

The do's and don'ts of qualitative interviewing

Interviews for research and evaluation purposes are very different from everyday conversations or interviews on political programs. They need to be guided by scientific principles and to meet specific criteria. This article summarizes some of the most important do's and don'ts of high-quality interviewing. It specifically targets researchers with limited interviewing experience who would like to avoid common mistakes.

Author

Katharina Felbermayr
OeNB, Financial Literacy and
Culture Division,
katharina.felbermayr@oenb.at



Obtaining information is a major goal

An interviewer asks questions on predefined topics to obtain information from the interviewee. Interviews usually take place as individual interviews, i.e. in a one-on-one setting (one interviewer and one interviewee). Conducting pair interviews or group interviews is also possible and common.



Knowing your target groups is key

Interviewing special target groups such as children or people with disabilities requires specific methodological adjustments. Interviewers working with these groups need enough time to carefully plan and conduct interviews and to collect and analyze data while keeping related challenges in mind.



Conducting interviews requires experience and knowledge

Conducting interviews requires experience and knowledge. Interviewers need a basic understanding of the methodological challenges to conduct high-grade qualitative interviews. If they lack practical or theoretical experience they need to make precise preparations to conduct qualitative interviews.

Opinions expressed by the authors of studies do not necessarily reflect the official viewpoint of the Oesterreichische Nationalbank or the Eurosystem.

Abstract

What needs to be considered when conducting qualitative interviews in evaluation research? Following up on the article “Qualitative research evaluation – how to get from first ideas to a final paper” (Felbermayr, 2024) published in the OeNB Financial Literacy Evaluation Series, this paper takes a closer look at the do’s and don’ts of conducting qualitative interviews. It addresses interviewers who have little experience in conducting qualitative interviews and are interested in learning about frequent sources of errors in interviewing. Its focus is on the subject areas of reflection, language and communication, interview settings and technology use. Moreover, it also discusses the additional considerations and methodological adjustments necessary for interviews with special target groups, pointing out, by way of example, the challenges that arise when interviewing children and people with disabilities.

Introduction

Interviews are a popular qualitative method in evaluation and research. Schäfers and Schachler (2022, p. 229) even consider interviews the “supreme way of empirical social research”¹ when it comes to collecting data on subjective experiences, perspectives and evaluations. There is a wide range of qualitative methods available in both evaluation and research (Hopf, 2004). “The same is true for interview forms. Choosing the appropriate interview form depends on the research interest and research questions. The interview form then determines the structure of the guidelines, the degree of openness and structuring as well as the role of the interviewer” (Felbermayr, 2024, p. 6). What all forms of interviews have in common is that participants answer directly and immediately to the questions asked by the interviewer. Nevertheless, qualitative interviews cannot be compared with conversations on talk shows or political programs (Patton, 2015). While on the one hand, qualitative interviews must meet methodological requirements, on the other, they primarily serve as a data collection tool that helps us answer underlying research questions (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1002).

“Particularly for beginners who dare to take on this medium, the activity of the interviewer may be seen as a sequence of tasks that can bring about uncertainties in the interviewer” (Hermanns, 2004, p. 209). With a view to avoiding errors, the literature provides a wide range of tips on how to conduct qualitative interviews (e.g. Patton, 2015; McGrath et al, 2019). Dieckmann (2017, p. 447) distinguishes three categories of error sources that frequently occur in interview situations: (1) respondent characteristics, (2) question characteristics, (3) interviewer characteristics and interview situation characteristics. This paper addresses interviewers who have little experience in conducting qualitative interviews and points out frequent sources of error. It is essential that interviewers deal with possible sources of error, or with the do’s and don’ts of interviewing, given that the quality of interviews has a “direct influence on data quality” (Emde and Fuchs, 2012, p. 342–343).

This paper is structured as follows: Section 1 provides useful information for the actual conduct of interviews. It focuses on interview situations and issues related to reflection, language and communication, interview settings and technology use. Given that interviews with special target groups require additional considerations and methodological adjustments, section 2 deals with conducting interviews with (1) children and (2) people with disabilities. By way of summary, section 3 provides an overview of important points to consider as an interviewer.

¹ All passages quoted from German-language sources have been translated by the OeNB.

1 Guidance for conducting interviews

Interviews can be roughly divided into three stages: preparation, conduct and follow-up. For details on the methodological steps that must be taken before an interview can actually be conducted (e.g. preparing consent forms or interview guidelines), see the article “Qualitative research evaluation – how to get from first ideas to a final paper” (Felbermayr, 2024), published in the OeNB Financial Literacy Evaluation Series. The present paper focuses on interviewing as an activity and on the challenges related to it. What is essential for both drafting interview guidelines and conducting interviews is that interviewers familiarize themselves with the subject matter the interview will cover (McGrath et al., 2019). The challenges that might materialize in an interview situation can be assigned to the following subject areas:

- reflection
- language and communication
- interview settings
- technology use

1.1 Reflection

To ensure quality assurance, interviewers should reflect on the following aspects while collecting or evaluating data:

