INTERVIEWING TIPS [1]

1. Preparation for the interview

Know your guide – It is essential that you know the interview guide (I-guide) and practice reading the questions out loud before hand. The more knowledgeable you are about the questions, the more relaxed and natural you will be during the interview.
Ensure that you understand what the question is asking so you can probe for *a full* answer.
Think about the probes you might use and the conditions under which they may be necessary (examples below in section 6: *More Helpful Hints*).

Contact potential respondents and gain permission to conduct an interview – This is a lengthy process that may involve pre-calls, introductory letters explaining the research goals in lay terms, and/or callbacks.
Be patient, polite, and accommodating at all times.
Keep in mind the points in the next section.

2. Authorization of self, study, and tape recorder

Presentation of Self – Be aware of how you are presenting yourself in the interview. How you dress, how you introduce yourself (will you affiliate yourself with a particular community group, as a researcher, as a current or former sex worker, all of the above, etc.) will likely make a difference. Be relaxed and friendly but not too casual.
Explain why the study is being conducted and what is expected of the person being interviewed.
Provide them will full information on how to reach you and the others responsible for the study.

Confidentiality – Reassure respondent that all the information they provide will be held in the strictest confidence.

Tape recorder – Ask for permission to tape the interview and explain why this is necessary.
Point out that the tape will be destroyed or returned to them (whichever they prefer) after it has been transcribed.
Read the page of ***TAPING TIPS*** and follow the instructions.
It is permissible to turn off the tape recorder during the response to single questions. Take notes regarding the answer and do not forget to reactivate the tape recorder.
Remind them that you do not want names or identifying details of people, club owners, clubs, etc. If a name is mentioned, it will be removed in the transcript. Note the number on the tape counter when something like this occurs so it can be omitted from the transcription. If they are still uncomfortable with this, take the time to rewind the tape and record over the problematic section immediately. If you cannot obtain permission to tape the interview the alternative is to take thorough notes instead.

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[1] Excerpts from Shaver, Frances M. *et al.* (2002) **Sex Trade Advocacy and Research (STAR) Workbook: Materials for a Two-day Training Workshop with Community Partners**. Submitted to the National Network on Environments and Women's Health (available in French and English).

3. During the interview

Secure the Environment – The interview will go more smoothly if both the interviewer and interviewee are comfortable (physically and psychologically). One way to alleviate some of the social distance between you and the interviewee is by offering to answer any questions they may wish to ask. For the most part, this exchange should take place at the end of the interview.
Be sure to settle in a quiet location where there is little chance of being disturbed by others.

I-Guide – Give the respondent a version of the I-guide to follow during the interview (a version excluding the detail on the probes is available). Remember to get it back at the end.

Ask Questions – Remember, your role is to listen rather than to talk. The interviewer should only be taking up 10% of the time of the air-time.
Some questions may trigger emotions in either or both of you. If this happens a number of strategies are possible: simply wait quietly until the tears subside (silence is good), offer a tissue, suggest that you come back to the issue later in the interview, and/or ask whether they are ready to go on.
For more specific tips on how to handle questions see section 6 below (*More helpful hints*).

Take Notes – Even if you are taping the interview, it is a good idea to take notes. It works as an interview aid (keeping you on track, helping you to formulate probes and approaches to upcoming questions). It also serves to build rapport with respondents since it provides a clear indication that you are interested in accurately recording what they are saying.
Even though note taking is much less threatening that a tape recorder, it is a good idea to ask if they mind.

Closure and Exit – After completing the interview move toward closure by asking the following type of questions: Do you have questions about the interview? Are there questions or areas of information we have missed asking about? Is there any information you would like (about the law, policies, health centres, etc.)?
If you are unable to provide the requested information or to find it on the Referral Sheet, offer to telephone them later once you have found it. Alternatively, suggest they contact [*put in my name or the key RA's name*] at (514) 848-2139.
Remind them how to get in touch with you and thank them for their time.
Give them the honorarium and money for other expenses incurred (babysitting, transportation etc). Be sure to get receipts for the expenses.

4. Immediately after the interview

Edit Notes and Record Other Details on the Post-interview Comment Sheet – Include details on how it went, such as emotional aspects, interruptions, any resistance to questions, and your own personal feelings and/or observations.

Do a Recording Check – Listen to several sections of the tape to ensure that it recorded properly. If not, write up some notes on the missing information.

Do an Internal Consistency Check – It is difficult to remember all of one's jobs and/or events in one's history. If you find inconsistencies in the respondent's recollection, most are there by accident (rather than design). If you find any such inconsistencies or, indeed, any unclear areas of information, telephone the respondent and ask for clarification. Explain that we need an accurate record for the purpose of the research.

