

# **Convergent interviewing essentials**

**An introduction to the key  
features of a combined  
interviewing and data analysis  
technique**

**Bob Dick**



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# Convergent interviewing essentials

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Convergent interviewing is an in-depth interview procedure characterised by a structured process and initially-unstructured content. The analysis of interview data overlaps with the collection of that data.

Convergent interviewing has certain features that suit it for use in under-researched areas and complex and uncertain situations. It can also be used whenever a flexible data collection process is relevant.

It can be described as emergent and data-driven. It has multiple inbuilt sources of research rigour. It is time-efficient compared to many interview processes. Its uses for research include emergent research and pilot studies.

It has also been used effectively as part of community and organisational change programs. In these settings, diagnosis and evaluation are common applications.

This paper briefly describes the shape of a typical interview. The program of multiple interviews is also explained, as is the integrated process for data analysis. All three components are important sources of the procedure's responsiveness to the data, and its rigour and efficiency. (The process for data analysis can also be applied to data collected in other ways.)

Finally, some more detailed aspects of convergent interviewing are then addressed.

On the next page you'll find a table of contents. Peruse this, and you'll find that the rest of this document is organised in three parts. The twin aspects of convergent interviewing — the interviews, and the process for data analysis — are first described briefly in the *Introduction*. This is followed by a more detailed description that covers the main aspects of the technique in more depth. A third segment then explores in yet more detail some aspects of the technique.

brief description
more detailed description
further analysis of certain aspects

If you examine the table of contents it will help you to choose the level of analysis that best suits your purposes.

As you read the following description I recommend that you treat it as just one example of how convergent interviewing can be conducted. Convergent interviewing is most effective when it is tailored to the requirements — especially the purpose — of the study. Many variations are possible. As you use it you'll discover what is best for you and your situation.

## **Contents**

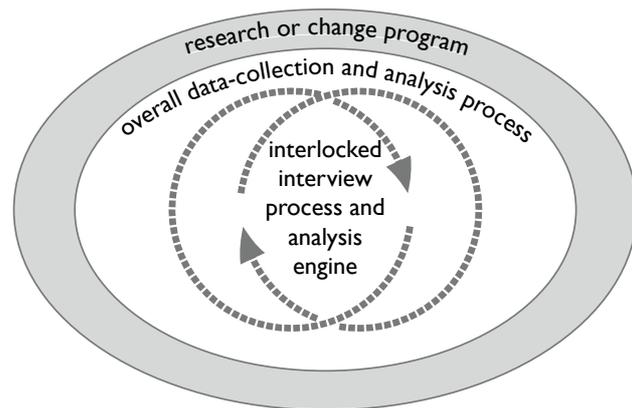
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## Introduction

Convergent interviewing is a package with several components. At its core are two interlinked processes. Both are cyclic and data-driven:

- an interview process, and
- an “engine” for analysing data.

The data collection alternates with the analysis of data in a tight cycle. Those two elements are embedded in an overall process that supports the data collection and analysis. That in turn is usually part of a research program or change program or similar.



The convergent interviewing package can be disassembled. Parts of it can then be used in other situations and for other purposes. In particular, the “engine” for analysing information can be used for almost any corpus of data, whatever its method of collection. It is particularly well-suited to analysing qualitative data as an integral part of data collection.

When convergent interviewing is used as a complete package the interpretation of data converges towards a more-justified result over the course of a program of interviews. Gradually, from interview to interview, a more rigorous and detailed interpretation of the situation develops. Convergence also occurs within each interview, which moves from open-ended to more focused.

From interview to interview, convergence is achieved by probe questions based on data from earlier interviews. The probes become progressively more detailed and specific. In responding to the probe questions, informants interpret the data from previous (and sometimes current) interviews. The effect is to challenge, and change or confirm, the emerging interpretations. The theory (or diagnosis, or evaluation) therefore is emergent, taking shape more confidently as the study proceeds.

Here I describe the overall process as it might be used as part of a research study or for diagnostic purposes.

The present document omits two important aspects of a typical diagnostic study, except superficially.

The first, before any data collection starts, consists of negotiating entry and clarifying the purpose and boundary of the study. In particular, stakeholders are identified, and the extent of their involvement is negotiated. It is also decided who has access to the eventual report, and under what conditions.

The second, at the end of a study, is the report to the host organisation or community about the results of the interviewing.

In the descriptions below I assume that interviewers work in pairs to conduct the interviews. In each interview a single interviewer interviews a single participant. After each interview the two interviewers meet to compare notes and devise probe questions. This further improves the rigour of the process. However, a single interviewer is adequate.

If there is only a single interviewer, the process is generally similar. In the early interviews the interviewer compares adjacent interviews to devise the probe questions. In later interviews each interview is compared to the emerging theory.