1.1.1 Proximity and distance

Interviewers should establish proximity with interview participants by empathizing with what is being said and putting themselves in their place to understand how they experience and interpret the world. At the same time, it is important to maintain distance to participants' statements by constantly questioning the horizons of meaning of terms used in the interview (Hermanns, 2004). Keeping distance to what is being said can be more difficult when interviewing people who have had the same experience as the interviewer. This is the case, for example, when a prospective teacher interviews other teachers. If participants have too much background experience in common with the interviewer, they may not elaborate on certain content because they assume that the interviewer will know this content anyway (Dieckmann, 2017). Interviewers, on the other hand, run the risk of failing to ask detailed questions about terms the participants use or processes they describe. Interviewers will ask fewer questions because they believe they are familiar with the content and that, therefore, they do not need more detailed descriptions. According to Dieckmann (2017, p. 300), “unfamiliarity can thus promote explication.” If it is unavoidable that interviewers have a similar or even the same background as participants, this must be taken into account at the latest when analyzing the data – which is ideally done in interpretation groups.

On an emotional level, it is important for the interviewer to establish proximity and familiarity with the participants. Particularly in longitudinal research projects, where people are interviewed several times, there is a risk that participants will interpret the working relationship with the interviewer as friendship and that they will therefore experience the end of the survey as abrupt (Felbermayr, 2023). This is why it is important for interviewers to always reflect on their own proximity-distance relationship with the participants and to inform them in good time about the approaching end of their working relationship. For Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2014, p. 8), interviewers and participants are like travelers on the same train: strangers unlikely to meet again after the ride (in this case, the interview). This is why it is essential in qualitative research to establish a trusting working relationship between researchers and research subjects, who are usually strangers to one another. And this is also why a trusting working relationship is a core element of many definitions of research ethics (for details on data privacy and ethics, see Lorenz and Felbermayr, 2024).

1.1.2 Culture and power relations

As cultural beings, people have different expectations of an interview situation. An interview with deaf persons or with people with a migrant background may require the services of an interpreter – “someone who is culturally sensitive to the interviewee’s situation” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1003). The response behavior of participants can also be influenced by their cultural background. The following example from Dieckmann (2017, p. 441) illustrates that the type of questions or the way questions are asked must always be adapted to the respective cultural context:

“At least in Western cultures, most people have internalized one norm to such a degree that they will try to give a ‘true’ answer to questions from strangers as long as the cost of sincerity does not exceed a certain threshold that may vary individually. This, however, also means that distorted answers are to be expected for unpleasant or sensitive questions. In other cultures, by contrast, politeness norms play a predominant role and, consequently, priority is given to the idea of not offending the person who asked the question rather than to the truthfulness of the answer. Answering ‘no’ to a question, for instance, is frowned upon in some cultures.”

From a research ethics perspective, it is important for researchers to reflect on their own role and the power that comes with it. In an interview, the interviewer’s power is evident in the fact that they determine the interview topic or specify the content of the guideline. It is the interviewers who are (more or less) in control of the process. Then, there is a power relationship between the interviewer and the participants, and also a power relationship among the participants – especially if underage children and teenagers are part of the sample. McCarry (2012, p. 60) draws attention to the powerless position of the latter, which is evident, for example, in the fact that interviewing them requires a declaration of consent. Underage children and teenagers can only participate in research if their parents or legal guardians give their consent. This can lead to situations where underage children or teenagers would like to participate in a study, but their parents or guardians refuse to give their consent.

1.1.3 Protective behavior

Interviewers may tend to try to protect participants from unpleasant, problematic situations and thus to adopt protective behavior during interviews. Hermanns (2004, p. 211) gives two reasons for this: the “*fear of embarrassments* in the course of the conversation” and the “*fear of injuring intimacy* or of *personality crises*.” Often, however, such protective behavior does not protect the participants but rather the interviewers themselves, e.g. from having to deal with traumatic episodes they do not know how to react to. This protective behavior is particularly evident when interviewers interview their own peers (ibid.). Protective behavior should not be confused with a responsible approach to unpleasant situations, e.g. when participants begin to cry during an interview or when they report traumatic experiences. Generally, the guiding principle of Charmaz (2014, p. 71) applies: “[Don’t] Leave when the participant seems distressed.” Interviewers have a responsibility toward participants and must not leave them in an agitated state after interviews. It is advisable to compile a list of contact addresses for psychosocial services, etc., and share them if necessary. Also, it is recommendable to ensure that participants are not left alone after a disturbing interview, but that a family member or some other trusted person is present.

1.1.4 Co-construction

In qualitative research, the prevailing understanding is that interviewers create the data together with the participants (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1004). The interview situation is a joint construction of the interviewer and the study participants, especially as understood by constructivist grounded theory. Interviewers

should therefore reflect both on their own behavior in the survey situation and on that of the participants, e.g. with regard to their choice of words, emotions and body language signals (Charmaz, 2014, p. 57–58). Other key influencing factors are aspects such as gender, race, age and power structures (ibid., p. 74). The interview setting must always be interpreted with regard to the individual context. This is because interviews always take place at a specific historical point in time and in a specific social context (ibid., p. 57–58). Certain gestures or facial expressions, for instance, can have different meanings in different cultural contexts (Felbermayr, 2023). “Consequently, the interviewer needs to be reflexive, conscious, and aware about how his or her role might impact the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1004).