5. Final Steps

Return Tape, Notes etc to the Research Office – *Note*: We should provide the name of a specific individual on the team to be the contact person.

Quality Check of the Interview – Another team member performs this check. The objective is to evaluate the quality of the interview and determine whether all answers are clear and have been fully probed. You may be too close to the situation, or have a blind spot – just because you know what the respondent means, does not mean anyone else does.
If areas are inadequately developed, you will be asked to fill in the details by contacting the respondent.
Note: The check also serves as a training tool by keeping you aware of your blind spots and any problematic questioning styles.

Verification of Transcription – When the interview has been transcribed, it is returned to you with the tape. You are expected to read it while listening to the tape to ensure that the transcription is accurate.
Ensure that any information the respondent did not want recorded has been removed.

6. More Helpful Hints

Avoid Leading Questions – Leading questions put words into the respondent's mouth.

DON'T: I guess you find this hard?
DO: How did that make you feel?
Note: The "DO" formulation allows the respondents to answer in their own words.

DON'T: Do you think we are spending too much on assistance to the poor?
DO: What do you think about the level of assistance to the poor?
Note: The "DO" formulation allows the respondents to answer in their own words.

Avoid Loaded Questions – Loaded questions encourage a particular answer.

DON'T: Should the mayor fix the pot-holed and dangerous streets in our city?
DO: What should the mayor do to keep the streets in top shape?
Note: The "DON'T" formulation is loaded for agreement (i.e., a YES answer).

DON'T: Should the mayor spend even more tax dollars to keep the streets in top shape?
DO: What should the major do to keep the streets in top shape?
Note: The "DON'T" formulation is loaded for disagreement (i.e. a NO answer).

Limit Questions to whose within the Competence and Knowledge of the Respondent

POOR: How adequate are the services in your neighborhood?

Key agency informants may be able to handle such a question, but not members of the general population. If you ask such a question, be sure to remember that the respondent can only answer it with respect to his/her own experiences. Rephrase it in the following manner:

BETTER: What neighborhood services do you use? Are they adequate for your needs?

Clarify Answers – Our goal is to obtain information. Probe for full answers by asking follow questions such as:

What did you find difficult about that?
Can you give me an example?
I know what that means to me, but what does that mean to you?
You say you participate in X, but we'd like to know how often? (Probe for an answer linked to a specific time frame such as times in the last week or month or year.)
Note: Probes must be neutral and not affect the nature of the subsequent response.

Encourage Respondents to Talk – Our goal is to obtain full information; one-word answers are not useful. Tips to encourage fuller answers (especially when faced with a non-talkative respondent) include those suggested above under "Clarifying Answers" and the following:

Use verbal clues: How is that? In what way? Does anything else come to mind?
Use silence (i.e., don't fill the empty space by talking yourself, just wait a little longer)
Non-verbal clues also help: tilt head, raise eyebrows, or make eye contact

Record Body Language – Watch for and record body language when it is used to answer a question: a shrug, a nod or shake of the head. Body language does not record, so clarify and record what the respondent intends to convey. Keep notes with the question number or "speak" it in to the tape recorder (e.g.: respondent is nodding her head).
Note: Be aware of your own body language and how you respond to their answers: keep it non-judgmental.

Coping with Interruptions – Ideally, the interview should take place in a location where interruptions (phone calls, children etc.) are unlikely. Often they happen anyway (e.g., you will interrupt the flow when changing the tape). When returning to the I-guide, review the last thing they said:

You mentioned your sources of income were X, Y, Z. Do you have anything else to add?
You were telling me about the time you did X; do you have anything else to add?

Handling Conflicting Information and Repetitious Questions – Responses that seeming contradict earlier ones are usually inadvertent (rather than intentional) and tied to problems respondents have in recalling details about their lives. (Can you rattle off your work history without thinking about it?) Use the following questioning style to clarify the issue:

Earlier I thought you said X, Y, Z. Did I misunderstand you?
It is important that we get accurate information, this answer sounds different from what you said earlier. Could you clarify the situation for me?
Note: This same strategy can be used when respondents mention that the questions seem repetitious.

Questions Invoking Tears or Other Strong Emotions – Monitor your own and your respondent's comfort levels. If the situation becomes awkward or tense for yourself or the respondent, follow the suggestions for appropriate action provided below:

Interviewee – Listen to your respondent. If it appears that s/he is avoiding a question or that you have touched on a sensitive topic, take the time to decide how to proceed. If the situation becomes particularly tense, suggest taking a short break, or continuing on a different topic, or coming back to the topic later.
Watch the body language of the interviewee. This may give you an indication that they are getting uncomfortable. If you're unsure, ask. You may have misread the body language, or you may find the respondent is relieved to be given the opportunity to talk about their experiences and want to continue.
Keep your referral list at hand in case they want/need help (such as the address of a rape crisis centre, health clinic, women's shelter, etc.).

