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Piloting The Question Guide

You should always pilot (or practice) your question guide. Doing a practice run is a good way to make sure you have everything you need to do the interview/focus group, the participants understand the questions, and you get the information you need (in enough depth and richness) to answer you research questions. This document will help you to think through some questions to ensure quality piloting, and therefore, quality data for your study.

Practicing the steps before collection

For your interview/focus group to be successful, you need to prepare for the meeting. This could mean creating a checklist to organize all the things that are needed. Below are example items you may consider in your study and could helpful on a checklist:

- Has the date/time/location been confirmed with participants?
- Do you have copies of the consent form?
- Do you have a pen/pencil?
- Do you have a recording device?
- Do you need spare batteries?
- Do you have a copy of the interview/focus group guide?
- Do you have compensation?
- Do you have forms to record compensation was given?

Conduct the interview/focus group, then listen to yourself

This step is about conducting the interview/focus group as if it is real! It typically occurs in two broad steps.

1. *Practice with fake participants several times to get comfortable with the guide*

The best way to get comfortable with the question guide and probing (which is the unstructured part of the semi-structured question guide) is to practice with people several times. This is particularly useful for a novice researcher and getting comfortable with silence. The person playing the participant could add in some curveballs for you to work through on-the-spot. Fake participants can be your team members part of the research study – this type of practice can help with the *content* of questions, good probes, and how the target sample may respond to specific questions (e.g., if questions are sensitive, if there is common language used within a particular disease, and so on). Practicing with fake participants outside the research team can help with overall researcher-participant interactions/body language, rapport building, general understanding of questions and so on.

2. *Conduct your first "real" interview/focus group*

The first interview/focus group is typically considered the pilot. Oftentimes, but not always, pilot data is used in the dataset for analysis. This is how the researcher checks that the quality of data (depth, richness, relevancy) is "good enough" to answer your research questions. Without sufficiently in-depth, detailed data, it is difficult to conduct rich analysis (see article about underdeveloped themes in qualitative research). Some things to think about include:

- Is the data you are getting linked to your research questions?
- Did participants ACTUALLY answer your question? If not, this can be a function of a person who just simply likes tangents or a function of a poorly crafted question.
    - If there were tangents, how did you bring the person back to the question/topic?
- Quality probes: Listen to the audio-recording to check your probes (are you probing enough? Are the probes getting more in-depth information to answer the research question?)
- Silence: Are you OK with silence or interrupt the silence? How much time to you give people to think about their answers?
- For focus groups: check the "airtime" people had, how did you manage equal airtime?

The tweaks

Piloting usually means a few tweaks…this is why you pilot! These tweaks might include changing the wording of a question, adding a question, re-ordering questions, providing a bit of preamble to a particular question and so on. These tweaks should be described as part of your write-up of your study for transparency.

Reflecting on the quality of the information you get from your question guide is an on-going process in data collection, not just something you do once in a pilot. A pilot of your guide helps to initiate the process.