1.2 Language and communication

“Practice makes perfect,” as the saying goes, and this certainly applies to interviewing. People conducting interviews for the first time are often overwhelmed by the task. This is because during an interview, they must carry out many activities simultaneously: listen to participants and respond to their content; reflect on the guideline and prioritize questions if necessary; pay attention to participants’ nonverbal signals; reflect on their own nonverbal signals and communication, etc.

To ensure quality assurance, interviewers should consider a number of aspects that have to do with language and communication. Table 1 lists the most important do’s and don’ts in interviewing.

Table 1

Do’s and don’ts in conducting qualitative interviews: language and communication

Do’s	Don’ts
Ask short questions that are easy to understand	Don’t imitate the language of participants
Ask if there is something you don’t understand	Don’t ask too many questions at once
Allow for breaks, even if they feel long	Don’t rush when speaking or asking questions
Talk less and listen more	Don’t use too many leading questions and don’t evaluate statements
Think carefully before interrupting	Try not to provoke distorted responses from participants
Adopt a neutral stance	Try not to refer to the interview guideline too often

Source: Author’s compilation.

1.2.1 Do’s

- **Ask short questions that are easy to understand:** During an interview, interviewers should ask short, easy-to-understand questions. They should not use sentences with complicated structures, string together several questions or use foreign words and long sentences. They should not use research questions as these are unsuitable in interviews. They are too complicated and usually contain theoretical categories or abstract terms the participants may not be familiar with. Interviewers should ensure that they phrase questions in a way that fits in with participants’ life-world (Hermanns, 2004).
- **Ask if there is something you don’t understand:** Interviewers should not hesitate to ask questions to ensure that they understand what the participants meant to say. People doing qualitative research want to understand the world from the participants’ perspective. So it is essential that they ask participants to explain terms, processes and situations in detail and that they ask questions if there is something they do not understand. “Try, through the interview, to understand your counterpart’s life-world so well that you could write a film-script for scenes from this world and could direct a production.” (ibid., p. 213). Detailed questions should also encourage participants to talk more about the research topic. Questions such as “Why do you say that?” or “Can you tell me more about that?” are suitable for this purpose (Yoong et al., 2013, p. 162).

- **Allow for breaks, even if they feel long:** Asking detailed questions is important in interviews. Nevertheless, interviewers should make sure that they give participants enough time to think about the questions they ask. Beginners, in particular, might easily begin to feel insecure if participants are silent for what they feel is too long. They might interpret prolonged silences as a mistake in their question and, consequently, begin to correct their question, add to it or rephrase it. This, in turn, can make participants feel insecure. Of course, it is possible that participants do not understand a question. Based on my experience in conducting qualitative interviews with various target groups, however, I can say that participants will always clearly communicate that there is something they do not understand. In many cases, their silence can therefore be interpreted as a pause for reflection. Such pauses can help participants sort out their thoughts (Dieckmann, 2017; Hermanns, 2004). Dieckmann (2017, p. 297) recommends the following rule of thumb: “Every time the participant stops speaking, interviewers should pause for three seconds before resuming communication.”
- **Talk less and listen more:** This request to interviewers by McGrath et al. (2019, p. 1004) sounds simpler than it actually is. Beginners, in particular, may have “Problems with the passive-receptive aspects of interviewing: difficulties and lack of patience in listening and in picking up stimuli for supplementary questions.” (Hopf, 2004, p. 208). They want to do their job particularly well and are therefore overly active during interviews (McGrath et al., 2019). However, the interviewer’s task is precisely to listen in order to learn from the participants. Interviews are not conversations with friends, with everyone ideally having an equal share in the conversation (Felbermayr, 2023). Interviewers have to keep a low profile. Not talking does not mean doing nothing. Active listening is more strenuous than it may sound. “Actively listening to the interviewees means respecting silence and identifying such silent moments as an opportunity for ongoing reflection” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1004).
- **Think carefully before interrupting:** For many interviewers, the question is whether and, if so, when participants may be interrupted. Interruptions should not be ruled out in principle, but they require careful consideration. Participants should not be given the feeling that they are being cut off or that their comments are of no interest to the interviewer (Dieckmann, 2017). As an interviewer, you should generally “intervene as little as possible in ways that specifically influence participants’ narrative flow or explications” (ibid., p. 308). Neither should they interrupt long, digressive narratives that feel like they might not relate to the interview topic. Often, the relevance of such narratives to the research interest only becomes apparent when the respective text passages are analyzed. In addition, interviewers are often pressed for time or focus on collecting information on a specific topic, which is why they cannot let conversations run indefinitely. As a compromise in dealing with digressions, Dieckmann (2017, p. 312) recommends the following approach: “Interviewers [should] let the communication process run for another three to four minutes as soon as they have the feeling that the participant is digressing. If, after this time, no idea has yet emerged as to what it is all about, it may actually have nothing to do with the research question.”
- **Adopt a neutral stance:** Interviewers should adopt a neutral stance in interviews, i.e. they should neither agree nor disagree with what is being said. It is not the interviewer’s job to evaluate or sanction statements made by the participants – neither verbally nor nonverbally. The requirement of neutrality is another feature that distinguishes interviews from everyday conversations. Unlike in interview situations, in everyday conversations we react directly to what the other person says. It is this behavior in particular that is not desired in interviews (ibid.).

