

Lecture 46 Designing the Interview

In an interview we cannot ask our research question as is, had I asked Sher Singh what Bhil art signifies and what transformations have come about in the art practice over time,. It is possible I would not have got much of an answer.

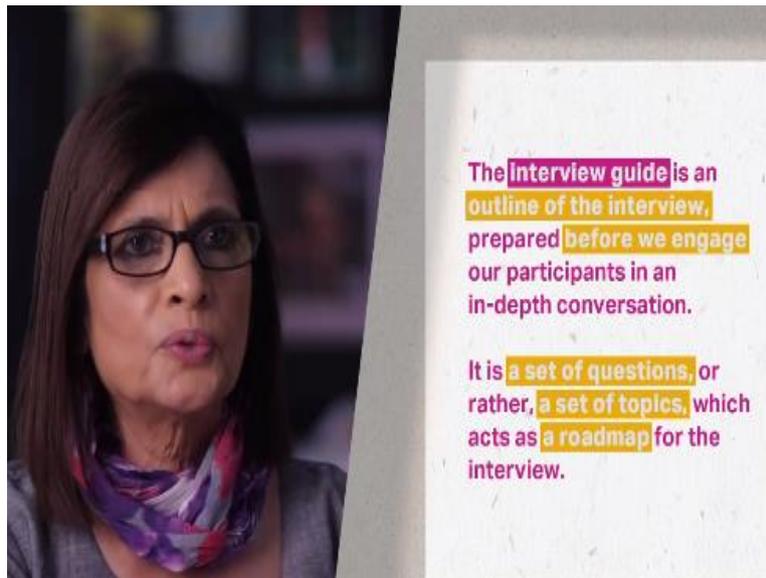
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Is that Sher Singh and I had many conversations which led me to understand the place of painting in his life and in the life of his community. We talked about how he started painting, who taught him to paint and why they were painting on paper. We discussed how his status in the community was connected to his art and many such topics. Some of these conversations were prompted/promoted by questions that I had prepared beforehand.

But some others emerged organically. Among these are the origin story about why the Bhils paint.

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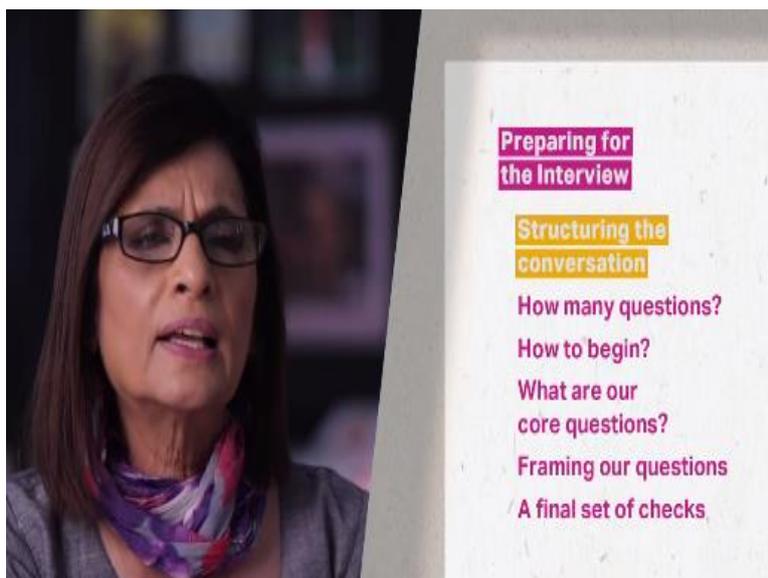


But I had to prepare for these organic meandering conversations. This involved putting together a set of questions that would help me understand Sher Singh's relationship with his art. For many researchers, this is where the preparatory work for an interview begins with designing an

interview guide. At its simplest, the guide is a set of topics or questions which we hope to discuss with our participants.

But it is not a laundry list of questions which we can rattle off and then expect participants to answer them one by one. It is an attempt at designing and structuring the conversations we want to have, so that we may learn about particular phenomena. So how do we exactly prepare?

