avoid closed-ended questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Relatedly, focus on "how" questions rather than "why" questions to help put your participants at ease and avoid any feelings of defensiveness or anxiety. Consider beginning the interview with an icebreaker or a "freebie" question, to start on a relaxed and comfortable note before delving into the more sensitive topics. Example: Unstructured interview questionsYou are studying the effects of regularly going to the gym on perceptions of mental and physical well-being. In order to get more honest, unfiltered responses, you choose to conduct unstructured interviews, asking your participants progressively more challenging questions depending on their previous answers. Here are a few possibilities for how your conversation could proceed: Conversation A: Interviewer: Do you go to the gym? How often? Participant: I go to the gym 5 times per week. Interviewer: What feelings does going to the gym bring out in you? Participant: I don't feel like myself unless I go to the gym. Since the participant hinted that going to the gym is important for their mental health, proceed with questions in that vein, such as: You say you "don't feel like yourself." Can you elaborate? If you have to skip a gym day, how does that make you feel? Is there anything else that makes you feel the way going to the gym does? Conversation B: Interviewer: Do you go to the gym? How often? Participant: No, I hate the gym. Since the participant seems to have strong feelings against the gym, you can probe deeper. What makes you feel this way about the gym? What do you like to do instead? Do your feelings about the gym reflect on your feelings about exercise in general?



How to conduct an unstructured interview Once you've determined that an unstructured interview is the right fit for your research topic, you can proceed with the following steps. Step 1: Set your goals and foundations As you conceptualize your research question, consider starting with some guiding questions, such as: What are you trying to learn or achieve from an unstructured interview specifically? Why is an unstructured interview the best fit for your research, as opposed to a different type of interview or another research method? What is the guiding force behind your research? What topic will serve as the foundation for your unscripted and follow-up questions? While you do not need to plan your questions ahead of time for an unstructured interview, this does not mean that no advanced planning is needed. Unstructured interviews actually require extensive planning ahead to ensure that the interview stage will be fruitful. Perhaps you have been studying it for quite some time, or you have previously conducted another type of research on a similar topic. Maybe you are seeking a bit more detail or nuance to confirm or challenge past results, or you are interested in delving deeper into a particular question that arose from past research. Once you are feeling really solid about your research question, you can start brainstorming categories of questions you may ask. You can start with one broad, overarching question and brainstorm what paths the conversation could take. Step 2: Assemble your participants There are a few sampling methods you can use to recruit your interview participants, such as: NoteBe careful of sampling bias, which occurs when some population members are systematically more likely to be chosen for your study than others. Step 3: Decide on your setting You should decide ahead of time whether your interview will be conducted in-person, over the phone, or via video conferencing. In-person, phone, or video interviews each have their own advantages and disadvantages. In general, live interviews can lead to nervousness or interviewer effects, where the respondent feels pressured to respond in a manner they perceive will please you. Videoconferencing specifically can feel awkward or stilted, which could affect your results. However, your participant may be more comfortable in their own home. Not being face-to-face with respondents, such as in a phone interview, could lead to more honest answers. However, there could be environmental conditions or distractions on the participant side that could affect their responses. NoteBe sure that you receive written informed consent from each of your participants prior to beginning the interview. This includes: Consent to video- or audio-recording Signature of a confidentiality agreement Signature of an agreement to anonymize or pseudonymize data. Step 4: Conduct your interviews As you conduct your interviews, pay special attention to any environmental conditions that could bias your responses.

Table 6. Characteristics of Unstructured and Structured Interviews ⁶⁰	
Unstructured	Structured
Factors evaluated by the interview are implicit across candidates.	The factors evaluated are explicit, based on analysis, and are the same for each candidate.
Questions are not necessarily job-related.	Questions are job-related.
Questions vary from interview to interview for the same job.	The same questions are asked of all candidates for the same job.
No system or guide for evaluating interview results.	There is a pre-developed system for evaluating interview results.
Interviewers may be untrained.	Interviewers have received the same training.