1.2.2 Don’ts

- **Don’t imitate the language of participants:** Taking into account participants’ life-world should not be confused with imitating their language. If participants use certain terms or names, the interviewer

should use these as well. However, interviewers should not imitate the language of the participants' milieu, e.g. by using youth language when interviewing students (Hermanns, 2004). Instead, it is important to speak to participants as a layperson and to use sentences that are easy to understand (McGrath et al., 2019).

- **Don't ask too many questions at once:** Asking questions is part of the interviewer's core business and is essential for understanding. Nevertheless, questions should be asked carefully and, in general, care should be taken not to ask too many questions at once. This might be the case when interviewers e.g. ask three questions in a row, shedding light on a different, new aspect with each question. Participants may get confused by too many questions. Moreover, their answers may be influenced by cognitive psychological factors (e.g. primacy effects) (Dieckmann, 2017).
- **Don't rush when speaking or asking questions:** Beginners often tend to go much too fast in interviews. On the one hand, their own speaking rate may be too high. On the other, they may tend to mask their own uncertainty by asking too many questions at a time, without giving the participants time to think (ibid.). As the speaking rate usually increases when speakers are nervous, interviewers should pay conscious attention to their speed of speaking, aiming to create a pleasant, unrushed atmosphere. Moreover, high speaking rates may require increased concentration from participants, causing (earlier) symptoms of fatigue. If participants show signs of fatigue or exhaustion, the interviewer might want to discontinue the interview. In such situations, it may make more sense to make a follow-up appointment.
- **Don't use too many leading questions and don't evaluate statements:** According to Hopf (2004, p. 208), interviewers should avoid a "domineering communication style." This includes using a suggestive communication style (e.g. by frequently asking leading questions, using suggestive specifications, interpreting what is being said) or evaluating or commenting the participant's statements as such behavior can have a disruptive or distracting effect on the course of the interview.
- **Try not to provoke distorted responses from participants:** In general, interviewers should make sure that they do not influence participants' responses. Although interview guidelines are validated before use and interview questions are tested for suitability, communication issues may occur in interviews, e.g. when participants ask questions back, when they do not understand interview questions, ask for further explanations or begin to answer prematurely. In cases like these, it is the interviewer's job to solve these issues in a nondirective manner. In any case, interviewers should take care to avoid getting distorted responses from respondents (Schäfers and Schachler, 2022).
- **Try not to refer to the interview guideline too often:** Beginners in particular tend to refer to the guideline frequently when conducting interviews, e.g. by repeatedly mentioning it to participants (e.g. "Now these were the questions of Part 1.") or using it as a disciplinary tool (e.g. "Please keep your answers short so there will be time for all my questions."). Lack of practice coupled with fear and uncertainty often leads to an "inflexibility in dealing with an interview-guide" (Hopf, 2004, p. 208). This means e.g. that interviewers do not bring forward a question from the guideline when suitable but rigidly adhere to the sequence of questions in the guideline.

1.3 Interview settings

In addition to aspects of language and communication, interviewers must consider a number of issues regarding the setting of an interview (for further details, see Felbermayr, 2024). Specifically, they should avoid making unclear agreements with the participants. The place, time and duration of an interview should be agreed upon precisely. Otherwise, this "(...) leads to a set of unfavorable conditions, because, for example, the subjects are short of time and the interviewer comes under pressure of time in the course of the conversation" (Hermanns, 2004, p. 210). Allocating too little time for an interview is one of the most

common planning mistakes. Interviewers should make sure to avoid it (Hopf, 2004). They should also be on site in good time before the start of an interview, allowing for a time buffer for travel. If interviews take place on the premises of an institution, the interviewers may try to make the interview room comfortable in advance to ensure that the interview does not take place in a sterile atmosphere (Williams, 2015).

1.3.1 Location of interview

It is not always possible for the interviewer to determine the location of an interview (e.g. when interviewing students at school). In any case, the needs of the participants should take priority. Ideally, they should be free to choose the interview location. This requires flexibility from interviewers and can lead to interviews taking place in different, possibly distant locations. On the other hand, this offers the advantage that the interviews are conducted in a place where the participants feel comfortable and safe (Buchner, 2008; Felbermayr, 2023).

Some people like to conduct conversations in their own homes, while others see this as an invasion of privacy. Interviewers should be able to offer participants an alternative interview location if private premises are not an option. Ideally, this should be a professional setting (e.g. in a meeting room at the institution involved). Conversations in public spaces, such as cafés or parks, require careful consideration. There may be loud background noises, which may affect the sound quality of audio recordings. Also, in public spaces the interviewer cannot guarantee that what is being said will not be overheard by others, which might give rise to concerns of data privacy and research ethics. In a café, moreover, interviews may be interrupted by waiting staff.

