Psychology Interviewing Skills

Interviewing Skills for Psychology Undergraduate Students

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The beginning of interview wisdom is to appreciate the big difference between what you want to know and how you should ask[1]

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[1] Gordon, R. L. (1992). Basic interviewing skills. USA: F. E. Peacock Publishers Inc. Quote page 9

PSYC3011 Psychology

Lecture and Tutorial Outcomes:

After the completion of this interviewing component, students will:

1. Be able to articulate the key skills required for a range of interview types.
2. Be more confident in their ability to apply these key skills to a variety of interviewing contexts.
3. Be more aware of areas that they need to further develop when communicating in everyday situations.

Interview Format

Planning the Interview:

Planning for an interview is an important process to understand what approach to take, and to develop appropriate questions to obtain the desired information. Planning can also increase awareness of potential pitfalls (e.g., playing devil's advocate with the questions), and areas where one may need to show more sensitivity (e.g., controversial topics, minority groups). It is also critical to ensure that appropriate time is allocated to various topics. Most interviews have some degree of planning involved as can be seen in job interviews, in which questions are targeted to assess role relevant skills.

The first decision in the planning process is the structure of an interview. There are 3 main structures:

Fully-Structured   Semi Structured   Un-structured
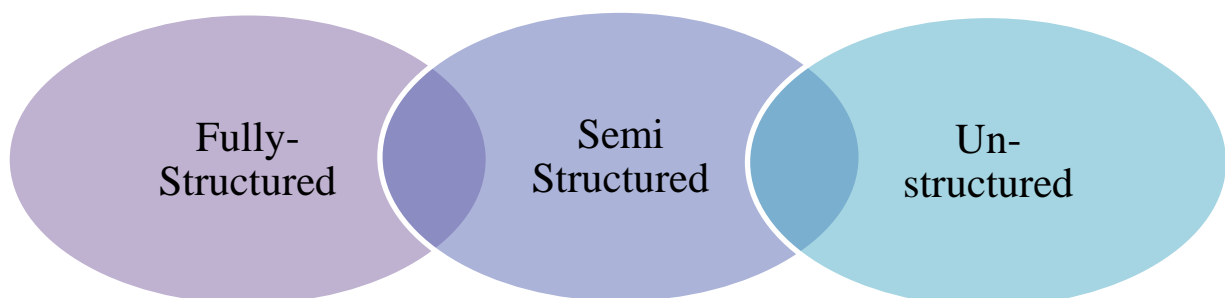
1) **A fully-structured interview** - all questions are delivered to each respondent consistently, regardless of their responses.

2) **A semi-structured interview** - there are some set questions that are delivered to all respondents. However, other questions vary depending on earlier responses.

3) **An un-structured interview** - an exploratory interview with few or no set questions.

Clearly more planning is needed in structured interviews than unstructured interviews, which enable more consistency, for example when one needs to compare job candidates. It has been found that structured interviews are more valid for hiring employees (McDaniel et al., 1994).

A simple structure is where each question is independent, just like a questionnaire (e.g., Question 1→Response 1, Q2→R2, Q3→R3). More complex structures come about when there are responses to one question, which should be followed up on (i.e., probing to get a better understanding of the response: Q1 "How do you feel?", R1 "Sad", Q2 "Why do you feel sad"). Even more complexity can occur when there are multiple factors mentioned in a response (e.g., R2 "Because my husband is a jerk, and my kids hate me and my cat died!"). The interviewer has the complex task of trying to work through multiple issues, which can result in bias if they assume that one issue is more important (or easier to talk about, or piques their own curiosity), and fails to discuss the other issues. The interviewer may also simply forget as the conversation continues to return to discuss the other factors.

Interview structure checklist

A more complex interview structure requires additional cognitive demands to ensure that the interview is on track. Consider these questions in understanding your control of the interview:

☐ Are you on track? Do you know which way the sequence of questions and responses is leading?

☐ Has the respondent accidentally or intentionally led you into a topic which you did not intend?

☐ If so, how can you get back on track?

☐ Have you taken account of each aspect of a complex response or only followed up on one aspect and neglected others?

☐ Is there consistency between different components of the response? Is there anything confusing that you need to clarify?

