*Section C*

# Qualitative Interviews

***In this section you will learn how to:***

- Interview individuals
- Create focus groups and listening sessions
- Recognize community member "types"
- Analyze interview data

Many watershed groups will not have the time or expertise to conduct qualitative interviews. If you have the resources, it is highly recommended that you hire a professional to conduct some more in-depth interviews. As you will learn from this section, knowing how to ask and who to ask takes a certain level of expertise.

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Quantitative data gives you very reliable numerical information. Qualitative data allow participants to give answers with a lot of details and will allow you to understand more fully what is happening in your watershed. For example, more qualitative interviews in Badger Creek watershed revealed a deep, long rooted hostility toward the lake that wasn't apparent in the quantitative survey. This knowledge has helped the Madison County Soil and Water Conservation District commissioners to design a more effective outreach campaign.

Qualitative interviews are typically either in-depth one-on-one conversations or are conducted in small groups with a moderator or facilitator, also called a focus group or listening session. When possible, the same person should facilitate the interviews for a specific watershed community assessment so that there is a consistency in interview style. In-depth interviewing is an excellent method for reaching a limited number of individuals who have been identified as having specialized knowledge or an underrepresented perspective that you would like to know more about.

Likewise, interviews can be utilized as a means of clarifying survey research findings about a larger population or be used as an initial step in learning more about the opinions or challenges facing a community prior to formulating survey questions. In all interviews, avoid deception, be honest about the intended use of the research, obtain interviewee informed consent and protect their right to privacy. You can gain the person's informed consent by sharing with them the following information:

- who is conducting and funding the assessment
- the time required for the interview
- their identity will be kept confidential
- that their participation is voluntary
- the interview can end at any time upon their request.

For community assessments, there is no need to use signed consent forms.

## One-on-One Interviews

A one-on-one interview should be used when you want to obtain understanding through detailed examples, to ascertain the meanings of actions, experiences and opinions, to shed new light on puzzling questions, to unravel complicated events, to identify variables and to frame hypotheses for future survey research. A good qualitative interview builds on conversational skills of asking questions and listening to answers. However, a good qualitative interview imposes a few different social roles: more active listening, keeping the interview focused on the your agenda and challenging the one interviewed to obtain full and detailed responses.

One-on-one interviewers should ask clear, short, open-ended questions (requiring something other than a simple yes/no response), use follow-up probing questions, listen carefully and inspire detailed responses to questions. When possible, you should audio record one-on-one interviews for a more accurate analysis of the discussion. The "Knowing How to Ask" section contains more detail about asking questions.

## Group Interviews

Focus groups or listening sessions are group interviews that bring together individuals of similar backgrounds, who may or may not be acquainted with one another, for the purpose of gathering their views and opinions. Unlike one-on-one interviews, a group interview has the added feature of allowing interviewees to converse with one another and comment on each other's views. Group interviews provide a platform from which participants can share their opinions and clarify their positions face-to-face with their peers.

On the other hand, the group dynamic has the potential to hinder conversation as well, especially if there are one or two participants who dominate the interview, are outspoken or rude, or who choose not to cooperate with the intent of the moderator. Group interviews should remain manageable in size (no more than five to six participants) and focus on opinions or even brainstorming. Personal or controversial topics are best covered in a one-on-one environment.

A listening session is a variation of a focus group. Listening sessions use a series of open-ended questions and the social interactions of the group to elaborate and elicit deeper values and beliefs and to observe the effects of a group member's words on the direction (positive, negative, neutral) and content of the group dialogue about a particular topic. Although the same questions on a particular issue are asked, each group experiences both unique conversation and common themes.

The themes and content are influenced by the size and composition of the group as well as the varied (or similar) opinions and ideas expressed by members of the group. The ideal size for a listening session is eight to twenty people per group, simulating a public dialogue about the topic. Unlike focus groups, listening session participants are invited (or required) to participate because of their organizational affiliation and/or relationship to the watershed. Similarity among participants is not necessarily desired, as this can be limiting in some situations.

All group interview sessions should be audio recorded and transcribed to ensure that key ideas and quotes illustrating common and unique expressions of beliefs and values can be analyzed and evaluated. Listening sessions are particularly useful when specific issues or stakeholders are targeted and the findings are used to guide interventions, develop programming and/or create public policies and rules.