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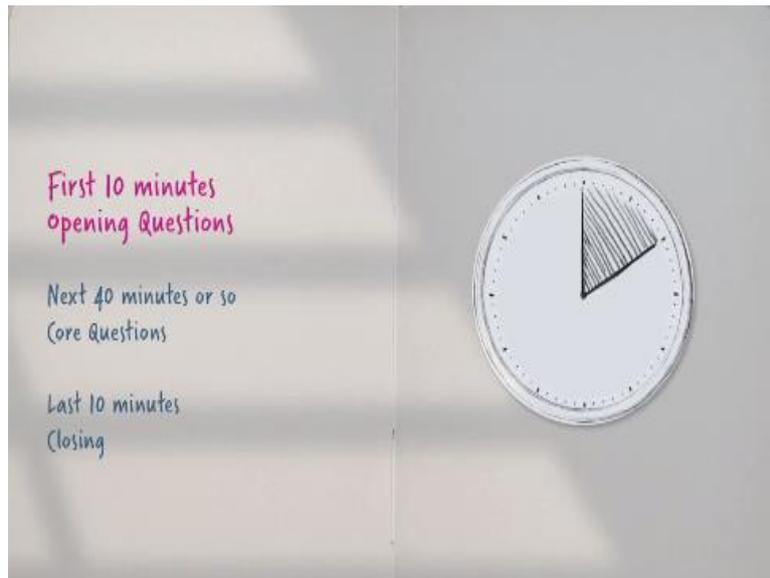


First, we must understand the basic structure of an interview. It is often like a wave. It starts slow and easy as a researcher and participant get to know each other. The intensity rises as we near the middle where we approach more complex topics

And then it cools off with simpler discussions towards the end. We are likely to have a limited period of time within which to conduct the interview.

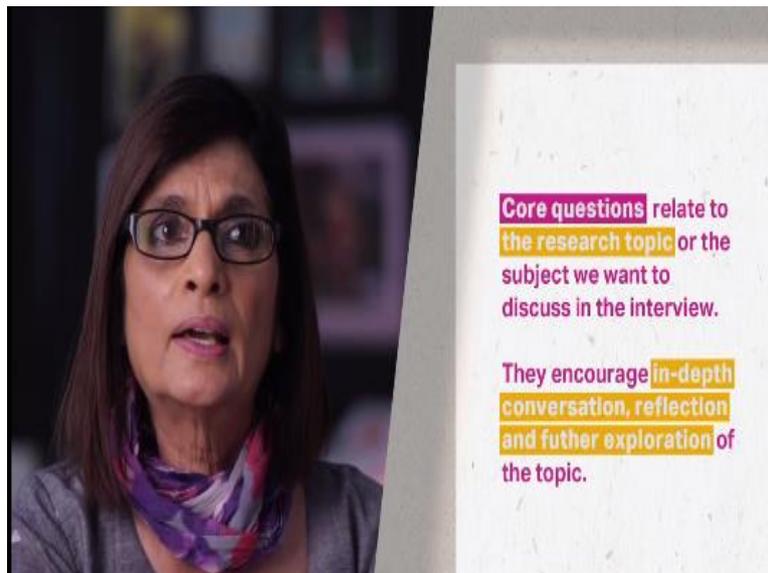
In this limited time, we need to hear from the participant as much as possible, and therefore, we need to ask questions or introduce topics that are important to us. For this to happen, we must plan ahead to ensure we have enough time. In an hour-long interview, we can hope to ask 8 or maybe 10 questions in all. Any more than that may leave the participants feeling too tired.

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The first few questions of any interview which may take up the first 10 minutes or so are likely to be generic questions. With these, we open the conversation and put our participants at ease.

