

# CONDUCTING RESEARCH INTERVIEWS ON SENSITIVE TOPICS



## ILLINOIS CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION AUTHORITY

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*Abstract: Researchers use interviewing as a qualitative tool to answer research questions. Researchers have an ethical obligation to protect study participants from harm, particularly when asking about sensitive topics. Interviews on potentially sensitive topics (e.g., victimization, criminal offending behaviors, substance use) can elicit emotional responses from both the participant and the interviewer. However, research has found the benefits to participating in interviews on sensitive topics generally outweigh risks to participants. This article offers recommendations to researchers conducting qualitative interviews on sensitive topics, including creating a safe environment, offering compensation and referrals, and considering staff well-being.*

## Introduction

The primary purpose of qualitative research interviews is to examine research participants' views, opinions, and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Interviews can contribute to society by increasing knowledge in a subject area. However, during the interview process, researchers have an ethical obligation to protect participants from harm.<sup>2</sup> Questions on sensitive topics may elicit powerful emotional responses from the participants, such as anger, sadness, embarrassment, fear, and anxiety. This can be harmful to study participants, as well as the researcher conducting the interviews.<sup>3</sup> Sensitive topics may include victimization experiences, criminal offending behaviors, substance use, and deaths of loved ones.<sup>4</sup> However, benefits to conducting interviews on sensitive topics may outweigh risks of harm and there are strategies for researchers to mitigate potential harm.

Researchers have an ethical obligation to maintain boundaries to protect the researcher–participant relationship and to do no harm. Boundaries are kept by explaining the research relationship, minimizing personal disclosure, debriefing, recognizing signs of distress, and moving on or stopping if responses become negative.

Source: Rossetto, K. R. (2014). Qualitative research interviews: Assessing the therapeutic value and challenges. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 482–489.

## Direct Benefits for Research Participants

While being interviewed on sensitive topics, at times, can be distressing to the participant, there may be benefits for both participants and society. When participants talk to a researcher, who is a neutral third party, about themselves and their experiences, it encourages emotional release which can have therapeutic value.<sup>5</sup> Many interview participants have reported feeling a sense of empowerment, as well as gaining a new understanding of past events.<sup>6</sup> Sharing information, stories, and experiences can also raise participants' self-awareness giving them conscious knowledge of their own character, feelings, motives, and desires.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, interviews hold the potential to facilitate healing and make positive changes.<sup>8</sup> In addition, researchers may offer participants referral information for social services or access to counseling following the interview.<sup>9</sup>

## Guidance for Researchers Conducting Sensitive Interviews

Sensitive interviews require careful planning to be successful and offer protections. To prepare for a project involving sensitive interviews, researchers should:

- Identify ways to clearly communicate to participants their role and responsibilities as a researcher, as well as offer assurances of confidentiality and privacy.<sup>10</sup>
- Create an environment where the participant feels comfortable sharing about their experiences and views.
- Use judgment-free language, mannerisms, and facial expressions.<sup>11</sup>
- Pay careful attention to non-verbal cues that may indicate distress.<sup>12</sup>

- If offering compensation, consider the best form of, and amount of compensation (e.g., money or gift cards).<sup>13</sup>
- Consider offering, upon request or as part of the debriefing process, referrals or reference materials to participants.<sup>14</sup>

## **Researcher Responsibilities**

Researchers conducting sensitive interviews are responsible for obtaining consent from interview participants. Consent involves researchers informing the participants of their rights, the purpose of the study, what they will experience as a participant, and the potential risks and benefits of participation. Individuals must be given an opportunity to consider whether to participate via an informed consent document, which must be written in language easily understood by the participant. Researchers are also responsible for maintaining individuals' confidentiality and privacy and for taking steps to ensure participant safety and well-being.<sup>15</sup> Articulating policies and procedures regarding confidentiality is particularly important when conducting sensitive interviews; individuals may be more reluctant to participate or disclose sensitive information during an interview without assurances of confidentiality and safety.

## **The Role of the Researcher**

During interviews, the researcher's role is to be a listener, learner, and observer. A researcher should not influence participants' responses or take on a therapist role by championing change or aiming to educate and help the client.<sup>16</sup> To avoid confusion, researchers should clearly communicate their role as a researcher in the consent form and before the interview begins. In doing so, researchers should:

- Minimize personal disclosures about themselves.
- Establish and maintain clear boundaries with interview participants.
- Respond in a nonjudgmental, empathic, and respectful manner.
- Be an active listener who does not interrupt or offer advice.
- Recognize signs of distress and respond to them appropriately.<sup>17</sup>

## **Creating a Safe Environment**

Researchers conducting interviews should create an environment in which participants are comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. Researchers should use open-ended questions enabling the participant to respond in their own words rather than close-ended questions which offer fixed responses from which to select.<sup>18</sup> Use of the Tell, Explain, and Describe (TED) system to guide the development of open-ended questions is recommended (see text box).

### Tell Explain, and Describe (TED) System

- “Could you **Tell** me what happened?”
- “Could you **Explain** how you were able to see the incident from your position?”
- “Could you **Describe** where the police took you after your arrest?”

Source: United Nations. (2011). *Manual on human rights monitoring*. <https://bit.ly/2AiHYp7>

During interviews, the researcher can use probes, requiring intent listening to ensure relevant follow-up questions are asked.<sup>19</sup> Probing questions vary, but some may be more distressing for sensitive interviews. For example, an elaboration probe, in which researchers ask the participant if they will say more about what they are describing, may be less likely to cause distress in participants than a detail-oriented probe; follow-up questions such as where the experience happened and who was there could feel more like an interrogation than a research interview.