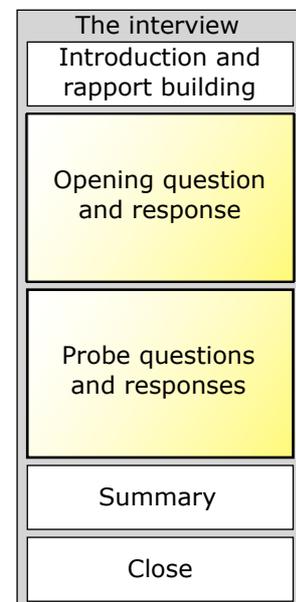
I'll begin by describing a typical convergent interview.

### **A typical interview**

Each interview has an internal structure — in most instances something like the following:

- introduction and rapport building
- opening question and response
- probe questions and responses
- summary
- close.

These components of a typical interview are described in more detail below.



## **Introduction and rapport building**

In the introduction, which may take about 10 minutes or a little less, the interviewer:

- explains the purpose of the interview
- describes what happens to the data and the interpretations of the data, and
- provides any guarantees about participant confidentiality and the like.

In doing so, the interviewer tries to anticipate the participant's concerns and address them honestly.

For instance, the interviewer may explain that

- the interview is to pursue certain research outcomes
- data will be carefully and actively anonymised, and
- the participant will have access to whatever is reported as a result.

(Those are my own preferences. Other researchers may favour other options.)

In a change program, or for diagnosis, it is useful to explain (if it is true) that

- the intention is that resulting action will protect *everyone's* interests as far as possible, and
- senior management has given a firm commitment to honouring this.

Importantly, the interviewer uses the introduction phase of each interview to *build rapport* with the participant. The interviewer does this by paying attention to the participant, and in particular by being responsive to and genuinely curious about what the participant says.

## **The body of the interview**

When initial rapport is established, the interviewer asks the *opening question*. This is a broad question that is almost content-free. In effect it defines the boundary of the information that the interviewer wishes to collect. In most situations my preferred question is "Tell me about this organisation" (or whatever it is).

*Every* interview, including those later in the sequence, begins with the opening question. Each participant is initially encouraged to contribute her or his views unconstrained by more specific questions.

Rapport continues to build as the interviewer continues to pay close attention to what the participant has to say. The most effective frame of mind for the interviewer

to adopt is one of intense curiosity about the participant's opinions and experience. Such an attitude of curiosity tends to generate behaviour on the part of the interviewer that helps to build rapport. This increases the quality of information.

To encourage the participant to keep talking the interviewer uses "minimal encouragers". For instance the interviewer is attentive, nods, smiles, and says "Mm-hmm", and the like. Saying "Tell me more" or asking for examples is helpful. I return later to this important feature.

At this stage of the interview the intention is for the informant to volunteer information, guided as little as possible by the interviewer's questions. By helping to protect against interviewer bias, this feature aids research rigour. It is an important source of the data-driven nature of the process.

This part of the interview and the next part are usually recorded, perhaps digitally, perhaps by keyword notes, perhaps memorised. See more on this later.

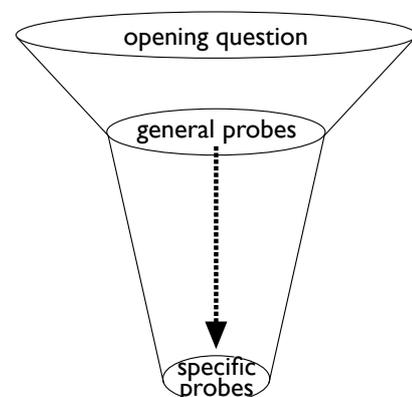
### **Probe questions**

The earliest interviews may or may not include more specific questions. In organisational diagnosis, for example, sometimes the host organisation may wish for information on specific issues. Relevant specific questions may then be planned before the interviewing begins. Alternatively, though, the first two interviews may include only the broad opening question.

Later interviews contain both the opening question, and probe questions. The purpose of the probes is to refine the emerging interpretation of the data. They do so by clarifying ambiguities or contradictions from earlier interviews. The effect of the probes is to develop an interpretation of the data that has been tested against evidence.

In other words, the probe questions are the means by which the informants are asked to interpret the data so far collected. They are a central part of the "engine" for interpreting data. I describe the process for developing probe questions in more detail later.

To clarify, there may be no probe questions in the first pair of interviews. The number of probe questions typically increases from interview to interview. So does their specificity and focus.



In later interviews most aspects of the emerging interpretation or theory have been tested and accepted. There are only a few loose ends to address.

Eventually “saturation” is achieved. This is the point beyond which additional interviews provide no additional meaningful data or clarification — or at least not enough to warrant spending time on any further interviews.