Much like surveys, in-depth interviewing and focus groups require that you provide a careful rationale as to whom you are sampling with your questions. In many ways, because interviews can only reach a small fraction of a population, given time and monetary constraints, being clear why you are interviewing some folks over others is even more important than sampling in quantitative research.

Who you choose to talk to determines the type of information you will be receiving. It also determines the type of questions you will ask and the purpose of your research. How you select interview participants says a lot about what kind of information you are seeking.

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### *Knowing Who to Ask*

Oftentimes the act of having sustained interaction in the form of an interview that could last over an hour is daunting to both the interviewer and the person being interviewed. Our tendency might be to gravitate towards those individuals with whom we already feel most comfortable with, perhaps because of some prior relationship we have with them or because they seem like the talkative type.

Both of these qualities, while making for a comfortable interview encounter, are biases that can severely impede collecting important knowledge from the community. If we only ever seek out those people we feel comfortable with or those individuals who are easy to talk to, we have just as much of a built-in sampling bias as we would in only sending out surveys to homeowners in a community instead of all residents regardless of whether they own their own home or not.

The best way to overcome this sampling bias is to be explicit why you want to talk to certain individuals over others in a community in your investigative design. One way to accomplish this is to use

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the same random sampling technique discussed earlier. In order to diminish the amount of possible bias in your selection of who to interview, you can randomly select individuals to approach with interviewing. This is especially useful when you want to know what the general or representative opinion of a community might be.

Even though your sample size will be necessarily small (because of the time investment in conducting an interview) and you cannot make any grand claims to representativeness, you can be more assured that the individuals selected for interviewing are free from any unconscious bias on your part. Sometimes, however, you may want to be intentional in your selection because you are looking for specific points of view or perspectives or are seeking out individuals with expertise or specialized knowledge. This is useful, too, and perfectly acceptable as long as you are aware of your selection bias.

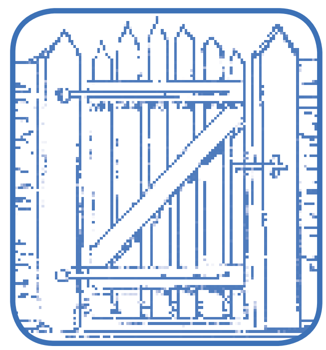
In general, it is important to ask who are the people you wish to interview. Not all members of a community will have the same kind of knowledge and experience, nor will they all speak from the same social position. In order to help clarify who you wish to talk to, you should be aware that there are "types" of individuals present in any community oftentimes referred to as the gatekeepers, the usual suspects, the dark horse, and the everyman or everywoman. These types are broad classes that can be applied to nearly any social group.

Ask yourself if you have chosen interview participants from predominantly one type. On the one hand, there may be legitimate reasons to do so; on the other hand, you may be collecting a very limited perspective if you didn't question why you are interviewing primarily from only one type. There are certainly other types out there; these types are broad classes that can be applied to nearly any social group.

Gatekeepers, the usual suspects, the dark horse and the everyman/woman can all cause potential problems for researchers because, for a variety of motives, they tend to make themselves available. Without self-awareness and reflection, you could find that you have only interviewed those individuals who have an overt agenda.

### *Gatekeepers*

Gatekeepers are traditionally individuals who regulate access to information, places or people. The term evokes an image of the man in charge of letting people in and out of the gate of a walled-in city; gatekeepers provide just such a service today. In terms of conducting interviews, gatekeepers are individuals who limit your ability to talk to others. This can be because the gatekeeper sees him or herself as filtering out unwanted attention or interruption.



The gatekeeper may view him or herself as the "expert" on a matter, believing that there is no need to look any further or speak to anyone else because they already hold all the information. In either case, gatekeepers try to corral investigators into going in a certain direction, speaking only to certain people, or gaining only the gatekeeper's perspective. This isn't necessarily due to bad intentions; it could be that gatekeepers believe they are assisting researchers by saving them time or providing access.

Examples of gatekeepers could include administrators and secretaries who block contact with higher-ups, scientists who limit access to findings and reports, or community members who steer you to speaking only to certain types of people.

Interviewing gatekeepers provides a starting point from which to begin acquiring some information, as well as a running list of other potential interview subjects. Working through or around a gatekeeper takes time and effort, but it is worthwhile to seek out the knowledge and experiences of others.