Interviewer – You are not immune to the situation and may well feel uncomfortable with a question or its answer. Give yourself time to recover (pause, check the tape, refer to the I-guide etc) and then continue with the interview.
Later on you may find it useful to debrief with another team member.
Always maintain open lines of communication with other team members and bring such issues to the team meetings for discussion.

STAR Follow-up Training Workshops (Montreal)

Additional Interviewing Tips

Summary of workshops held on
October 19, November 23 and December 6. 2001
Prepared for the meeting January 23 2002 by Isabelle Lantagne
Translated by Shannon Timmons

1) **Remember the goal of the research.** To find solutions to improve the health and safety of sex workers in their work environment. Remembering the research goal allows us to focus on certain issues, without giving the impression of overlooking other essential questions. Don't forget that Fran has already done some work in the field and has gathered certain information. This may be why you feel like you are not asking the right questions. On the other hand, it is important to collect information that you feel is important, that will enrich the data collected while remaining within the scope of the project.

2) **Ice breakers.** Arrange to meet the interviewee at the corner café. If appropriate, have a coffee and smoke a couple of cigarettes (the majority of the respondents are smokers). This gives you a great opportunity to create a rapport with the interviewee by talking about whatever you like, or, you may choose to discuss the project and answer any questions they have. After about 15-20 minutes, or whenever the respondent is ready, proceed to the interview room, and begin the interview. (You may want to let the participant choose whether he would like to take a couple minutes to have coffee and a cigarette, as some may wish to get started immediately.)

3) **Ask questions as if it were a normal conversation.** When you are able to do so, skip from topic to topic, following the natural flow of the discussion but staying within the parameters of the interview guide. Glance at your interview guide when you feel you have asked all your questions, this will allow you to check whether any questions have been missed. Let your interviewee know what you are doing: looking over the guide to make sure you haven't missed anything. This also serves to make the informant aware that s/he is crucial to the interview process. It also helps to eliminate the possibility of repetitive questions.

4)**It's up to you to properly formulate your questions.** Adapt your language to the respondent's language level. If necessary simplify your questions or add to them by including examples when the informant does not seem to understand the question. Ask Fran if you are unsure about the meaning of a question. If you do not understand an informant's answer, ask them to clarify their answer and encourage them to provide examples.

5) **It is best not to interrupt an interview for a coffee break or for any other reason.** To date, any break in the interview has had a negative effect on the process. Often, the second half was difficult because the respondent was tired and less open to questions. In addition, we have learned that it is best not to give the respondent a copy of the interview guide unless they specifically request it. This is because it seems to be a distraction.

6) **Use the silences.** Count to ten in your head after each question. This gives the respondents time to think and to add anything they would like. It's not easy and requires discipline. If you feel a certain unease, ask yourself whether it is really the respondent who feels uneasy or yourself. Try not to respond to questions with non-verbal communication: the recorder will not pick it up.

7) **The university office interview locales are not "cool"**… but they are the most practical. They allow us to easily monitor the interviews, both on a personal and technical level, and to verify whether this person is here for the first time, or is trying to participate a second time. In addition they provide a quiet, confidential environment for the tape recorder. It is a good idea to avoid places where illegal activities may be in progress, (bawdy houses etc.) .

8) **Don't stop taping until the interviewee has left the room.** The respondent may say something very important once the interview is officially over.

9) **Each interviewee decides to participate in the research for specific reasons** that may not necessarily be in agreement with our own motives. This is a normal part of the research process. You will, therefore, have to negotiate between these two positions in a way that allows us to get the most information, while protecting the interviewee.

10) **Don't forget about "outreach".** Encourage/invite the interviewee to talk about the project to people they know. We are in need of dancers, escorts and masseuses. Without them we will not be able to complete the study.

11) **Ensure that the respondent signs the receipt**

12) **Only one interview a day** : Since doing an interview is very demanding, do not do more than one a day. In addition, give yourself enough time after the interview to complete your notes. Make sure you have enough energy to finish the interview without getting too tired.

13) **It is important to talk about any difficulties experienced during the interview** : Some people may have experienced some really difficult, even horrifying things that they share with you. After an interview you may feel heavy, sad, frustrated or you may simply feel the need to talk. Don't hesitate to call or e-mail us! If you can't contact another interviewer, write it up in your journal! You will feel better afterwards.

14) **Once the respondent has left the interview room** : It is important to ensure the quality of the interview, and to rewind the tape to the beginning of the interview. Make sure that the tapes are labeled properly and that the forms are filled out (cover page and post-interview comments).