An interview can have various structures and substructures. It is important to be aware of the objective of the interview, to ensure that you choose the structure that will maximise the information that you can obtain within the allocated time frame.

Understanding Objectives and Formulating Relevant Questions

Clarifying the objectives of the interview

- What is it you want to know and why?
- What is the information being used for?
- What direction do you want to take?

Specifying the information needed to achieve those objectives

- Will different responses affect the direction taken?
- Is it important, or are you just curious?
- Have you defined the terms? Is there an established term? Clarify &/or define it
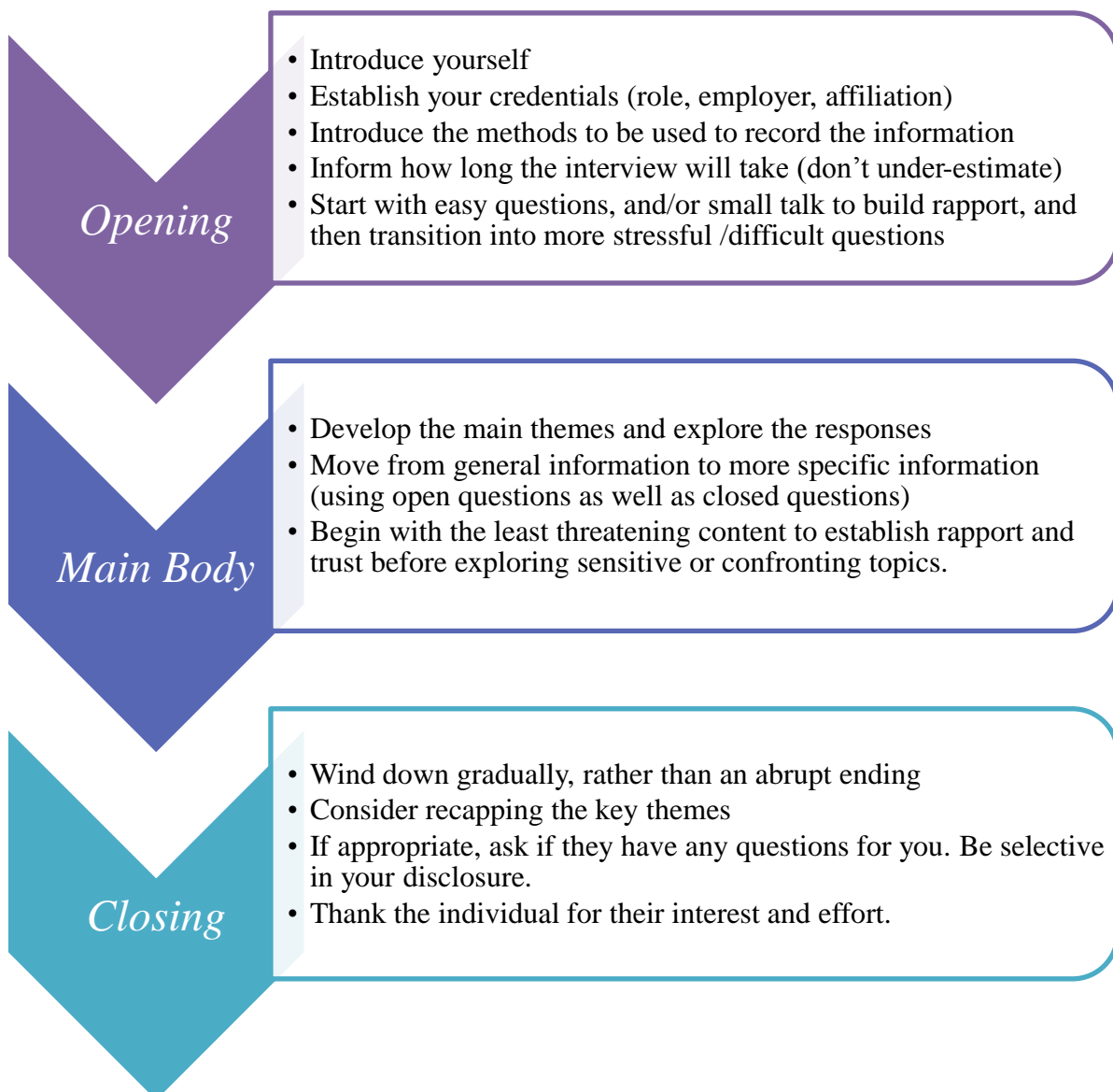- Have you made any assumptions?