### *The Usual Suspects*

The usual suspects are individuals that are known as the "go-to" person when a particular issue or topic is being discussed. They may also be considered "resident experts," although claims to expert knowledge are not a prerequisite to being a usual suspect. Indeed, an individual might be a usual suspect because of the degree of their involvement or because of their highly recognizable public position, not because they are more knowledgeable than others.

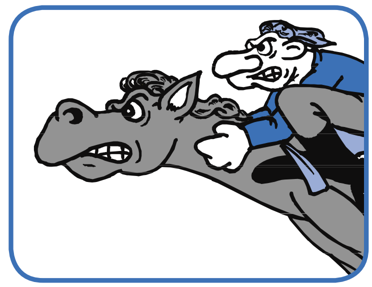
Because the usual suspects are recognized by others as the people to discuss an issue with, they tend to be easy to talk to and willing to do so. On top of their already recognized stature by others in the community, this certainly makes them attractive interview subjects.

The problem, however, is that with the usual suspects you are mostly gaining perspectives of individuals who are either heavily committed to a cause or issue, have been central to the functioning of a group, and/or have received specialized training because of their interest. They will provide a valued perspective, to be sure, but by no means are they representative of the broader public.

If you were to only interview the usual suspects, the data you collect would be of the usual, expected kind. For a broader understanding of how a community understands or feels about a particular issue, it is important to seek out the uncommon voices, individuals who are rarely asked their opinions or knowledge about an issue. When combined with the voices of the usual suspects, you can gain greater representation across the spectrum.

### *The Dark Horse*

In horse racing the dark horse is the contender that comes out of nowhere, from the back of the pack, to take the others in the race by surprise, eventually upsetting the field by winning the race. In finding interview subjects, the dark horses are the ones who, subtly or not so subtly, try to convert you to their point of view.



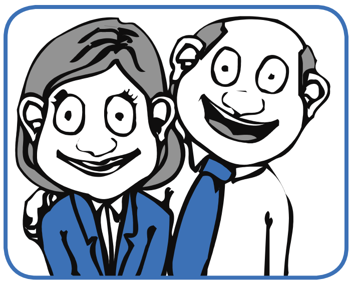
Usually dark horses tend to be part of a minority view in a community. They may be organized into a group or act separately and uncoordinated from others. Either way, their desire to speak with you is partly motivated by impressing upon you the worthiness of their cause and engaging you as a potential ally or evangelizer within the community.

While generally harmless, dark horses can be great time drains. They may attempt to keep you from speaking to others who do not share their views. Others in the community may also label them as outsiders or outliers. It is important to recognize their alternative or oppositional opinions to those held by the majority of a community.

Dark horses, however, may be so far outside of the mainstream that their information can skew results if they make up the majority of your interview data. Ideally, the opinions and views of dark horse interview subjects should be contextualized within the opinions of the larger community.

Dark horses can provide an important perspective on and critique of the views of others, but they should not be relied on as the main source of information.

### *Everyman or Everywoman*



The everyman or everywoman interview subjects are those individuals who purposefully position their views as being held by the majority of a community. The everyman sees himself as representing the status quo in his lifestyle, his beliefs and his actions. He or she may be convinced of his or her own unremarkable qualities and convince you that his or her views are the same as everybody else's.

As the interviewer, you may make the mistake of searching out individuals they see as being "representative" of the majority of the community, seeking certain demographic characteristics for your research subject. Perhaps you hold preconceived ideas about who the average citizen of a community is and look for interview subjects that best represent the status quo. Or, perhaps in the course of conducting interviews, the subject presents him or herself as the average citizen. Both cases present the problem of limiting the findings or results of the research.

The true "status quo" is the shared, predominant view across a wide social spectrum and not embodied in any one set of social characteristics. Whether you have set out to define who the average citizen is or the interview subject presents him or herself as being perfectly average, both present a skewed perspective. You should let what is considered the dominant view of a community emerge from the data.

Interview subjects who present themselves as being average or normal do so because they don't want to appear out of step with community norms.

### *Knowing How To Ask*

Interviews require face-to-face interaction between investigators and members of the study population. Thus, interviews necessitate a combination of detached professionalism and interpersonal engagement on the part of the investigator. In other words, keep your surprise at a respondent's answer in check; yet still appear genuinely interested in the lives, actions and opinions of the interview subject.