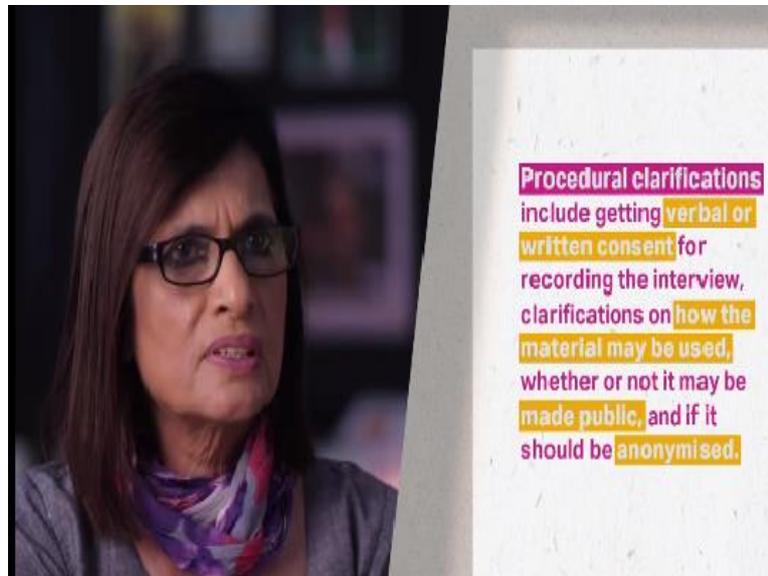
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The next few questions are the core questions. With these, we hope to generate complex discussions for which we need to factor in time. In this part of the interview, participants are likely to also introduce new topics. For these, too, we need to leave sometime. We may have

30 to 40 minutes in all for 8 to 10 questions of this kind. And the last few minutes is where we ask a couple of relatively simple questions to wind down the conversation, just like the wave

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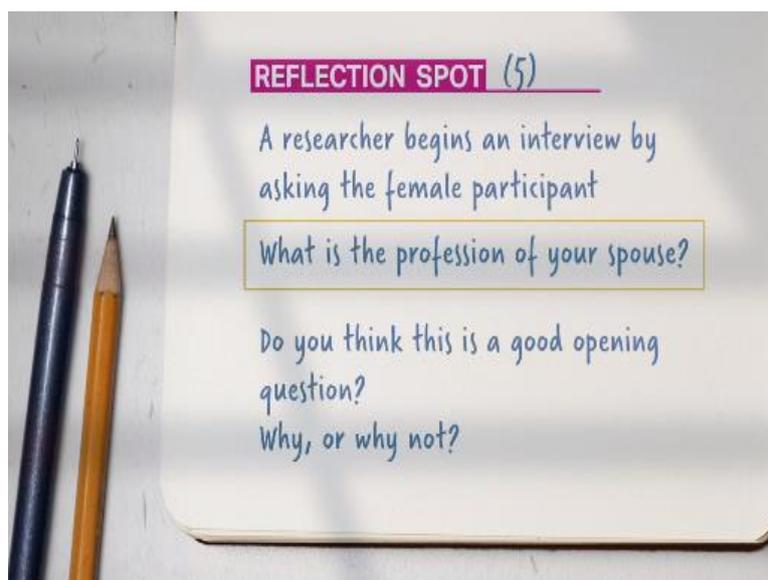


Let us take a closer look at the different parts of this interaction. The first few questions are meant to build rapport between the participants and us where we introduce them to our research. In this stage of the discussion, we try to introduce them to the interview process and include procedural clarifications. We request for their consent to have the interview, the permission to record and discuss their right to the recorded material and so on.

Some researchers like to prepare a small note telling the participants about themselves and the research. A written version of this sometimes doubles as a consent form. Our initial questions are designed to give us some background knowledge about our participants. We can start with questions about where they grew up, what they do for a living, the different cities they have lived in, and so on.

Something that gives us a sense of their journey so far. Introducing themselves to us in their own way helps participants settle into the conversation. What we learn at this stage can help us contextualise the events that are brought up later in the conversation. Let us reflect for a moment on what kind of opening questions we may ask. Here's a scenario from an interview. A researcher prepared a guide to interview her participant a woman in her mid 30s.

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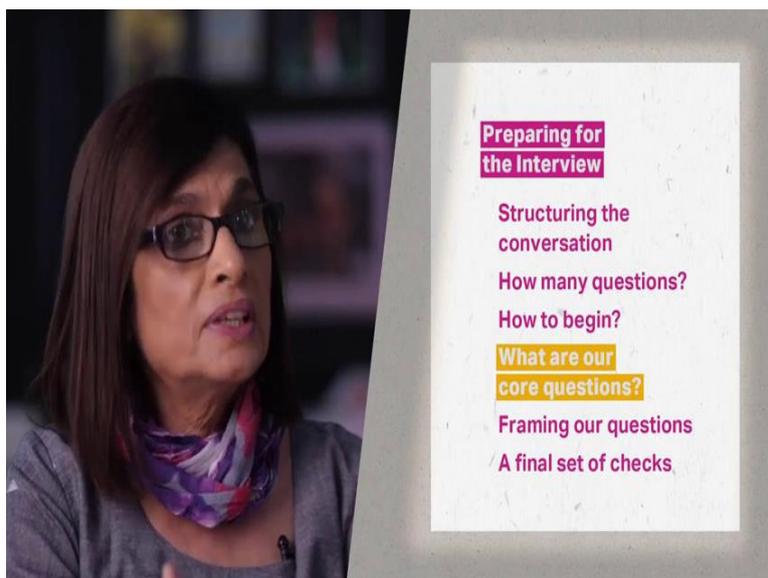


