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|  | HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (MEDICAL) |

**Interviews, Questionnaires and Focus Groups**

**Commonly-used acronyms and abbreviated terms in research studies**

COVID – Corona Virus-19

FGD - Focus Group Discussion

Minors – persons under 18 years of age

PI – Principal Investigator

PIS – Participant Information Sheet

SAQ – Self-administered questionnaire

**Interview**

An interview is a verbal conversation held between the researcher and participant, in person or online, using a set of prepared questions or topic areas to probe. These are therefore open-ended questions, with the possibility of follow-up questions on some points, depending on the participant’s answer. Unlike in a questionnaire, an interview allows the researcher scope to explore/probe issues in more detail and depth. Therefore, an interview will typically last longer than a questionnaire, there will be fewer participants, and the nature of engagement with the participant is fuller and deeper. Interviews are best conducted with participants who may have specific knowledge and expertise of the topic at hand (i.e. are experts), or with participants who have specific interest or concern with the topic (i.e. stakeholders). A popular research design is therefore to use *questionnaires* with a general sample population to understand the big picture, and more detailed *interviews* with specific types of participants.

If you are doing one-on-one individual interviews, these can be *confidential*, but not *anonymous* during data collection. By nature, interviews are not anonymous, as the researcher can see the participant and the researcher has usually made contact with the participant beforehand in order to set up the interview. If anyone else can hear your conversation, the interview will be neither *confidential* nor *anonymous*. This is the case with both face-to-face and online interviews.

* Be clear about issues of anonymity and confidentiality in interviews. These conditions must be stated in the PIS. Be aware that some participants might be identifiable based on their job or status, even if you do not use their names All participants must be given a PIS to read, whatever method of consent is to follow.
* For interviews, a separate consent form is needed. A hard-copy signed consent form (termed *formal consent*) should only be obtained before doing face-to-face interviews. If you are doing online or telephonic interviews, oralconsent may be used, if properly structured and recorded, but only if there are substantive impediments to obtaining written consent. This is where the researcher reads the consent form to the potential participant, allowing them to say Yes or No to the different conditions of consent. Therefore you need to prepare and supply a consent form (which acts as a script), even if you are using oral consent.
* Under COVID and remote research conditions it is often preferable that face-to-face interviews are not held, and that you use online or telephonic interviews only.
* Please think about language and literacy issues when interviewing participants. Consider whether you are able to conduct the interview in the participant’s language of choice, or whether you need an interpreter or research assistant. Make sure your questions are clear, unambiguous, not leading, and do not contain complex technical terms.
* If your ethics application includes interviews, you need to supply a full participant information sheet, consent form, and the full draft of the questions to be asked or topic areas to be probed (for each participant group, if you have several). This is called the interview schedule.
* It is common practice to audio record interviews so as to transcribe the interview afterwards. This must be clearly flagged in the PIS and can only happen with the participant’s express consent, If doing online interviews, be clear whether you will audio or video record. Video recording is most cases not needed. The HRC (Med) preference is for separate consents to audio and video recording.

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire (sometimes called a survey) is a form of data collection that comprises a series of short questions that require generally short answers in either open-ended or closed-ended formats. These answers may be just a single sentence, a short paragraph, or where the participant ticks the appropriate box (e.g. on a Likert scale, or from a list of possible options), or where a closed question (e.g. with a yes/no answer) is being asked. A questionnaire is not specifically designed for in-depth data collection (see *interview*, above) – it is therefore best suited where the researcher is looked for aggregated (e.g. averaged) results from a large population sample. This sample can be *inter alia* a segment of the general population, patients being treated for a common ailment, or an occupationally-defined group, *e.g* paediatric registrars. A questionnaire can be self-administered (where the participants fill out the questionnaire themselves) - often abbreviated to SAQ (self-administered questionnaire), or researcher-completed, where the researcher asks the questions and then ticks the boxes to which the participant responds. If the questionnaire is self-completed, this can be done as a hard-copy (where the participant fills out a paper questionnaire and then returns the completed form to a predetermined collection point), or online questionnaire, where the participant completes an online survey such as in Google Forms or Survey Monkey. Either way, a participant information sheet (PIS) needs to be given to the potential participant, outlining what the researcher wants to do, what the questionnaire is all about, roughly how long it will take to complete, what the Principal Investigator (PI) hopes to do with the results and whether it is anonymous and/or confidential. In most cases:

* A questionnaire can usually be both anonymous AND confidential. This is because you should NOT ask for any personal identifying information about the participant, such as name, ID number, phone/email, address, date of birth etc. Asking basic demographic information (gender, ethnicity, age category, education status, whether employed etc) is generally acceptable,In a but caution is still needed here. Under-18’s are minors in South African law and generally require parental or guardian consent to play any role in a research project. If you are using a researcher-completed questionnaire, you can guarantee neither confidentiality nor anonymity in data collection, although both of these can be guaranteed in reporting.
* A separate consent form is usually not needed if the questionnaire will be completed anonymously by the participant. In a hard-copy questionnaire, you should state on the PIS and at the top of the questionnaire that completing and submitting the questionnaire is taken to mean consent to participate. You must clearly indicate how the questionnaire is to be returned; in most cases a drop box in a secretarial office or similar is the preferred procedure – this protects anonymity and removes any perception of coercion. In an online questionnaire, you must state on the PIS and at the top of the questionnaire that completing and submitting the online questionnaire is taken to mean consent to participate. (This will usually mean clicking on Submit or Send or a similar button at the end of the questionnaire.)
* Under COVID and remote research conditions, it is often advantageous to use an online questionnaire, rather than completing a hard copy.
* Please think about language and literacy issues in designing a questionnaire – make sure your questions are clear, unambiguous and do not contain complex technical terms. If you are using an online questionnaire, please be aware that some participants might not have access to the internet or to data, and this may skew your sample population or your results. Ensure you have proof-read your questionnaire before disseminating to participants; if possible, pilot test it on one or more representative persons.
* If you are using someone else’s already developed questionnaire, especially from an international context, (1) ensure that you have permission to use it if the questionnaire is not in the public domain, and (2) be aware that some questions may not be linguistically, culturally and/or contextually appropriate. Please therefore adapt the questionnaire for the specific context and population of study.
* If your ethics application includes a questionnaire, you need to supply a full participant information sheet and the full draft of the questionnaire.

**Focus Group**

A Focus Group is a number of persons (typically 6-8), gathered together in a real or virtual room, to discuss a pre-arranged topic(s), which the PI considers to be central to a particular research study. The PI will usually act as the moderator of the discussion. A Focus Group may be appropriate if you want to get people from the same community or interest group together, in the hope of a synergistic exchange of views. So, for example, the participants might be persons who suffer from a common medical condition, are dependent on a particular hospital(s) for treatment, have similar dietary regimes, have relatives in an intensive care unit, have recently given birth, etc.

In a Focus Group, different views can be shared and group members would also be able to respond to or talk with other group members, not just with the researcher.

* Because of the group nature of a Focus Group, this activity cannot be either confidential or anonymous (participants may recognize one another) during data collection. Make this clear on the PIS and Consent Form. Participants should be asked to treat the discussions as confidential, but the PI has no real means of enforcing this.
* As discussed above, a Focus Group can be face-to-face (in which case *formal consent* is needed) or online (in which case oral consent must be taken and recorded). If face-to-face, a separate consent form for each participant is needed – i.e. they must not sign the same sheet of paper like an attendance register.
* Under COVID and remote research conditions it is often advantageous to conduct online Focus Groups.
* Please think about language and literacy issues in Focus Group activities. Consider whether you are able to conduct the Focus Group in the participants’ language(s) of choice, or whether you need to involve an interpreter or research assistant. Make sure your questions are clear, unambiguous, not leading, and do not contain complex technical terms.
* If your ethics application includes Focus Groups, you need to supply a full participant information sheet, consent form, and the full draft of the questions to be asked or topics to be discussed. This is called the Focus Group schedule. It should never be referred to as an “interview, “which is both inaccurate and misleading.
* If the intention is to record the FGD in audio and/or visual format, this must be stated in the PIS and can only be done with the participant’s prior permission.
* If you are using both interviews and Focus Groups in your study, or a questionnaire and interviews, or a questionnaire and Focus Groups, the questions used in each activity should differ and must be tailored to the method of data collection and the participant group.

Please be aware of the differences between questionnaires, interviews and Focus Groups, and do not get them confused. Incorrect terminology can delay ethics clearance, because reviewers are unclear as to the intended methodology. If used correctly, they will bring richness and depth to your study. If used incorrectly you will end up with very poor and very confusing data.

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