In general, the location of an interview can influence interview dynamics. This is particularly obvious in an educational context. Students behave differently depending on whether they are interviewed at their school or in a more private setting, e.g. at a youth center. School as an institution is associated with certain feelings, behaviors, sanctions, etc. All of this can have an influence on students' answering behavior in an interview. This does not mean that conducting interviews at schools should be avoided. However, as with every interview, the interviewer will have to reflect on the possible influence the interview location may have on analyzing the answers given.

1.3.2 Seating arrangements

Interviewers should take care to create a pleasant atmosphere for interviews. "In the first few minutes the interviewer has to create a situation that is so relaxed and open that the people in it can lay bare, without fear, a great variety of aspects of their personality and their life-world" (Hermanns, 2004, p. 210). In addition to the choice and design of the interview location, seating arrangements can make a significant contribution to creating a pleasant atmosphere. Comfortable seating is the preferable choice (McGrath et al., 2019). Whether the interviewer chooses a table with wooden chairs, armchairs or other seating arrangements depends on the target group and interview format. Tables create a barrier between people, but at the same time they can also provide a kind of protection for interviewers. Such an arrangement can be more effective for expert interviews. For biographical interviews with young people, comfortable armchairs or couches may be more appropriate. "Ideally, the seating arrangement corresponds to an 'egalitarian structure,' so that all participants experience equal treatment in their subjective perception" (Lamnek, 2005, p. 120). "A large, round table is best suited for this; with no one 'chairing' or sitting at the head of square table formats. The seating arrangement must also take into account participants' individual needs. Sign language interpreters must sit opposite deaf people or in the deaf person's field of vision. Visually impaired people should not sit opposite windows due to the incidence of light, for example, as it is difficult for them to see people sitting in front of windows" (Felbermayr, 2024, p. 10).

1.4 Technology use

Before conducting an interview, the interviewer must decide whether the interview should be technically recorded and, if so, whether by tape and/or video (on the advantages and disadvantages of various recording options, see Felbermayr, 2024). A popular method is audio recording with a dictation machine. Before the interview, interviewers should familiarize themselves with the technology they are going to use (McGrath et al., 2019) to make sure they feel safe and relaxed when operating it. This, in turn, can have a positive effect on the atmosphere of the interview. Many interviewers find tape recording unsettling. They feel uncertain because of possible technical complications and because they feel uncomfortable having to listen to their own voice and possible mistakes later on (Hermanns, 2004). In most cases, however, interviewers are not the only participants to be excited during an interview. For many participants, it may be the first time they are being interviewed, and they might be nervous and uncomfortable. According to Hermanns (2004, p. 210), it is the interviewer's duty "to accept responsibility (...) for *managing the feeling* of 'recorder-discomfort', by demonstrating – with the machine running – that, irrespective of the fact that a recording is being made, it is possible to speak in a relaxed and open way (...)"

There are several options for dealing with the technology used. In my experience, it is not advisable to place the audio recorder on the table and start recording without comment. Such an approach is to be rejected from a research ethics and data privacy perspective as well. Participants must always be told when a recording begins and how long it will take. For me, it has worked well to place the audio recorder on the table after preliminary talks and the warm-up phase and to comment on it accordingly, e.g. "I am now placing the audio recorder on the table and will start recording." It is okay for interviewers to communicate their own excitement about this to participants, e.g. "It's always exciting for me to start the tape. Will it work?" Whether or not this is advisable must be decided on an individual basis, however. Not all interviewers feel comfortable sharing their own insecurities with the participants.

2 Interviewing special target groups

The points discussed in section 1 also apply when conducting interviews with special target groups. In addition, specific aspects must be considered. In the following, we will examine two target groups (children, people with disabilities) and their special needs. Before conducting interviews with members of these target groups, interviewers will be well advised to thoroughly study the relevant methodological literature. Moreover, it is advisable that they ask the prospective participants or – if necessary – their parents or guardians about participants' individual requirements.

2.1 How to interview children

In research involving children, according to Kuhn (2019, p. 237), "we are faced with the fundamental problem that adults cannot 'think' and 'feel' children's thoughts and feelings." This means that being adults, they face the challenge of adequately reflecting children's views. While interviewers have experienced their own childhood, they have long outgrown it and must now try to reapproach it (Punsch, 2002). Against this background, the question of how interviewers can ensure that they understand a child's perspective has been widely discussed in qualitative research (Hartnack, 2019; Heinzl, 2012). Interviewers are faced with the fundamental challenge that they have to "totally understand the world from a child's point of view" (Punch, 2022, p. 324–325). A wide range of qualitative research methods provide helpful tools for approaching the world of children.

It was not always a matter of course that children were interviewed for research purposes at all. For a long time, to gain information about children's lives, research interviews were conducted with children's primary caregivers only (Emde and Fuchs, 2012). When adopting a participatory approach, however,

research should be conducted *with* and not *about* the group of persons concerned (Unger, 2014). This general requirement is in line with the current maxim for the conduct of childhood research to include children as actors in research and to collect data on their views (Mey and Schwentesius, 2019). Children are “experts on their own life-world” (Hunger et al., 2019, p. 169) and should be interviewed as such.

