SEARCH MOP - Section 3
Interviewing
Table of Contents

3. Interviewing

3.1. OVERVIEW

Interviewing is a science with definite rules that produce valid results. Interviewing is also an art. While general guidelines provide a blueprint to follow, much depends on the sensitivity of the interviewer. The procedures and techniques that follow will help you to conduct interviews that will yield valid data.

3.2. DEVELOPING A GOOD INTERVIEWING RELATIONSHIP

Interviewing is a major factor of the SEARCH study and therefore it is crucial that the interviewer present questions appropriately, record the participants' replies precisely and accurately, and probe meaningfully. In order to maintain an objective, information-gathering atmosphere, the interviewer must convey an understanding persona and be capable of accepting information in a non-judgmental manner. The interviewer must also portray an interest in what the participant is saying. The participant must find satisfaction in talking to a receptive person without the fear of appearing inadequate.

It will be the interviewer's responsibility to obtain complete and accurate information. Interviewers are skilled professionals. Their skills make it possible for participants to give frank, complete, relevant answers to questions.

Most of the questionnaires in SEARCH 3 can be self-administered, as well as interviewer administered. If the forms are self-administered, it is essential that the instructions to complete the forms are presented by staff to the participant in a clear and uniform way (see Section 3.6).

<u>Increasing the Participant's Cooperativeness</u>

Previous studies have identified several factors that will increase the respondent's receptiveness.

- Be prepared and know your material. Participants need to feel that you are interested in the study and interested in their opinions. Be an active listener and establish comfortable eye contact with the participant.
- Offer convincing statements about the purpose of the study.
- Describe the beneficial uses of the research findings to both the respondent and to the community.

3.3. INTERVIEWER ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRES

There are several standard procedures for reading questions:

- Read in a natural conversation rhythm and in a normal tone of voice.
- Read as if you are speaking.
- Be cautious about reading questions too rapidly; the participant may not feel comfortable asking you to repeat questions and consequently the answer will not reflect his/her true thoughts on the issue.
- Be aware of the participant's facial expressions, e.g., puzzled, confused.
- Repeat the question if it is answered inappropriately, but repeat it exactly as written.
- Show no impatience when being asked to repeat a question.

Each question must be asked of each participant in the same way and in the same order to insure that comparable information is being obtained from all the respondents in the study.

Instructions are provided throughout SEARCH forms as needed. Instructions should be read to the participant.

Ask the questions exactly as worded and in the same order as they appear in the questionnaires. Minor changes in wording can completely change the meaning of a question. Unless each interviewer asks the questions exactly as shown, the answers are meaningless. Similarly, you must follow the sequence of questions. Do not ask questions out of order unless you are given special instructions to do so.

***Remember** – SEARCH questions are written in a form consistent with interviewing the participant. If you are interviewing the Parent or Guardian and **not** the participant, use a variation of the script that includes using the participant's given name.*

Example:

Participant oriented: "Script: We're going to ask some questions about when your diabetes was diagnosed."

Parent/Guardian oriented: "Script: We're going to ask some questions about when ***Mary's*** diabetes was diagnosed."

Ask every question. It is the interviewer's responsibility to ask every question. Often a previous statement by the participant will partially answer another question, but rarely does it answer that question completely. Do not omit questions and <u>do not assume that you know the answer to the question</u>. Skip questions only as dictated by the participant's response and interviewing instructions.

3.4. HOW TO GET SATISFACTORY ANSWERS

Learn the purpose of each question. In order to do a good job of interviewing, you need to understand the kind of information we are trying to gather through each particular question. Unless you understand its purpose, you will not be able to judge when a response is adequate and when you must probe for clarification or for additional information.

Don't attempt to interpret/explain the question - maintain neutrality. If a participant does not seem to understand a question, repeat the question slowly and clearly. Give the participant time to think about the question (while simultaneously being aware of time allowed for administering the questionnaire). Unless you have other instructions about handling specific questions, the acceptable reply for a participant who wants to know what a question means is "whatever it means to you". Do not attempt to explain the purpose of a question unless the interviewer instructions specifically authorize you to do so.

Don't define terms used in questions. Some participants may ask what is meant by a word used in a question. Leave the matter of definition to the participant, suggesting "whatever you think ____ means" or "however you use the term ______". The exception to this is when a term has a specific diabetes definition. Information related to these types of questions can be found in the Manual of Procedures section related to that form.

Don't leave a question until you have an adequate answer or have determined that a participant can't give a clearer answer.