She began the interview by asking, "What is the profession of your spouse?" "Do you think this was a good opening question? Why or why not? Think for a moment and write down your responses. Some of you may have said that this is a good opening question. It gives us some information about the participant and starts off the conversation on a neutral note, some of you may have disagreed.

You may have said; the question is too personal. Or that it is based on certain assumptions. You are right. In asking such a question, the researcher is assuming that the participant is married, and there is the additional assumption that her spouse has a profession. Both of these assumptions are quite problematic. The assumption that she has a spouse can be seen as judgmental and prying. Particularly in a society where men and women in their mid-30s are often expected to be married.

And by asking about her spouse's profession and not hers, the researcher is suggesting that the participant does not have a profession is not as important as that of her spouse. A good opening question in this case may have been something less personal, or more casual. Like asking someone how their day has been so far. Or asking them what their interests are. Or simply, by asking them to tell us something about themselves.

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This way, the participant can choose what they would like to share with us. From these opening questions, we move on to the core questions. These are the questions that relate to our central research topic. Discussions around these usually take a lot of energy and thought. So we give them plenty of space in our guide. We try to place them right after the opening questions so that they are not left for the end.

Because by then, participants may be too exhausted or overwhelmed to continue with intense discussions. As we had said earlier, our questions cannot be a direct translation of the research question. They are often formulated by deconstructing our research question.

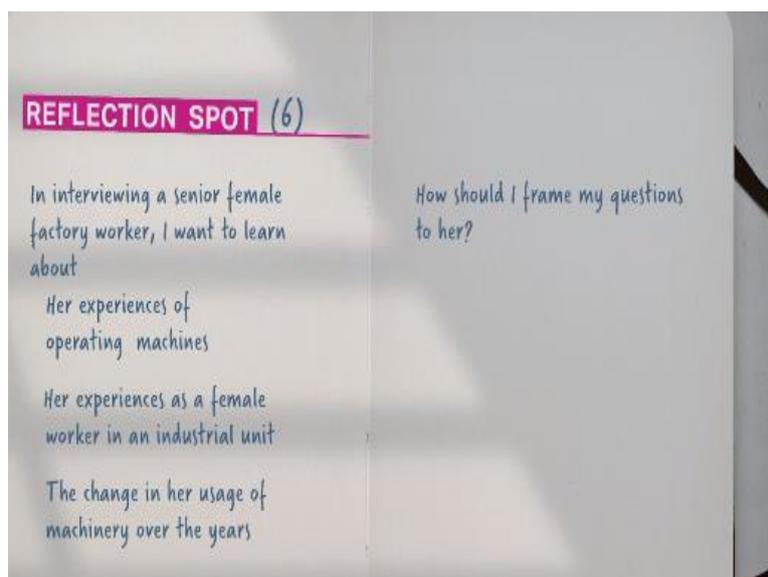
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In drafting the core questions, we try to maintain a certain focus. Not everything that we need to learn can be formulated in words. So, we put in those topics which can be best discussed through a verbal conversation. Interviews are best for learning about our participants' experiences. So we design our guide to seek out personal histories and experiences. We ask participants to share with us their personal opinions and perspectives.

And through personal narratives, we can also try to grasp how a phenomenon is situated in the society that is how is it experienced and perceived by others like them. Let us take an example to understand this better. Imagine that I am working on a project which requires me to understand the use of machines and tools by workers in a factory. As part of my fieldwork, I am going to interview a female employee who has been working there for almost a decade.