“Generally, qualitative methods are considered more appropriate for researching children owing to the methods’ greater orientation towards participants’ needs.” (Vogl et al., 2023). Various qualitative methods can be used to reflect the voices of children, such as photo evaluation (e.g. Feichter, 2015), thematic drawings (e.g. Schultheis, 2019; Kuhn, 2019) or puppet interviews (e.g. Weise, 2021). Another popular method is conducting interviews. However, the methods of empirical social research, and especially different forms of interviews, have been designed primarily for adults (Vogl, 2021, p. 142). When researching children, therefore, the interview method needs to be adapted, which, according to Vogl (2021, p. 142), requires a “basic understanding of age-specific abilities and developmental challenges.” At the same time, it is obvious from methodological literature that research involving children requires particular care (Hartnack, 2019; Heinzl, 2012; Vogl, 2021; Vogl et al., 2023). This refers to ethical research considerations as well as methodological challenges in adapting survey instruments to children’s individual needs. What definitely needs to be taken into account in researching children are “development-related aspects” (Vogl, 2021, p. 154) such as their linguistic, cognitive or interactive skills. When collecting data from young children, in particular, it is recommended to combine linguistic (e.g. interview) and nonlinguistic, symbolic forms of expression (e.g. photo evaluation) (Schultheis, 2019). This also means having conversations with the children. If children only produce drawings, for example, interviewers will have to focus on interpretation rather than on children’s knowledge, as the drawings come without any further explanations.

2.1.1 What is most important when interviewing children?

“What you have to expect is short attention spans in young children, a literal understanding of language vs. unspecific language use, children’s uncertainty and shyness, problems in the temporal localization of events (see Poole and Lamb, 1998) and in specifying frequencies and quantities” (Vogl, 2021, p. 147).

Age plays an important role, not only in children’s social and communicative development (how can children express themselves in an interview?) but also in determining when children can be considered responsible and able to decide for themselves whether to participate in an interview or not. The age and *developmental stage* of children must always be taken into account. Abilities and developmental challenges can vary greatly with children’s age (ibid.).

As far as children’s development is concerned, according to Vogl (2021, p. 145), children at the age of five already have *language skills* that are sufficiently developed for them to take part in qualitative interviews. However, the question at which age children can definitely be “questioned by social scientists cannot be answered per se; rather, this depends on the research interest and the methods and techniques used” (ibid., p. 148). At any rate, interviewers should adapt their communication to the linguistic abilities of the children they interview. They should avoid questions that are too complex or questions that are divided into several individual questions (Emde and Fuchs, 2012). Moreover, most children lack experience with interview situations. Interviewers need to take this into account when designing interviews with children, as younger children in particular can be overwhelmed by complex interactional situations (Vogl, 2021). In any case, children must never be overburdened.

2.2 How to interview people with disabilities

It has been frequently the case that people with disabilities have not been trusted to participate in qualitative interviews or research as such because – as Buchner (2008, p. 518) points out – in the opinion of some people they “do not have sufficient verbal skills to express themselves in line with the method’s requirements [...]”. To ensure that research in the areas of inclusion and disability is in fact research *in cooperation* with the people concerned, regardless of their disability, it is important to actively involve them in the research and give them a voice (Coons and Watson, 2013; Unger, 2014).

The needs of people with disabilities can vary greatly depending on the type of disability. As this paper can only outline a few aspects and examples, interviewers are advised, at any rate, to read the research literature relevant for the respective target group before designing or conducting interviews (e.g. Buchner, 2008; Hermanns, 2004; Scott-Barrett et al., 2018). When interviewing deaf persons, for instance, different questions arise than when interviewing people with intellectual disabilities. Interviewing deaf persons requires an interpreter, which means an additional person will be present at the interview. If interviewers lack experience with such communication situations, the setting should be discussed with the participants in advance: Do the deaf persons choose their interpreter themselves? Who pays the costs? Should interviewers look back and forth between the deaf person and the interpreter? Where does the interpreter sit during the conversation?, etc. For people with intellectual disabilities, in turn, it may be more important to adapt the wording of questions to ensure comprehension.

2.2.1 What is most important when interviewing people with disabilities?

As a place of cooperation and communication, an interview depends on the eloquence of its participants, which “may mean making high demands on persons with poor communication skills [...]” (Dimbath, 2012, p. 311). It is the interviewers’ task to adapt the interview situation and interview guidelines to the individual needs of the participants. For some people, for example, free narratives can be too demanding, which is why interviewers should reflect on the suitable interview form and the guideline (Kremsner, 2006). It may be necessary to avoid foreign words or complicated sentence structures. Interviewers should conduct their interviews in an *easy-to-understand and comprehensible language*, which is by no means to be understood as “an oversimplified use of language” (Buchner, 2008, p. 522). According to Charmaz (2014, p. 96), it is advisable to speak the language of the participants: “Following threads in our participants’ everyday language and discourse helps us to form questions from their terms and learn about their lives.”