Be sure the time reference is appropriate. In any follow-up study, it is critical that the participant understands the time frame that is appropriate to the question. Many of the questions are prefaced by "In the past 6 months" or "Have you ever..." Always read these phrases within the questions as they appear on the form.

3.5. PROBING TECHNIQUES

The two most effective neutral probes are silence and repeating the original question.

Silence. The value of silence cannot be overestimated. Many people, including interviewers, react to silence as a vacuum that must be filled with constant chatter. The interviewer who can wait quietly and patiently will soon find that 15 seconds of silence is more than most participants can take, and the participant will often expand or clarify a previously inadequate answer.

Repeating the Question or Answer Categories. Be sure to repeat the question as stated in the questionnaire. This is particularly useful when the participant answers a question irrelevantly. In some cases it will be necessary to remind the participant of your frame of reference, i.e., to acknowledge what the participant has said and then bring the participant back to the topic by repeating the question.

Do not Accept a "Don't Know" Answer without Probing at Least Once. If a participant replies to a question with a response of "I don't know", gently probe by asking: "Well, what do you think?" or "I'd like to know your opinion" (if the question asks for an opinion rather than facts). If the question deals with facts, we prefer an approximation to no answer at all, and you might probe "what's your best guess?" or "approximately?" to convey the idea that 100% accuracy is not required.

Use Neutral Probes That Do Not Suggest Answers. Probes are needed to obtain more complete, accurate answers. All probes must be non-directive, i.e., the probe must not suggest any particular answer to the participant. Probes should be used whenever the participant is hesitant in answering questions; when he/she seems to have trouble expressing him/herself; when he/she seems too shy to speak at length; whenever there is any reason for the interviewer to believe that the participant has not given a complete report of his/her thoughts; and finally, whenever reassuring probes are needed for a participant who seems to lack confidence.

Examples of Other Neutral Probes:

1. In what way?
2. What is that? Why do you feel that way?
3. How do you mean?
4. I would like your impression.
5. I would like your opinion.
6. What do you think?
7. Can you give me an example? or For example?
8. Can you explain that in a little more detail?
9. How are you using the term. . .?
10. How is that? or How does that work?
11. Anything at all - even little things?
12. If you had to choose, which would you say?
13. What else can you tell me about that?

In general,

Generally Speaking, Some Probes Should Be Avoided in Favor of Others.

- Instead of "anything else?" you'll find that "what else can you tell me about that?" is more likely to elicit answers.

- Instead of "why?" you'll find "why do you feel that way?" or "I'd be interested in your reasons" accomplishes the same purpose and is less likely to be threatening.

Questions Used in Ordinary Conversation Should Be Avoided Because They Suggest Answers.

- Refrain from suggesting the answer to the participant. Do not ask "do you mean A or B". This suggests two possible answers and there may be others which may occur to the participant.
- Don't ask, "Do you mean…". People tend to say "yes" to any suggestion because they think it is the right answer.

Do Not Leave a Probe Dangling. Always record the response to a probe even if it's only "No" or "That's all I can think of".

Always Cross Reference. When you probe to clarify a response, always indicate which response you are clarifying. There will be times when a participant will say something ambiguous and continue talking.

If there's not enough space to record the respondent's answer, use the margin. Be sure to label the continuation of the response clearly.

Make Probes Consistent with the Purpose of the Question. The importance of choosing a probe that is appropriate for the particular kind of inadequate answer given cannot be stressed enough. Think through each response, evaluate it for relevance and clarity, and choose the right kind of probe. Any probe that does not suggest answers and is non-threatening is acceptable, provided it is appropriate to the particular interviewing problem.

Watch for Irrelevant Answers. Irrelevant answers can be interesting, but interviewers must bear in mind what information is being sought. Acknowledge the response and make it clear that you have been listening; also make clear your frame of reference before repeating the question. Repeat the question word-for-word, but preface it in such a way that you now need additional information. Consider saying, "I appreciate you sharing that information with me but I'd like to know more about 'X'", and then repeat the question as written on the form.

Watch for Vague, Incomplete Answers. A probe such as "tell me more about. . ." is effective.

Monitor for Inappropriate Responses. If the participant provides an inappropriate response to a question (e.g., uses the wrong response category), the interviewer may repeat the question *and* the response categories. Example: If the interviewer asks a question that requires the participant to provide their degree or level of agreement and, instead, the participant states, "That's true," the interviewer may respond "Would you say you strongly agree or agree?" If the participant provides an ambiguous response to a question, the interviewer should solicit an elaboration of the response without directing the response.