### Types of Probes

- **Continuation probe:** “Mmm hmm.” “Then what?” “Before we started talking about X, you were saying...”
- **Elaboration probe:** “Could you give me an example?” “Can you say more about that?” “Such as...”
- **Attention probe:** Making statements such as “Okay, I understand” or “That is interesting” shows you are actively listening.
- **Clarification probe:** “Can you say that again – I’m sorry I didn’t understand.”
- **Sequence probe:** “Could you tell me what happened step by step?” “When did that happen?”
- **Steering probe:** “Sorry, I distracted you with that question; you were talking about...”
- **Slant probe:** “How did you feel about [the topic]?” “Did [the person/event] make you feel upset?”

Source: Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sage Publications.

Researchers should be intentional in their choice of language; this helps to create a safe environment for participants to share their experiences. They should avoid using potentially stigmatizing labels such as “victim” or “disabled person” to refer to participants; instead, terms such as “survivor” or “person with disabilities” are recommended.<sup>20</sup> Interview questions should not lead or suggest an expected response.<sup>21</sup> For example, rather than asking a participant to confirm whether an experience made them feel angry, the researcher should ask how the experience made them feel. This approach may also empower participants to share more detailed information. In addition, researchers should be mindful of the language they use to show empathy. Saying “I appreciate this may be difficult for you” communicates that the researcher understands the emotional impact of the experience.<sup>22</sup> But a statement like “I understand what

you are going through” may give a participant the impression that the researcher feels equally knowledgeable about the topic area, rather than affirming that the participant is the expert.

Throughout the interview, researchers should be observant of indicators of participant distress. Individuals who participate in research on sensitive topics, may experience anxiety, sadness, embarrassment, or acute stress reactions as they recall, reexamine, and/or reveal their experiences. Potential indicators of distress include both verbal cues, such as sarcasm, curt responses, and compulsive or slowed speech, and nonverbal cues, including changes in body language and silence.<sup>23</sup> Such cues may indicate that it is time to pause and/or check in with a participant as to whether they want to continue or to stop the interview. Interviews must be adapted to the needs of respondents, including the need for pacing, taking breaks, postponing painful discussions, and terminating interviews if they become too distressful.<sup>24</sup>

### **Compensation and Referrals**

During sensitive interviews, participants often talk about emotionally difficult experiences, so it is important to find meaningful ways to honor them for their time and willingness to share their stories. Compensation may include gift cards, cash, the chance to win a much larger gift card or cash amount, or the option to donate the incentive to a not-for-profit selected by the participant.<sup>25</sup> A typical incentive ranges from a \$10- to \$25 gift card, but researchers should consider larger incentives for sensitive or more complex interviews.<sup>26</sup> Monetary forms of compensation should be given to participants after they have received the informed consent sheet and before beginning the interview to help ensure they do not feel pressured to complete the interview if they experience distress and would prefer to discontinue participation.<sup>27</sup> Some participants may feel that a financial incentive makes the interaction more impersonal, therefore, they should be given the option to decline compensation.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, researchers can make referral information, such as reading material and community-based resources like counseling services available to participants; this ensures participants have access to the information and demonstrates compassion for the participant.<sup>29</sup> Maintaining clear boundaries is important for researchers when offering referrals to participants as researchers’ training and expertise typically differ from those of a therapist.<sup>30</sup> For example, researchers should avoid speaking with providers on a participants’ behalf and but empower participants to call or communicate their needs to a provider themselves.

### **Impact on Research Staff**

Interviews on sensitive topics can also affect researchers. Some researchers have reported problems sleeping after an interview and feeling guilt or sadness for eliciting powerful emotions in interview participants.<sup>31</sup> For example, researchers who interviewed homicide survivors had continued thoughts about participants post-interview.<sup>32</sup> Others conducting interviews with women who underwent an abortion procedure expressed feeling burdened by the weight of participants’ sadness and guilt from having elicited sadness.<sup>33</sup> Some researchers’ feelings paralleled those reported by their participants.<sup>34</sup>

Strategies researchers can use to mitigate potential negative impacts associated with conducting sensitive interviews include:

- Releasing feelings of sadness by reflecting upon the emotional impact of the interview.<sup>35</sup>
- Using strategies, such as journaling about the interview, engaging in an activity requiring little or no thought (e.g., shopping), or debriefing with colleagues.<sup>36</sup>
- Disengaging physically and psychologically, removing themselves from the research environment completely by going for a walk, grabbing lunch with a friend, or running errands.<sup>37</sup>
- Checking in with research managers and the team to review research progress, discuss transcripts and coding, share interview techniques, and emotionally debrief (e.g., grabbing coffee or lunch with one another).

Researchers will differ in their comfort with conducting sensitive interviews, how interviews impact them, and the strategies they find most helpful for mitigating impacts. However, researchers have noted that the need to release emotions decreased as they became more experienced in hearing difficult stories.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Researchers who conduct sensitive interviewing must take steps to prevent harm to participants. Questions on sensitive topics can elicit strong emotional reactions from participants and researchers should be prepared to empathically respond. While it can be difficult and distressing, at times, for participants to share their stories, the interview process can be therapeutic for them and the knowledge gleaned can benefit others in society. Therefore, researchers should consider best practices for engaging in sensitive interviewing and integrate them into their research designs to protect participants from harm and researchers who may be emotionally impacted by hearing participants' stories. Additional research or discussion on how to minimize risk while conducting sensitive interviews, such as best approaches to empathically recruit and screen participants, also would benefit researchers and participants.

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