“Especially in interviews with people with cognitive impairments, however, there will be deviations from the ideal interview process. This has to do with comprehension problems on the part of the respondents, e.g. problems understanding abstract content, time estimates, questions with linguistic modifications and negations, which can lead to frequent clarifying questions, inadequate answers, lower response rates or systematic response tendencies” (Schäfers and Schachler, 2022, p. 230).

In a study, Schäfers and Schachler (2022) examined interviewer behavior in personal interviews with people with so-called cognitive impairments, analyzing the resulting problematic and unproblematic sequences of the interviews observed. They found, for example, that *repeated questioning* by interviewers was problematic for the flow of the interview. This is in line with the general requirement to avoid asking too many interview questions at once (see section 1.2.2), which applies to all target groups.

The research literature (Lewis and Porter, 2004) also discusses the use of visual methods, such as images, photographs or videos, as aids in interviews. Such aids should help participants capture the content of the interview in the best possible way. For participants with visual impairments, visual materials

can be printed in a larger format and in stronger, contrasting colors. When interviewing people with learning disabilities, pictures can be used in support. However, interviewers should carefully consider the use of images or visual aids as such. In the best case, they will reflect on their selection of images with other interviewers. There is always the risk that images symbolize something different than intended, are understood in a different way and thus lead to confusion rather than clarity. When an interview is recorded on audio tape, interviewers must bear in mind that the act of pointing at images will not be recorded. This means that, with this information missing, it may be difficult or impossible to perfectly reconstruct the meaning of individual text passages in the transcript. To eliminate any ambiguities, in such cases it is particularly important to take notes (for further details, see Felbermayr, 2024).

3 Conducting interviews – a summary

This paper highlights the do's and don'ts of conducting interviews in qualitative research, regardless of the specific interview method. It focuses on the subject areas of reflection, language and communication, interview settings and technology use. In this context, conducting interviews is only one part of the overall process under review; what is equally important is preparing for the interview (e.g. drafting interview guidelines and consent forms) and follow-up (e.g. writing notes). Qualitative interviews are very popular in the social sciences and are used in a wide variety of research contexts with many different target groups. Interviewing special target groups such as children and people with disabilities requires specific methodological adjustments. Interviewers working with these groups need sufficient time to carefully plan and conduct interviews and to collect and analyze data while being aware of the related challenges.

It is important to bear in mind that conducting interviews requires experience and knowledge. Just as expertise is required for creating quantitative survey instruments, a basic understanding of the methodological challenges and the necessary know-how are required for the careful conduct of high-grade qualitative interviews. Experienced interviewers know “when it is appropriate, in terms of content, to depart from the question guidelines, when it is essential to ask more intensive follow-up questions and when it is of particular significance, for the research interests of the project, to ask only very unspecific questions and to arrange for interviewees to have broad opportunities for self-expression” (Hopf, 2004, p. 207). Interviewers who lack practical or theoretical experience will be able to conduct qualitative interviews provided they undergo precise preparations such as reading the corresponding methodological literature (e.g. Felbermayr, 2024).

References

- Buchner, T. 2008.** Das qualitative Interview mit Menschen mit so genannter geistiger Behinderung – Ethische, methodologische und praktische Aspekte. In: Biewer, G., M. Luciak and M. Schwinge (eds.). *Begegnung und Differenz. Menschen – Länger – Kulturen. Beiträge zur Heil- und Sonderpädagogik.* Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt. 516–528.
- Charmaz, K. 2014.** *Constructing Grounded Theory.* 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Coons, K. D. and S. L. Watson. 2013.** Conducting research with individuals who have intellectual disabilities: Ethical and practical implications for qualitative research. In: *Journal on developmental disabilities* 19(2). 14–24.
- Diekmann, A. 2017.** *Empirische Sozialforschung. Grundlagen, Methoden, Anwendungen.* Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rohwohlt Verlag.
- Dimbath, O. 2012.** Rekonstruktion „großer“ Entscheidungen. Entscheidungsverlaufsanalyse mithilfe prozessbegleitender Interviews. In: *sozialersinn* 13(2). 305–322.
- Emde, M. and M. Fuchs. 2012.** Datenqualität in standardisierten Interviews mit Kindern. In: Heinzel, F. (ed.). *Methoden der Kindheitsforschung. Ein Überblick über Forschungszugänge zur kindlichen Perspektive.* Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa. 335–349.
- Felbermayr, K. 2023.** Entscheidungsprozesse am inklusiven Übergang. Eine Grounded Theory Studie im Längsschnitt. Bad Heilbrunn: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt. https://www.pedocs.de/frontdoor.php?source_opus=26629
- Felbermayr, K. 2024.** Qualitative research evaluation - how to get from first ideas to a final paper. OeNB Financial Literacy Evaluation Series.
- Feichter, H. J. 2015.** *Schülerinnen und Schüler erforschen Schule. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen.* Wiesbaden: Springer VS Verlag.
- Hartnack, F. (ed.). 2019.** *Qualitative research with children. Herausforderungen, Methoden und Konzepte.* In: Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Hermanns, H. 2004.** Interviewing as an Activity. In: Flick, U., E von Kardorff and I. Steinke (eds). *A Companion to Qualitative Research. Translation.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd. 209–213.
- Heinzel, F. (ed.). 2012.** *Methoden der Kindheitsforschung. Ein Überblick über Forschungszugänge zu kindlicher Perspektive.* Weinheim, Basel: Beltz & Juventa.
- Hopf, C. 2004.** Qualitative Interviews – an overview. In: Flick, U., E von Kardorff and I. Steinke (eds). *A Companion to Qualitative Research. Translation.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd. 203–208.
- Hunger, I., B. Zander, M. Zweigert and C. P. Schwark. 2019.** Impulsinterviews mit Kindern im Kindergartenalter. Praktische Entwicklung und methodologische Einordnung einer Datenerhebungsmethode. In: Hartnack, F. (ed.). *Qualitative Forschung mit Kindern. Herausforderungen, Methoden und Konzepte.* Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien. 169–192.
- Kremsner, G. 2016.** Vom Einschluss der Ausgeschlossenen zum Ausschluss der Eingeschlossenen. Biographische Erfahrungen von so genannten Menschen mit Lernschwierigkeiten. Bad Heilbrunn: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt.
- Kuhn, P. 2019.** Was Kinder bewegt. Thematische Zeichnung und episodisches Interview am Bild als Methodenkombination zur Erhebung der Kinderperspektive auf Bewegung, Spiel und Sport in der Schule. In: Hartnack, F. (ed.). *Qualitative Forschung mit Kindern. Herausforderungen, Methoden und Konzepte.* Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien. 237–278.
- Lamnek, S. 2005.** *Gruppendiskussion. Theorie und Praxis.* 2nd revised and expanded edition. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Verlag.
- Lewis, A. and J. Porter. 2004.** Interviewing children and young people with learning disabilities: Guidelines for researchers and multi-professional practice. In: *British journal of learning disabilities* 32(4). 191–197.