Formulate concrete questions designed to obtain the information

- Serves as a guide to stay on track
- If you decide to probe a response, think about where it will take you, and whether you will need to return to where you digressed.
- Open-ended or closed questions?

Interview stages

Once the planning has occurred, the actual interview can be considered to occur in 3 stages:

Each phase serves a different purpose, and emphasises different skills. For example, building rapport is most essential in the opening phase, whereas active listening is most crucial for the main body of the interview.

Opening

- Introduce yourself
- Establish your credentials (role, employer, affiliation)
- Introduce the methods to be used to record the information
- Inform how long the interview will take (don't under-estimate)
- Start with easy questions, and/or small talk to build rapport, and then transition into more stressful /difficult questions

Main Body

- Develop the main themes and explore the responses
- Move from general information to more specific information (using open questions as well as closed questions)
- Begin with the least threatening content to establish rapport and trust before exploring sensitive or confronting topics.

Closing

- Wind down gradually, rather than an abrupt ending
- Consider recapping the key themes
- If appropriate, ask if they have any questions for you. Be selective in your disclosure.
- Thank the individual for their interest and effort.

Questions

You will probably use a range of question types during the interview. Be aware that the questions you select will greatly influence the direction of the interview. You may need to ask a question in more than one way in order to elicit the information you are after.

Open ended questions

- Useful when the interview is exploratory, or when the emphasis is on discovering the respondent's perspective on events.
- Can motivate by allowing free association, giving recognition, allowing the interviewer to be a sympathetic listener, and avoiding more specific questions that might alert the respondent to ego-threatening information.
- Disadvantage is that they are liable to a larger proportion of irrelevant information than narrower questions, and some detail may be missing.
- Useful in understanding the chronological order of events, and assessing the vocabulary of the respondent.

Close-Ended Questions

- More readily used when the objectives of the interview are known.
- Useful for more reluctant respondents (whether for reasons of motivation or language), or for those giving information not particularly important to them.
- usually preceded by open questions which provide a sense of the context in which the questions are being asked

Recommendation:

- Broad, open-ended when you begin your dialogue. These are the least suggestive (leading)
- Move from open to more specific (close-ended) when necessary
- A combination of both is required to get the bigger picture as well as clarification of important details

Probing Questions:

A probing question is a question that follows up on the answers to previous questions. These can be used to:

- Clarify or search for reasons behind previous answers
- Search for inconsistencies
- Help the respondent deal with a topic that has been difficult to speak about
- Revisit responses from earlier in the interview

Clarifying/ elaborating
- "Can you tell me more about…?"
- "Could you explain a little more about…?"
- "Can you give me an example?"

Expanding/ Encouraging
- "Then what happened next?"
- "Uh huh' mm 'I see' 'go on' 'please continue'

Checking consistency
- "You said …but now you have told me…How do you explain that? Can you tell me more?"

Revising
- "Let's go back to what you told me before about… In the light of what you told me later, can you now tell me more about…?"

Motivating questions

There are a few factors that influence a respondent's motivation to respond. Threatening the respondent's ego will decrease their motivation. In contrast, making respondents feel better good or recognising the importance of their response will increase motivation. It is therefore important to choose words that do not prejudice or do not imply anything unintended.

Maximising
Recognition

Minimising
Ego-Threat
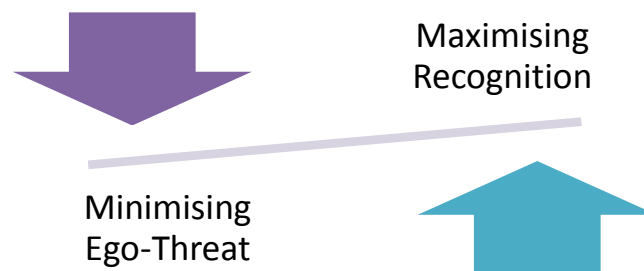
Minimising Ego-Threat

- Contextual prefacing can reduce threat – by indicating you are aware of the issue
- E.g., "We are trying to understand the way in which an individual ends up in a certain course at university. A student may find themselves in a course that was not their first choice, because of things like grades, influence of family and friends, or financial considerations. So let me start by asking….How did you end up studying law?"