Avoid "Depends" or Qualified Answers. When the participant gives a response of this nature, it is advisable to use probes such as repeating the question; preface the question with a phrase such as "Well, in general . . ."

Record and Document Fully and Clearly.

If a participant is having difficulty choosing a response between two or more of the response choices, a non-leading technique should be used, such as: 1) repeating the entire response set, or, 2) "Would you say it is closer to A or to B?" in a case where the subject has narrowed the choices.

3.6. SELF-ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRES

Most of the forms in SEARCH 3 may be self-administered. The exceptions are the Medication Inventory completed at the Registry visit and the Family Medical History Questionnaire completed at the Cohort visit.

Many of the general rules governing interviewer administered questionnaires are also applicable to self-administered questionnaires. Generally, these questionnaires will be self-reported by the participant or the parent/guardian. They may be completed at the in person visit, or at home if hard copies of the form were mailed to the participant. In all cases, it is important for the interviewer to provide clear, concise instructions for completing these instruments, and to be available to answer questions about the forms. If the form is being completed at the visit, staff will give instructions and answer questions in person. However, if the form is being completed at home, written instructions which include the following points should be mailed to the participant:

1. A summary of the content of each questionnaire;
2. Specific instructions regarding what to write with when completing the questionnaire, e.g., black ink pen;
3. A statement explaining that "There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. Your answers are confidential;"
4. An invitation to call a staff member if the participant needs further clarification or has questions.

While the self-administered questionnaires are designed for ease of administration, the possibility exists that respondents, particularly children, may have difficulty completing the self-administered questionnaires based on their developmental age. According to the US Department of Education, in 1993 between 23 and 51% of the US population were either functionally illiterate or had limited literacy equating to having completed fewer than four years of schooling. This rate may be underestimated and has implications for questionnaire completion. In addition to literacy, some respondents may have disabilities or impaired visual acuity that may impact their ability to respond to questionnaires. If any of these conditions exist, the forms should be interview administered.

Once completed, study personnel should evaluate the questionnaires for completeness, being certain not to be perceived as being judgmental of the responses. Questions regarding omissions should be clarified at this time.

3.7. HOW TO RECORD THE INTERVIEWS

The following guidelines are recommended for recording participant responses during an interview:

- Periodically establish eye contact with the participant while you read questions and write responses.
- Interviews should be recorded in black ink and in legible handwriting.
- Use abbreviations to help you record as much as possible.
- Always repeat a response using the participant's exact words.
- Always record verbatim the response to a probe.
- If you question whether you circled the correct answer, be sure to verify the response with the participant and record the verbatim response.
- If you make a recording mistake, put a single line through the error – do not erase or black out the incorrect response. Write the date and your initials, and then circle or write in the correct answer.
- If a participant fails to respond to a question, use the -9 code to indicate the response is known missing.

If a response requires a date and the Month or Day are unknown, enter **[-9]**. If the Year is unknown, enter **1800.** Unknown values are <u>NOT</u> acceptable for participant birthdates or visit/examination dates. The full date should be entered as Month, Day, and Year.

If a participant provides you with information that will help you unravel a confusing set of answers, take as many notes in the margin or at the back of the interview as you need. These will help you remember if a question arises at a later date.

3.8. EDITING STUDY FORMS

Editing should be done as soon as possible after completion of the forms, preferably while the participant is still in the clinic. Editing should be completed both for forms completed at the study visit or forms completed prior to the study visit. It is easier to identify and correct a missed, unreadable, or confusing entry with the participant present. If a question arises once you no longer have face-to-face contact with the participant, you will need to decide if the information can be clarified over the phone or if it is best to record it as missing data. If it is determined that the data can be captured by phone, contact should be made with the family as soon as possible after the visit since it is best to obtain/clarify all responses as close as possible to the time of the initial data collection.

One reason for many comments from editors and data entry people is often the illegibility of handwriting, both numbers and words. RECORD AS CLEARLY AS POSSIBLE.

When editing look for: 1) completeness of the interview - no missing required data; 2) consistency - all the skip patterns should be observed and filled out appropriately; 3) clarity/legibility - clearly interpretable/readable data.

3.9. INTERVIEWING NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING PARTICIPANTS

Interview forms are available in English and Spanish from the Coordinating Center. Spanish versions of questionnaires will be used for Spanish-speaking participants. When interviewing non-English speaking participants, the interview should be conducted in the primary language of the participant with the assistance of a certified interpreter as indicated by the local IRB or other policies and regulations.