- Lorenz, T. and K. Felbermayr. 2024.** Data privacy and research ethics. OeNB Financial Literacy Evaluation Series.
- McCarthy, M. 2012.** Who benefits? A critical reflection of children and young people's participation in sensitive research. In: *International journal of social research methodology* 15(1). 55–68.
- McGrath, C., P. J. Palmgren and M. Liljedahl. 2019.** Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. In: *Medical Teacher* 41(9). 1002–1006.
- Mey, G. and A. Schwentesius. 2019.** Methoden der qualitativen Kindheitsforschung. In: Hartnack, F. (ed.). *Qualitative Forschung mit Kindern. Herausforderungen, Methoden und Konzepte*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien. 3–47.
- Patton, M. Q. 2015.** *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. Los Angeles et al.: SAGE.
- Przyborski, A. and M. Wohlrab-Sahr. 2014.** *Qualitative Sozialforschung. Ein Arbeitsbuch*. 4th expanded edition. Munich: Oldenburg Verlag.
- Punch, K. F. 2009.** *Introduction to Social Research. Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. 2nd edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Schäfers, M. and V. Schachler. 2022.** Die Interviewführung in standardisierten Interviews mit Menschen mit kognitiven Beeinträchtigungen. Erkenntnisse aus Interviewbeobachtungen. In: *Empirische Sonderpädagogik* 14(3). 228–244.
- Schultheis, K. 2019.** Schule und Lernen aus der Perspektive der Kinder. Konzeptuelle und methodische Grundlagen der Pädagogischen Kinderforschung. In: Hartnack, F. (ed.). *Qualitative Forschung mit Kindern. Herausforderungen, Methoden und Konzepte*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien. 49–82.
- Scott-Barrett, J., K. Cebula and L. Florian. 2018.** Listening to young people with autism. Learning from researcher experiences. In: *International journal of research and method in education*. 1–22.
- Unger, H. v. 2014.** *Partizipative Forschung. Einführung in die Forschungspraxis*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Vogl, S. 2021.** Mit Kindern Interviews führen. Ein praxisorientierter Überblick. In: Hedderich, I., J. Repping and C. Butschi (eds.): *Perspektiven auf Vielfalt in der frühen Kindheit. Mit Kindern Diversität erforschen*. Bad Heilbrunn: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt. 142–157.
- Vogl, S., E-M. Schmidt and O. Kapella. 2023.** Focus Groups with children. Practicalities and methodological insights. In: *FQS* 24(2), Artl.21.
- Weise, M. 2021.** Es ist noch jemand mit uns hier. Puppet-Interviews in der Forschung mit Kindern. In: Hedderich, I., J. Reppin and C. Butschi (eds.). *Perspektiven auf Vielfalt in der frühen Kindheit. mit Kindern Diversität erforschen*. Bad Heilbrunn: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt. 158–171.
- William C. A. 2015.** Conducting semi-structured interviews. In: Newcomer, K. E., H. P. Hatry and J. S. Wholey. 2015. *Handbook of practical program evaluation*. New Jersey: Jossey-Bass. 492–505.
- Yoong, J., K. Mihaly, S. Bauhoff, L. Rabinovich and A. Hung. 2013.** *A Toolkit for the Evaluation of Financial Capability Programs in Low-, and Middle-Income Countries*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.