In general, the more specific a question (probe or not), the later in the interview it is posed.

### **Interview summary**

The interviewer checks the accuracy of notes. (See “Notes”, below.) This can be done, for instance, by summarising the key points as the interviewer understands them and asking for comment.

Alternatively (and often more effectively) the interviewer can ask the participant for a summary. The participant’s summary can be compared to the interviewer’s own understanding. This will often elicit additional information about the importance of various issues.

### **Closing the interview**

The interviewer thanks the participant for taking part. She repeats any important guarantees and conditions. For instance, it can be useful to reaffirm the anonymity of reported information, and let the informant know how to access any report.

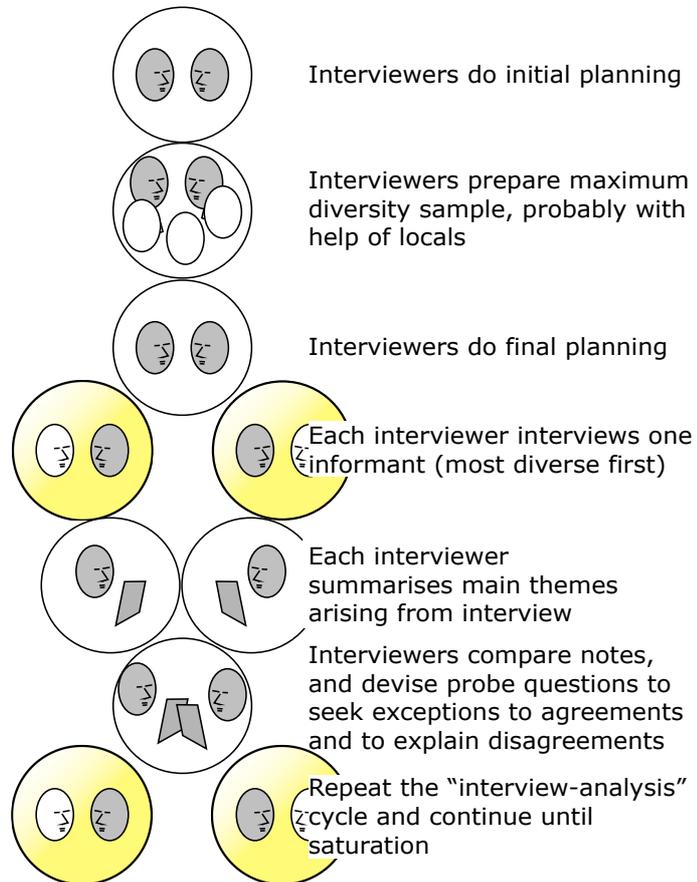
It is often useful — especially in the earliest interviews — to seek permission to return to a participant later in the process. Early informants are chosen to be representative of the organisation or community as a whole. But at this stage, probe questions have not yet been developed. Returning to early informants allows them, too, to respond to the probe questions developed later in the sequence of interviews.

### **The overall process**

As mentioned, the actual interviews are embedded within an overall process of design and analysis. The process includes the planning for and support of the interviews. It incorporates the interlocked process for data analysis. It allows for the development of the probe questions. In this way, the interviews are data-driven.

The description below assumes that a typical interview takes about an hour or a little longer. I usually schedule diagnostic convergent interviews at 1½-hour intervals. This allows an hour for the interview, 15 minutes “float” in case the interview goes overtime, and 15 minutes for note-taking afterwards. If you’re uncertain, you might begin like this. You can then adjust the timing in the light of your experience.

The overall process, as depicted in the diagram, is described below. This description assumes that the interviewers work in pairs. As mentioned, this is not essential. A single interviewer can compare adjacent interviews with only some loss of rigour. When theory (that is, the interpretation of data) has begun to emerge, each interview can then be compared with the emerging theory.



### **Initial planning**

The interviewers meet together to plan their overall approach. They consider the extent of participation with the host organisation or community. They plan their approach to the organisation or community. They approach the host and negotiate the process and the desired outcomes. They secure permission to proceed.

In a research program, they negotiate how the research can be done so it is valuable for the host as well as for the researchers.

In many situations it is desirable for the interviewers to have access to a very small working party. This consists of three or four people broadly representative of the host organisation or community. In a corporate setting the party might consist of a

senior manager, a middle manager and a rank and file organisational member from a different organisational function than the middle manager. Ideally, the senior manager is a member of the executive team and a strong supporter of the study.

In a unionised company, inclusion of a union representative is likely to be a benefit (and sometimes necessary). That person then can assist with liaison between the interviewers and external union officials.

The intention is for the interviewers to work closely with the working party. The interviewers provide expertise for research and/or change. The working party members contribute local knowledge that the interviewers lack. For example, working party members are likely to advise on compiling a sample of informants. They can also provide information on aspects of organisational (or community) practices and culture.