This includes noises, temperature, and setting, but also your body language. Be careful to moderate your tone of voice and any responses to avoid interviewer effects. Remember that one of the biggest challenges with unstructured interviews is to keep your questions neutral and unbiased. Strive for open-ended phrasing, and allow your participants to set the pace, asking follow-up questions that flow naturally from their last answer. TipRemember to refer to your guide and keep your research question front-of-mind when asking spontaneous questions. Don't be afraid to redirect a participant back to the main topic. How to analyze an unstructured interview After you're finished conducting your interviews, you move into the analysis phase. Don't forget to assign each participant a pseudonym (such as a number or letter) to be sure you stay organized. First, transcribe your recorded interviews. You can then conduct content or thematic analysis to create your categories, seeking patterns that stand out to you among your responses and testing your hypotheses. Transcribing interviews The transcription process can be quite lengthy for unstructured interviews due to their more detailed nature. One decision that can save you quite a bit of time before you get started is whether you will be conducting verbatim transcription or intelligent verbatim transcription. If you consider that laughter, hesitations, or filler words like "ummm" affect your analysis and research conclusions, you should conduct verbatim transcription and include them. If not, intelligent verbatim transcription allows you to exclude fillers and fix any grammar issues in your transcription. Intelligent verbatim transcription can save you some time in this step. TipConsider increasing the speed of your recordings to 1.25 or 1.5 if you're a quick typer. This can substantially speed up the time you spend transcribing. If you have room in your research budget, you can use transcription software. Be sure to double-check the finished transcriptions against your recordings before proceeding. Transcribing has the added benefit of being a great opportunity for cleansing your data. While you listen, you can take notes of questions or inconsistencies that come up. Note that in some cases, your supervisor may ask you to add the finished transcriptions in the appendix of your research paper. Coding unstructured interviews After you're finished transcribing, you can begin your thematic or content analysis. Here, you separate words, patterns, or recurring responses that stand out to you into labels or categories for later analysis. This process is called "coding." Due to the open-ended nature of unstructured interviews, you will most likely proceed with thematic analysis, rather than content analysis. In thematic analysis, you draw preliminary conclusions about your participants through identifying common topics, ideas, or patterns in their responses. After you have familiarized yourself sufficiently with your responses, you can separate them into different codes or labels. However, codes can be a bit too specific or niche for robust analysis.



You can proceed by grouping similar codes into broader themes. After identifying your themes, be sure to double-check your responses to ensure that the themes you chose appropriately represent your data. TipIf you encounter problems with the themes you've set, you can consider splitting them up, combining them, or discarding them entirely if they don't quite fit. It's a critical part of the process for your themes to be as useful and as accurate as possible. Analyzing unstructured interviews Once you're confident with your preliminary thoughts, you can take either an inductive or a deductive approach in your analysis. An inductive approach is more open-ended, allowing your data to then determine your themes. A deductive approach is the opposite, and involves investigating whether your data confirm preconceived themes or ideas. Thematic analysis is quite subjective, which can lead to issues with the reliability of your results. The unstructured nature of this type of interview leads to greater dependence on your judgment and interpretations. Be extra vigilant about remaining objective here. Presenting your results After your data analysis, you're ready to combine your findings into a research paper. Your methodology section describes your data collection process (in this case, describing your unstructured interview process) and explains how you justified and conceptualized your analysis. Your discussion and results sections usually describe each of your coded categories, and give you the opportunity to showcase your argument. You can then conclude with your main takeaways and avenues for further study. Since unstructured interviews are predominantly exploratory in nature, you can add suggestions for future research in the discussion section. Example of interview methodology for a research paper Let's say you are a history student particularly interested in the history of the town around your campus. The town has a long history dating back to the early 1600s, but town census data shows that many long-term residents have been moving away in recent years. You identify a few potential reasons for this shift: People are moving away because there are better opportunities in the closest big city The university has been aggressively purchasing real estate to build more student housing The university has long been the main source of jobs for the town, and education budget cuts have led to a hiring freeze The cost of living in the area has skyrocketed in recent years, and long-time residents can no longer afford their property taxes Anecdotally, you hypothesize that the increased cost of living is the predominant factor in driving away long-time residents. However, you cannot rule out the possibility of the other options, specifically the lack of job options coupled with the university's expansionist aims. You feel very comfortable with this topic and oral histories in general. Since it is exploratory in nature but has the potential to become sensitive or emotional, you decide to conduct unstructured interviews with long-term residents of your town.