Maximising Recognition

- One way to motivate a response is to demonstrate you recognise the respondent's view as unique.
- E.g., "There are many studies looking at how university students end up in a particular course. However, these studies do not adequately ask the student their perspective. As a first year student, who has just been through the process, I'm sure you can give an accurate analysis, and I would therefore like to hear your view"

Loaded Questions

A question is loaded when it is phrased in such a way that it evokes a different response from what was intended from the question.

Emotional loading
- "What is your opinion on the tax mess?" vs.
- "what is your opinion on the tax issue"

Combining questions
- "What do you think of Julia Gillard's carbon tax?" vs.
- "What do you think of carbon tax?"

One Sided
- "Do you think it is a <u>good</u> idea to do night study?"
- "Do you think it is a <u>good or bad</u> idea to do night study?"
- "How do you <u>feel </u>about doing night study?"

Suggesting 1 answer
- "Did you come to UNSW because of X?"
- "What features of UNSW attracted you before you came here?"

Hidden argument
- "Do you feel that it is right for you to work over the university break to pay back your parents for all they have assisted you with?" – suppresses doubts, fears, worries
- "How do you feel about working over the summer break?"

Biased Questions

Biased questions are questions that when asked will be likely to elicit a skewed answer. These questions should be avoided as they can affect the whole structure of the interview, as a biased question may lead to biased and/or hostile responses. It is the interviewer's responsibility to avoid bias. An example of a biased question is the following (it is also a leading question):

- "You don't…, do you?"
- "You don't support gay marriage…., do you?"
- "You know smoking causes cancer, don't you?"

These questions suggest there is a 'correct' response, which most people would endorse.

Communication Styles

In the case of an interview, which often is between strangers, there can be a mismatch between the communication style of the interviewer and the respondent. The communication style needs to be considered so that clear understanding occurs between both parties. The interviewer often needs to adjust the complexity of their language, their vocabulary, and their use of jargon, to build rapport and trust.

Language Complexity

If you are interviewing a layperson, it is better to use a simple level of language, and avoid technical jargon and confusion (e.g., 'Commanding officer', instead of CO). Conversely, in a specialised population, it is better to use *their* terminology to gain rapport and show understanding (mirroring).

Vocabulary

Consideration of vocabulary is also important for building rapport and obtaining the desired information. The vocabulary should be chosen to maximise the respondent's likelihood of engaging. In some cases, the interviewer might adopt the language of an "insider", but in other contexts, the interviewer might choose to retain the persona of an "outsider"

- Insider - A prostitute may feel more comfortable discussing topic of "the spread of STIs" with an insider. Therefore, adopt insider language - 'working girls' rather than 'prostitute'.
- Outsider – A doctor-patient relationship. Using technical language then explaining what it means more simply, may shows credibility. Don't use technical language to look smart.

Avoid or be cautious using:

- Idioms, similes, metaphors, jokes, euphemisms, colloquialisms (cultural sensitivity)
- NEVER assume a shared understanding of a term – clarify to ensure your meanings are aligned.

Building Rapport

Rapport is a term used to describe, the relationship of two or more people who feel similar and/or relate well to each other. Rapport is important because it creates trust, which leads to a more open and honest discussion.

Methods of building rapport

Commonality	• The technique of deliberately finding something in common with a person or a customer in order to build a sense of camaraderie and trust. This is done through shared interests, dislikes, and situations (i.e., small talk).
Emotional Mirroring	• Empathizing with someone's emotional state by being on 'their side'. It involves listening for key words, and then using similar valence words to show you understand what they have said. • Both too little and too much emotional expression by the interviewer results in less disclosure by the respondent

Posture mirroring	• Matching the tone of a person's body language through mirroring the general message of their posture and energy. (do NOT use direct imitation, as this can appear as mockery)
Tone and Tempo Mirroring	• Matching the tone, tempo, inflection, and volume of a person's voice.
Non-judgemental attitude	• The respondent will not open up if they feel as they are being judged
Inviting behaviour	• If anxious, make them feel invited by inviting gestures/body language. If they are intrusive into your personal space, you can use more control e.g., "why don't you sit over there? That way we can talk more comfortably?"

