Method

In-depth interview

A long, open, guided conversation with a single person to understand in detail their experiences, motivations and way of seeing a topic.



In Spanish

Entrevista en profundidad

Origin

Several roots in qualitative research, such as Merton and Kendall's focused interview (1946); systematized by Kvale (1996)

Output

Detailed accounts of experiences and motivations

What it's for

Understanding why things happen from each person's point of view.

Key elements

Open questions

Ones that can't be answered with yes or no.

From general to specific

Start with the person's life and approach the topic little by little.

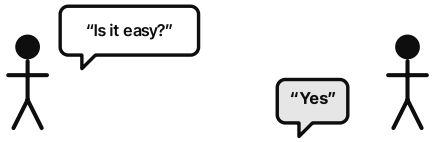
Listen and probe

Use their words, don't fear silence and go beyond the first answer.

An example

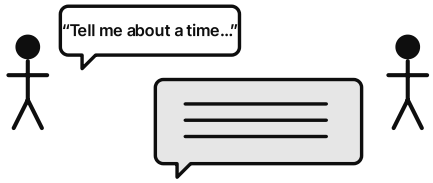
Two ways to ask about a banking service.

Closed question



"Do you find the app easy to use?" — "Yes." **End of conversation.**

Open question



"Tell me about the last time you had to get something done with the bank." **The story comes out.**

Open questions draw out concrete stories, and the useful details are in the stories.

How it's done

1

Prepare a guide of topics, not a closed questionnaire.

2

Have a conversation following what the person tells you.

3

Record and analyze looking for themes and quotes.

Applications in design

When to use it

To understand motives, decisions and experiences that can't be seen from the outside.

Avoid

Asking for general opinions instead of concrete stories ("the last time you..."), asking leading questions or selling your idea.

Don't fall for it

What people tell you doesn't always match what they do: combine the interview with observation.

Connections

Builds on

- Say vs. do
- Data saturation

Used by

- Brand design
- Product design
- Graphic design
- Environmental graphic design
- Legal design
- Design for health

- Design research
- UX research

Related to

- Design thinking
- Affinity diagram
- Diary study
- Focus group
- Generative tools
- Contextual inquiry
- Jobs to be done
- Stakeholder map
- Empathy map
- Extremes and mainstreams

Authors and works

1996	**Steinar Kvale**	Described the qualitative interview as a conversation with a purpose.
2013	**Steve Portigal**	Explained how to conduct this kind of interview in user research.
1946	**Robert K. Merton and Patricia L. Kendall**	Described the "focused interview": a guided, largely nondirective conversation about a specific situation the person has experienced. It is one of its forerunners.

Sources

Original sources

- Merton, R. K., & Kendall, P. L. (1946). The focused interview. American Journal of Sociology, 51(6), 541–557. View source (https://doi.org/10.1086/219886)

Secondary sources

- Kvale, S. (1996). InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing. Sage.
- Portigal, S. (2013). Interviewing users: How to uncover compelling insights. Rosenfeld Media.

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