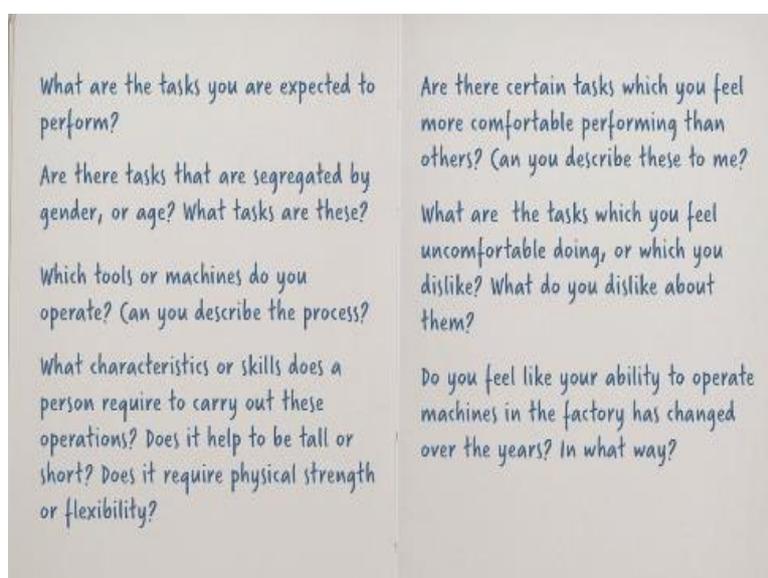
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I want to learn from her about her experiences in operating machines. I also want to learn her particular experiences as a female worker. That is, as a woman operating machines which were not necessarily designed for different genders. And I want to learn how her experience with these machines may have changed over the years. Can you suggest some questions that I should include in my interview guide?

Take a moment to write them down. I hope you wrote down some questions that I can use during the interview. Here is the list that I made and see how many of yours matches with mine.

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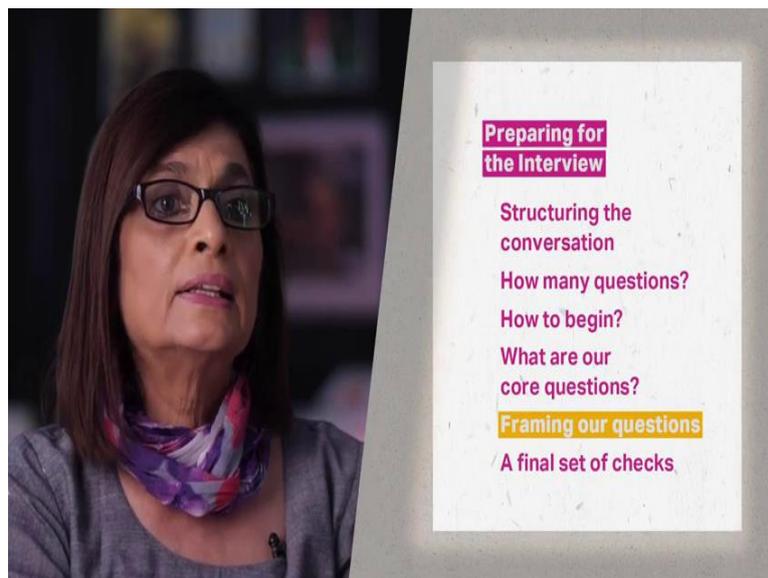


What are the tasks you are expected to perform? Are there tasks that are segregated by gender or age? What task are these? Which tools or machines do you operate? Can you describe the process? What characteristics or skills there is a person required to carry out these operations? Does it help to be tall or short? Does it require physical strength or flexibility? Are there certain tasks which you feel more comfortable performing than others?

Can you describe these to me? What are the tasks which you feel uncomfortable doing? Or which you dislike? What you dislike about them? Do you feel like your ability to operate machine in the factory has changed over the years? In what way? Through the discussion, these questions generate I hope to understand the particular experiences of this participant. Additionally, I may learn about the more general experiences of female workers at the factory.

a workers who are in the same age group as her and we also learn how the machinery and the task in the factory have changed over the last decade. This is one part of designing our guide its structure and the content of the core discussion.

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The other part is its details framing questions, structuring the discussion around every topic, moving from one topic to another and so on. We will discuss these in our next section.

