Interviewing

Fundamentals of Human-Centered Computing

Interviewing

Today I will cover the following aspects of interviewing:

- Getting ready for your interviews
- Conducting an interview
- Observing during the interview
- Interviewing after your first analysis

Preparation

Getting ready for your interviews

Preparation

Things to do before you start interviewing:

– Improve your interview guide

– Find your first set of participants

– Before every interview, do a little introduction

Interview guide

You already made one for the IRB, now make one for yourself

The guide helps you to:

– Make sure your group agrees on the scope and main topics

– Have a fall-back document in case your interview derails

– Prepare the participant for the interview

Interview guide

1. Identify the main **concepts** and **jargon** of the domain

    Not a literature review, but a basic understanding so you can follow the participants' arguments

    In the interview probe on jargon to get the participants' definition (it might differ from your own!)

Example:

    Grad school applicants may talk about a "safety school"

Interview guide

2. Write down **questions** that fulfill research objectives but keep the conversation open

Reflect upon the questions:

- Are these questions understandable, clear and concise?

- Do they elicit views, concerns, and experiences?

- Do they reflect the research purpose?

- Do they not reflect my own opinions or assumptions?

- How do they sound to a participant?

- How can I probe further without being too intrusive?

Interview guide

The danger of writing questions is that you focus on them too much!

- Let the participant lead, both in terms of depth of each question and order of questions

- Probe to get deeper answers (use the guide to return to under-explored topics)

- Don't try to answer all the questions

- Explore beyond the topics laid out (within scope)

Interview guide

If anything **don't use your guide at all!**

> I would still create one, because I teaches me how to formulate good questions on the fly

The topics in your guide are **not** your categories for data analysis

> Let the data speak!

Your data analysis can inform your interview guide, though!

> Revise your guide in future interview rounds

Interview guide

Use example questions in box 2.1 of Charmaz

Note that these questions are for retrospective interviews

We want to have more "**show me**" style questions

Ask questions from the participants point of view and in their own language

If your topic has a social or organizational aspect: first focus on the collective, then the individual

Initial sampling

Discuss who you want to interview before you start interviewing

- If multiple types of people are involved in the phenomenon, try to interview all of them!

- Coordinate with your team members so that you get a wide variety of participants

- Select people with first-hand experience

- Interview people in a wide variety of contexts

Introduction

Introduce yourself and your research to the participant:

- Mention the expected time commitment

- Explain the interviewing style

- Ask about demographics (before you start the tape)

- Have them sign the consent form (if you applied for IRB, otherwise not!)

- Ask if it is okay to start the recording (and let them know you can stop recording at any time)

Interviewing style

You and the user are collaborators in understanding the user's activity

Build an **equitable relationship** with the user

- Not traditional interviewee-interviewer (doesn't work for tacit knowledge)

- Not expert-novice (not about how it should be done, but how they actually do it)

- Not host-guest (it's okay to be nosy)

- Like master-apprentice (observe and ask questions)

Interviewing style

"I'd like to watch you <do activity>. Just do what you would normally do. I'd like you to talk aloud about what you're doing as you do it. And if there are things I don't understand or would like to know more about, I will ask you about them. Ready to get started?"

Sensitive topics

When interviewing on **sensitive** topics/experiences:

– Make sure participants are comfortable

– If you have a sensitive question, ask if it is okay to ask, and tell them they can choose not to answer it

– Tell the participants that their experiences matter

– Avoid triggers (that are unrelated to the topic)

– Encourage elaboration

– Try to end on a positive note

Interviewing

Conducting an interview

Interviewing

The two most important interview practices are:

- Saying "uhuh"
- Making an encouraging, non-judgmental summary statement in question form

This creates an interactional climate that encourages the participant to talk

The participant's main task is to demonstrate and explain the activity

Interview goals

Your goal is to understand the activity through observation and questioning in context, to gain insights about:

- the **environment** where the activity takes place

- the **tasks** that make up the activity

- the **people** involved in the activity

- **cultural** influences on the activities (expectations, desires, policies, values, etc.)

- **breakdowns** in current processes

- **variations** that occur between participants or over time

Real data

Seek real data, no abstract summary

Bad: "What do you dislike about the ordering system?"

Good: "Could you show me how you place an order? Let me know about things you like and don't like about the process as we go through it."

Watch out for "usually" and "typically"

Instead, ask: "Can you show me how you do that?" or "Can you demonstrate how you did that last time?"