Here is a simple list of "dos and don'ts" that can be used as a guide to conducting interviews:

- Do express interest, be personable and courteous
    - Too much surprise can comes off as judgmental
    - Too much detachment can make you seem disinterested.
- Do put subjects at ease. Interviewees should feel comfortable and interviews should be nonconfrontational. Most people are pleased to have interest in their lives and will eventually open up.
    - Do not make questions too personal
    - Do not lose patience with people
    - Not every person you interview will be talkative or communicate easily
- Do make interviews into a dialogue
    - Questions should come from give and take form of interview

- ◆ Don't offer too much of your own background or opinions—just enough to gain rapport.

- ■ Do pick a comfortable setting like subject's home, office or public space like coffee shop—quiet enough to record clearly

- ■ Do your homework!

You should know something of the local community prior to conducting any interviews. This includes walking or driving around the community, looking at maps, and/or reading up on facts about the community. This will provide enough background to give you a frame of reference from which to ask follow-up questions or clarifications during an interview.

If you are interviewing someone precisely because they have specialized knowledge or a unique perspective because of their position, work, or involvement, make sure you have done some background reading on the organization they work for and the types of projects they do. Prepare a schedule of questions that you would like to ask or a list of topics you would like to cover.

Most of your questions should be the same that you have asked to other interviewees or other listening session groups. In fact, in order to compare answers across the social spectrum, it is necessary that many of the questions are the same. However, you may want to tailor some questions to specific types of interview subjects. For instance, if speaking with local government officials, it makes sense that you may want to ask specifically about agency cooperation; this would not make much sense if interviewing local citizens about water quality.

Questions should be open-ended enough to allow the respondent to provide some level of detail but not be so broad that the response is unfocused. Simple yes/no questions without follow-up are a waste of time. Likewise, wide-open questions without direction are likely to garner vague answers.

For example, when wanting to know about a person's upbringing, asking a question such as, "Tell me about your childhood" doesn't give the respondent any guidelines. Instead, providing a starting point such as, "As a child, what activities did you do outdoors?" gives a more defined set of parameters and will achieve a more focused response. Don't be afraid to deviate somewhat from your schedule of questions by asking follow-up questions.

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If there is something in the response that you did not understand or wish to know more about, ask the interviewee to expand. Good follow-up questions can be simple inquiries, such as "How did you feel about that?" or "Did everyone agree?" and "How did you come to that decision?" Follow-up questions ideally help make the subject's implicit processes or assumptions explicit to the interviewer.

It is accepted practice to begin an interview with questions that uncover the demographic background of the research respondent, which would include information about length of residence in the community, education background, family, and how they make a living.

Ease into the interview, gaining rapport with the respondent and allowing the two of you to get comfortable with one another. This also gives the respondent time to acclimate to the recording equipment and to your interview style. Save the controversial or more personal questions for the middle of the interview. It is likely that the interview subject will feel more at ease then and more open to responding.

Finally, make sure you end the interview by giving the respondent the opportunity to share with you any concerns or questions they may have. If results of the study will be made available to the public, ask if they would like to be contacted to receive information about how and when this will occur. Always thank the interview participant for their time.

### *Participant consent*

You can gain the person's informed consent by sharing with them the following information:

- who is conducting and funding the assessment
- the time required for the interview
- their identity will be kept confidential
- that their participation is voluntary
- the interview can end at any time upon their request.

For community assessments, there is no need to use signed consent forms.

All interviews should be recorded with the recording device in plain view of the subject. Secret recordings of conversations and interviews are unethical and breaches informed consent. Recorded interviews are desirable because they are more reliable than hand written notes of interview exchanges.

Regardless of the technology that you ultimately use to record your interviews, it is important that you familiarize yourself with it and practice using it prior to conducting your first interview. The worse thing to have happen is to conduct an interview and realize afterward that the recorder wasn't turned on or recording properly. You have wasted your subject's time and are unlikely to get the chance to repeat that interview!

If the budget allows, you may want to think about contracting a transcriptionist. Doctor's offices hire individuals called medical transcriptionists who transcribe doctors' notes for patient files. A local doctor's office would be a good place to start to find names of experienced transcriptionists in your community.

## Analyzing Interview Data

While qualitative interviews and analysis are beyond the capacity of many watershed coordinators' skills, knowing how to analyze interview data also make you more able to understand reports that use it.

If you decide to conduct listening sessions or one-on-one interviews, you must understand how to make sense of the materials. It is irresponsible to merely transcribe the interviews and present your watershed group with lengthy transcriptions with no organization or analysis. Interview data must be used in an effective way to make an argument or create an image of the problem you wish to highlight. To do this, you need to summarize your findings and present them to others.

