

## INTERVIEWING

### WHAT IS IT?

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Talking to people to get their perspective on issues relevant to your research. Can be one on one or in groups (focus groups or just friends).

### HOW DO YOU DO IT?

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#### KINDS OF APPROACHES

- \* **Key Informants:** You identify a number of key informants that you build rapport and relationships with.
  - \* **Pro:** you reduce the risk of misinterpretation, you get more personal perspectives, you construct knowledge as a person might experience it, not as averaged among many. You learn far more when you establish rapport.
  - \* **Con:** You risk basing your conclusions on information from just a few individuals who might not be particularly representative. Establishing such close ties can make it difficult to write about things that may be unflattering.
- \* **Shotgun Interviews:** You try to talk to as many people as you can (think of how a shotgun spreads its shot broadly). Generally you have a finite number of questions that you ask everyone in the attempt to achieve some statistical significance. Simply reverse the pro and con above.

#### PREPARATION

- \* Research your topic before you contact anyone. There are such things as dumb questions: they're the ones that ask for basic background information that you could have acquired in many places rather than waste the interviewees time with them.
- \* Interviewers should always come prepared with questions to ask. However, it is generally a bad idea to stick entirely to that list. Rather, use the list as a guide and allow the person's responses to guide follow-up questions.
- \* Remember that you are asking someone to take time out of their day to talk with you. Be polite and flexible.
- \* Decide whether you will be tape-recording the interview or relying on notes. If you are taping, make sure you are familiar with your equipment and have back-up batteries. Either way, you should take cursory notes to help remind you of things you want to follow-up on.

#### PROCESS

- \* Remember to give "back-channel cues;" that is, nod along and say "um-hm" to let the person know you are listening carefully to what they are saying.
- \* Remember to follow up on things they said that you aren't sure you fully understood.
- \* Ask questions based on what they said, not simply based on what you prepared.

#### KINDS OF QUESTIONS

- \* **Open Ended Questions:** good for starting out. Allows people to set the boundaries, create the lists, tell you what they think is important. Helps alleviate the risk of narrowing them into your own set of categories and encouraging them to tell you what you want to hear.

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- \* **Focused Questions:** should be used only after open ended. Here's where you've worked with someone for a while and can hone in on the issue of most importance to you. Often, in social science research, if we're trying to interview a lot of people for more quantitative results, you move to this faster. When you're working with key informants, not as fast.

### **WHAT IT CAN ACCOMPLISH**

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- \* Allows people to talk about what they find to most important and relevant.
- \* Allows personal elements to factor in to human experience.
- \* Gives voice to the people most closely involved.
- \* Can be a chance to focus on a particular phenomenon.
- \* Allows you to gather current information.
- \* Can add multiple perspectives and voices, often giving you a range of responses that may contradict each other. This is very useful for establishing understanding of the complexity of an issue or community.
- \* Adds authority. This is why journalists use it so often. A person of that community said it, so it must be right. Proceed with caution on this assumption.

### **LIMITATIONS**

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- \* Must actually be there. Phone interviews are generally poor. Email is worse.
- \* An interview is a specific performance event. People look for cues from one another and go from there. An interview one day can be very different from an interview with the same person another day.
- \* It is *not* a direct route to answering all your questions. Information is not simply out there for the gathering. It's constructed. Further, meaning is often internalized by people. For example, most people have learned the socially acceptable behaviors for meeting a person for the first time, but could we simply spit out all these "rules" and exceptions to these rules? Often not. Interviews cannot take the place of field observation and one's own analytic work.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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Sending students into the community to interview people has ethical implications, even when students are engaged in small assignments used for pedagogical purposes only. Please review the ethical guidelines posted on this site in order to prepare your students to enter the community with considerations of respect and safety. Virtually all of the issues on these guidelines are relevant, but some of the areas of particular concern in terms of interviewing are:

- \* Clear and honest presentation of your goals and interests
- \* Decisions about granting anonymity or confidentiality to your interviewee
- \* Avoiding leading questions

## **PRACTICE**

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\* **Class Exercise: Interview each other.**

There are many ways to have students practice interviewing. You can identify specific parts of the interview process and have them practice just those, or have them practice the entire process at once. One way to have them practice is to do the following:

- \* Have each student identify a group they have belonged to for at least a few months. This can be a group based on ethnicity, gender, occupation, recreation, religion, politics, region, age, etc.
- \* Students pair up and tell their partner the group they have chosen.
- \* Students then work independently for a few minutes as they develop questions to ask in order to identify the key values that underlie this group: What is most important to them? What makes the group unique? What makes the group tick? Note: these three questions can generally not be answered if asked point blank. The student will have to develop questions that will allow the speaker to address these issues as they discuss the group. This will help them understand the value of the open-ended question. Further, they will understand that underlying values and patterns are often identified by the researcher, not the interviewee by analyzing specific examples that interviewees generally can provide.
- \* Students then take turns interviewing each other for a set number of minutes.
- \* When they are done, the interviewer must study his or her notes and write a couple of paragraphs describing the group.
- \* Students then exchange the papers and discuss what the other has written, discussing issues of accuracy and perception, what was difficult about conducting the interview, etc.

## **COURSE APPLICATIONS**

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Interviewing can be a useful process for virtually any discipline and in a number of classroom activities, from informal interviews used as part of class instruction to more extensive formal interviews that serve as integral parts of major projects. Some examples of how interviewing might be incorporated into the classroom are listed below:

- \* To expose students to other views and perspectives on a particular issue, particularly in targeting voices often suppressed or unheard in academic discourse
- \* To engage students in issues of local importance
- \* To train students to reason deductively from the data compiled from interviews
- \* To give students a first-hand encounter with a particular group they are studying

Examples of how Elon faculty have used or could use interviews in their classes:

- \* In English courses in the writing of stories, research papers, and pamphlets about or for the local community, particularly in College Writing courses
- \* In Biology to address the social construction of scientific knowledge
- \* In Religious Studies to understand personal issues of faith
- \* In Human Services courses to understand a particular profession

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- \* In Anthropology to get people's perspectives about any of a number of issues relating to human behavior, cultural norms, and creative expression
- \* In History courses to develop oral histories of local events and places
- \* In Physics to identify common misconceptions about specific systems
- \* In Business to identify current trends in the business world
- \* In Sociology to get people's perspectives about social structures and social norms
- \* In Elon 101 to encourage students to meet faculty