Multi-generational residents are of particular interest. To find the right mix of participants, you post in the Facebook group for town residents, as well as in the town's NextDoor forum. You also post flyers in local coffee shops and even some mailboxes. Once you've assembled your participants, it's time to proceed with your interviews. Consider starting out with an icebreaker, such as: What is your favorite thing about this town?

Tell me about a memory of the town that you have that's particularly special. You can then proceed with the interview, asking follow-up questions relevant to your participants' responses, probing their family history, ties to the community, or any stories they have to share-- whether funny, touching, or sentimental. Establishing rapport with your participants helps you delve into the reasoning behind the choice to stay or leave, and competing thoughts and feelings they may have as the interview goes on. Remember to try to structure it like a conversation, to put them more at ease with the emotional topics. NoteBe careful of leading questions.

Here's an example: Has increased cost of living led to you considering leaving the area? -- The phrasing implies that you, the interviewer, think this is the case. This could bias your respondents, incentivizing them to answer affirmatively as well.

Are there any factors that would lead to you considering leaving the area? -- This phrasing ensures the participant is giving their own opinion, and may even yield some surprising responses that enrich your analysis. After conducting your interviews and transcribing your data, you can then conduct thematic analysis, coding responses into different categories. Since you began your research with several theories for why residents may be leaving that all seemed plausible, you would use the inductive approach. After identifying the relevant themes from your data, you can draw inferences and conclusions. Your results section usually addresses each theme or pattern you found, describing each in turn, as well as how often you came across them in your analysis. Perhaps one reason in particular really jumped out from responses, or maybe it was more of a mixed bag. Explain why you think this could be the case, and feel free to include lots of (properly anonymized) examples from the data to better illustrate your points. Frequently asked questions about unstructured interviews When should you use an unstructured interview? An unstructured interview is the most flexible type of interview, but it is not always the best fit for your research topic. Unstructured interviews are best used when: You are an experienced interviewer and have a very strong background in your research topic, since it is challenging to ask spontaneous, colloquial questions. Your research question is exploratory in nature. While you may have developed hypotheses, you are open to discovering new or shifting viewpoints through the interview process. You are seeking descriptive data, and are ready to ask questions that will deepen and contextualize your initial thoughts and hypotheses. Your research depends on forming connections with your participants and making them feel comfortable revealing deeper emotions, lived experiences, or thoughts. What is an interviewer effect? The interviewer effect is a type of bias that emerges when a characteristic of an interviewer (race, age, gender identity, etc.) influences the responses given by the interviewee. There is a risk of an interviewer effect in all types of interviews, but it can be mitigated by writing really high-quality interview questions.

What is social desirability bias? Social desirability bias is the tendency for interview participants to give responses that will be viewed favorably by the interviewer or other participants. It occurs in all types of interviews and surveys, but is most common in semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and focus groups. Social desirability bias can be mitigated by ensuring participants feel at ease and comfortable sharing their views. Make sure to pay attention to your own body language and any physical or verbal cues, such as nodding or widening your eyes. This type of bias can also occur in observations if the participants know they're being observed. They might alter their behavior accordingly. If you want to cite this source, you can copy and paste the citation or click the "Cite this Scribbr article" button to automatically add the citation to our free Citation Generator. George, T. (2022, December 02). Unstructured Interview | Definition, Guide & Examples. Scribbr. Retrieved June 14, 2023, from