The first step in analyzing qualitative data is to read the transcripts of all interviews, at least once through. As you read, make a list of general categories or themes that emerge across interviews. Because you asked similar (if not the same) questions to all interviewees, you can start by grouping several questions together and then see what variation in answers emerge.

For example, if you asked your respondents questions concerning the role of local and federal government in maintaining water quality, you could start with a broad category called "role of government." Let's say in response to those questions, some interview subjects spoke in favor of greater regulation, others wanted decreased regulation and some spoke of private citizens needing to take personal responsibility for their actions. You could create three key themes–pro-regulation, anti-regulation and personal responsibility.

Since interview transcripts will likely be saved in a word processing file, it is recommended that you create separate documents for each theme that emerges from the interview data. For instance, in the example above, you would create separate files for pro-regulation, anti-regulation and personal responsibility.

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As you read through each transcript and find statements or anecdotes that fit within any of these three categories, copy the interview section and paste it into the file for the appropriate theme. Be careful to copy and paste (not cut and paste) because you do not want to alter the original interview document.

Make sure you identify the interview snippet that you have pasted into the theme file with the necessary identifiers from the source interview (typically the age, sex, community of origin, occupational identification and date of original interview – use the characteristics that were important in choosing that individual as an interview subject to begin with). For instance, in the above example, you could create an ID shorthand for the interview such as, 35 F Cresco School Teacher 02/19/12, which would indicate that the speaker is a 35 year old female school teacher from Cresco that was interviewed on February 19, 2012.

You will likely have identified dozens of themes that emerge from the interviews. Sometimes snippets of an interview might touch on multiple themes. In such cases it is important that you copy and paste it into multiple files. You will likely be able to refine your themes as you go along, combining some that fit together and splitting others into sub-themes categories that demonstrate a lot of nuance and variation.

Each interview must be coded and distributed to the various categories and themes in this way. After all the interviews have been coded, you can read each theme or category file to get a good sense of the variation or similarity of responses within each theme. You can also compare sentiment between different categories or themes.

The reason for dividing the interviews into separate themes, and not just following the schedule of questions as the main logic of analysis of the interviews, is that key themes are likely to emerge across several different questions. If you only organized the interview data by question, you would be unlikely to see that different questions may share similar concerns or address similar ideas.

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The interview questions also represent the concerns of the investigator, not necessarily those of the interviewees. Thus, you will do a better job depicting the opinions and values of the community you are studying if themes for analysis emerge out of the data you have collected and are not imposed onto that data by your concern as investigator. For instance, you might be interested in conflict between rural and urban residents of a watershed when it comes to community water quality and look explicitly in the data for such a conflict. However, if out of the interview data emerges the theme of cooperation and community negotiation, you must pay attention to what your interview subjects have to say. You would miss out on "negotiation" as a subtle category if you were only looking for "conflict."

You can also use the categories that emerge in your analysis of the data as your guide in reporting the findings. While not every theme that emerges from the data is necessarily one of interest, or is a line of inquiry you would want to pursue further, you can take the themes that provide a significant window into the research questions and use these as organizing points for your findings. In a written report or public presentation, for instance, you would want to compare themes to demonstrate the complexity and variation of attitudes or behaviors in a community.

You could even take illustrative quotes from the interviews (scrubbed of identifying personal information) that provide a clear example of a train of thought or commonly held belief. In this way, interview data helps make research questions more personal by adding a human element. Likewise, interviews can be effectively utilized in conjunction with statistical data, adding insight and explanation to the dry numbers.

A quote from ***Water Quality Matters To Us All*** illustrates the use and elimination of personal identifiers.

***"That's my understanding of what an impaired water body is, it's that you can't swim or have human recreation in it. That's what I understand."***

**Farmer NH 22011**

In the end, all data, whether quantitative or qualitative, has a certain texture, which requires that investigators pay attention to its contours and feel. Social science research depicts reality by revealing the patterns that give it shape. You are essentially looking for those patterns, whether they emerge from numerical values in descriptive statistics or the collective pattern of interview responses.

Effective data analysis is about searching for patterns, finding connections and interpretations of the patterns and connections that emerge. It is a challenging endeavor, to be sure, but one that has the potential to give great insight into the social landscape of watersheds.