Non-Verbal Cues

Be aware of an individual's non-verbal cues to detect their mood at the beginning. Things to look out for include:

- Territorial – avoid shaking hands, seat by the door, invading your space
- Behavioural – eye contact, fiddling with pencils, relaxed
- Emotional (expressive) – posture, gestures, facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice

Maximising Empathy

Empathy can be shown by verbal and non-verbal communication. One popular approach is to use a contextual statement to show you understand e.g., "I know some of the questions I ask may be difficult for you to answer in detail…Just take your time". However, be careful saying that you 'understand' the respondent's predicament, as it could lead to a negative

reaction, as can be seen by this dialogue between an oncology patient (CP) and a researcher (R).

- CP: "…I constantly feel awful from the chemotherapy"
- R: "I understand"
- CP: "Have you ever had chemotherapy?"
- R: "No"
- CP: "Then you don't understand!"

Active Listening

Active listening is a communication technique that requires the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what they hear. When interacting, people often are not listening attentively. They may be distracted, thinking about other things, or thinking about what they are going to say next. Active listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others, focusing attention on the speaker. Suspending one's own frame of reference, suspending judgment and avoiding other internal mental activities are important to fully attend to the speaker.

Levels of listening

Level 1. Non-listening	"It looks like I'm listening, I'm not really… I'm somewhere else in my mind."
Level 2. Passive listening (conversational)	I can hear what you're saying, but I'm not engaging with what you are saying. I am waiting to say my bit."
Level 3. Active listening	"I'm fully engaged in what you are saying (verbally and non-verbally), and am attempting to see things from your point of view."

Reflecting, Paraphrasing, Clarifying, Summarising

Reflecting	A verbal response to the respondent's emotion Respondent: "So many things are going on right now: another hectic semester has started, my dog's sick, and my mum's ill too. I find myself running around trying to take care of everything. I'm not sure I can take it anymore." Interviewer: "You're feeling pretty overwhelmed by all the things that are going on right now." Helps respondents: - Feel understood - Express more feelings - Manage feelings - Discriminate among various feelings
Paraphrasing	To paraphrase, the interviewer chooses the most important details of what the client has just said and reflects them back to the client in the interviewer's own words. Paraphrases can be just a few words or one or two brief sentences. Helps respondents: - To convey that you are understanding him/her - Help the respondent by simplifying, focusing and crystallizing what they said - May encourage the client to elaborate - Provide a check on the accuracy of your perceptions
Summarising	Summaries are brief statements of longer excerpts from the interview. In summarising, the interviewer attends to verbal and non-verbal comments from the client over a period of time, and then pulls together key parts of the extended communication, restating them for the client as accurately as possible. A collection of two or more paraphrases or reflections that condenses the client's messages or the session To tie together multiple elements of client messages

	• To identify a common theme or pattern
	• To interrupt excessive rambling
	• To start a session
	• To end a session
	• To pace a session
	• To review progress
	• To serve as a transition when changing topics

Factors that affect active listening

- Focus is not on client (distracted, lose attention, interrupt, shift attention to oneself)
- Emotional responses (criticise the client, share personal opinion)
  - One needs to be non-judgemental and minimise personal biases. It is good to think about one's prejudices, and be mentally prepared for an interview.

Active listening checklist

- ☐ Use inviting body language
- ☐ Do not appear distracted/detached during the consultation
- ☐ Don't be rushed, give respondent time and space to talk, allow silence
- ☐ Encourage clarification
- ☐ Summarise, paraphrase, reflect
- ☐ Express understanding non-verbally (nodding, smiling, sympathising eye contact)
- ☐ Acknowledge emotions of respondent
- ☐ NB Admitting when you don't understand i.e., "I don't understand" shows you are listening

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