Real data

Be flexible to **probe** on unexpected answers

"That's interesting, can you tell me more?"

Ask **clarifications** (even if you think you understand)

"What does you mean by X?"

"Can you define that for me, so I have it in your own words?"

"So if I understand correctly, you..."

Let participants **fix your understanding**, if needed

Real data

Elicit detailed responses that create **understanding**, not just facts

Try to uncover the subtlety and complexity of respondents' intentions and actions

Why does Pete do X? Why not Z? What led to Pete doing X? What are the consequences of Pete doing X?

But don't ask it in a confrontational way!

Good practices

Look for **actions** and **processes**, noting their:

- Contexts, scenes, situations
- Conditions
- Who, what, when, why, how
- Interpretations
- Jargon (words and phrases) and their meaning
- Tease out hidden assumptions, validate them

Good practices

Pacing:

- Plan for plenty of time
- Slow pace, but speed up if needed
- Stop to explore something interesting
- Request more detail
- Allow the participant to talk about whatever they want
- Steer the interview back if it goes too far off topic

Good practices

Focus:

- Ask about actions, but also about thoughts and feelings

- Make sure you understand the participant's point of view

- Let participants say things in their own words

- Read non-verbal cues, use them yourself

- Ask for elaboration, clarification and/or examples

- Even when trying to focus, open-ended questions

Good practices

Keeping the participant happy:

- Listen, don't interrupt or correct

- Validate the participant's perspective ("I understand your point..." / "that makes sense...")

- Ask for clarifications in slow and soft tone (not "why", but "tell me about..." / "how did..." / "what was...")

- Be supportive and trusting, don't confront

- Thank the participant for helping you

Bad practices

Don't take over!

- Don't be authoritative

- Don't jump from question to question too much (let the participant guide you)

- Don't forget to follow up on interesting things

- Don't impose your preconceived interests or ideas

Reflection

Critically reflect on what participants say, because they may:

- be hostile

- be vague

- be suspicious

- have their own agenda

- avoid negative feelings or experiences

- be inaccurate, hold back or embellish stories

Observation

Observing during the interview

Observation

Observation makes sure you capture all **tacit knowledge**

Look for the following things:

- Actions and processes (individual/collective)

- How is technology being used

- Reoccurring patterns

- Surprises (to you or the participant)

- Judgments of success and failure

- Discrepancies between words and actions

Observation

When the activity is **social**, also look for:

– Hierarchies (formal, informal, conflicting)

– Accountability (formal, informal, conflict)

– Explanations and justifications used in communication with others

– Understandings, agreements, challenges

– Opportunities to see the other side of things

Documents

You can also investigate documents used. Focus on:

- their intended and actual purpose

- how they are interpreted by people

- who produced them, has access to them, and uses them

- whether they have prominence and legitimacy

- the assumptions embedded in them

- the consequences of using them (who/what is affected)

Not just content, also form (structure)!

Documents

Copy or **take photos** of documents used

Try to retain annotations, folding, etc.

Compare documents between interviews

Think about the difference between how things ought to go, versus how they actually go

E.g. a recipe with scribbles on it

If you can't observe

Use documents for a **retrospective interview**

You can **elicit** documents

    E.g. (photo) diaries

Note though: direct observations get more data and easier to probe!

Iterate

Interviewing after your first analysis

Iterate

You can **sample new participants** and **ask more specific questions** based on your results

Let your later interviews be guided by your emerging theory:

– Theoretical plausibility (recurring statements, things that "suddenly start to make sense")

– Direction and centrality (how your main topic shifts; what you care to pursue and what not)

– Adequacy (try counterfactuals; use theoretical sampling to test them)

Filling the blanks

The goal of GT is to uncover discourses (narratives that make sense of phenomena, opinions and actions)

Later interviews focus on gaps in uncovered discourses

Types of gaps:

– Missing properties of a category

– Conditions

– Comparisons with and relations to other categories

Seek contrast, contradictions, similarities and confirmations

Filling the blanks

Look for things that may answer questions you had when writing your notes:

- **Why** did X happen? (deeper meaning)
- **What** exactly happened and **how**? (unpack, sequence)
- **When** does X happen and when not? (conditions)

Try to uncover assumptions, meanings and rules that have remained tacit

But try not to force responses!

Ask focusing questions **after** the open ones