In more participative versions of convergent interviewing the interviewers and the working party can continue to meet from time to time. It can often be feasible (and advantageous) for members of the organisation or community, with some instruction and practice, to conduct some or all of the interviews — see *Increasing participation* below.

### **Prepare the sample**

As mentioned, sample preparation is usually done in conjunction with the host working party. External interviewers seldom have the knowledge of the organisation to do this on their own. A maximum-diversity sample is compiled (see later).

In community settings (and sometimes in large and complex organisations) there may be nobody with the knowledge to prepare a good sample. A maximum-diversity sample of half the desired size may then be compiled. Then, during the interviewing, it can be augmented by a modified snowball sample.

(In a snowball sample, interviewees are asked to nominate who else may be interviewed). The final sample is then half pre-planned, half snowball.

## **Final planning**

Interviewers do the final planning for the interviews, perhaps again in conjunction with the working party. Importantly, the *opening question* is decided. A suitable venue for the interviews is selected. A comfortable location offering visual and aural privacy is desirable. The members of the community or organisation are notified that the interviews are to take place, and why.

In organisations it is usually advisable before the interviewing begins that a very senior manager announces the nature and purpose of the interview program, and expresses approval for it. In change programs it is very helpful if they also announce that they will act on the results of the program where possible, and explain what will be done about any parts of the results that cannot be acted on.

## **Interviews**

Each interviewer interviews one participant, using the process described previously:

- introduction and rapport building
- opening question, and encouraging participant response
- asking more specific questions (if any) and probe questions
- summarising the interview; and
- closing.

Practice differs in how to record the interviews. Some researchers prefer to record the interview using an audio recorder. After the interview they transcribe the recording or have it transcribed subsequently. (This can have problems — see later). Some interviewers take keyword notes and expand on them after the interview.

My own preference is to use a memory system to remember themes. I use the themes to reconstruct the content of the interview immediately afterwards. To this topic, too, I return later.

## **Taking interview notes**

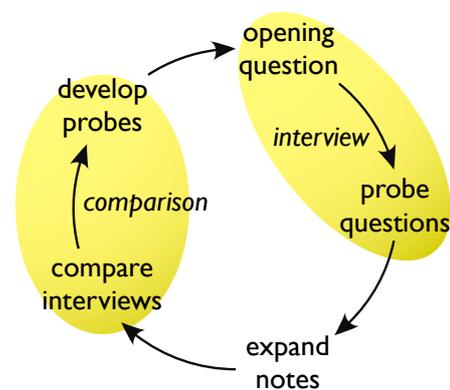
Immediately after the interview each interviewer writes detailed notes of the content elicited by the interview. A set of bullet points is adequate. This may be done, for example, by expanding on the keyword notes taken during the interview. My

approach is to expand on the themes recalled using my memory system. This allows me to reconstruct the interview in some detail.

### **Compare interviews**

This comparison is the engine of the data analysis. The comparison allows the data to drive the conclusions. It is the source of the probe questions that deepen understanding as interviews proceed. In turn, from this the theory (or interpretation or diagnosis or evaluation) develops.

Think of this as the cycle summarised in the diagram at the right. The opening question, asked in every interview, gathers the information that the current participant has. The probe questions, arising from previous interviews, work on tying up loose ends and resolving ambiguities and differences. When the interviewers meet between



interviews they further refine their emerging theory (or interpretation or diagnosis or evaluation) to take account of responses to their previous probes. In the light of this they develop further more specific probes to be asked in subsequent interviews. The probes explore loose ends, unresolved differences, and aspects of the situation that are not yet adequately understood.

In the early interviews, interviewers compare interview to interview. In later interviews it becomes a three-way comparison — two interviews, and the emerging theory (etc.) from earlier interviews.

This important process is described in more detail below.

It is also useful that at this meeting the interviewers review the interview *process* that they are using. How well is the opening question working? Has an appropriate time period been allocated for the interview? Does the sample of participants appear to be appropriate? Are there modifications that would improve the interviews still to come? Are there local issues the interviewers don't understand, and might usefully be discussed with the working party.

In other words, both the process and the content are data-driven.

### Repeat until saturation

The last three steps above — interview, notes and comparison, are repeated until saturation is achieved. That is, the interviews form an iterative process until a pair of interviews adds too little new data to warrant persisting further.

The theory (or diagnosis, interpretation or evaluation) develops slowly throughout the program of interviews. The report (if any) can also be developed gradually, at the same time.

### Develop probe questions

This section describes the essentials of the process for data analysis — the engine that powers the analysis. As mentioned previously it can also be applied to any corpus of data that can be collected gradually and analysed as it is collected.

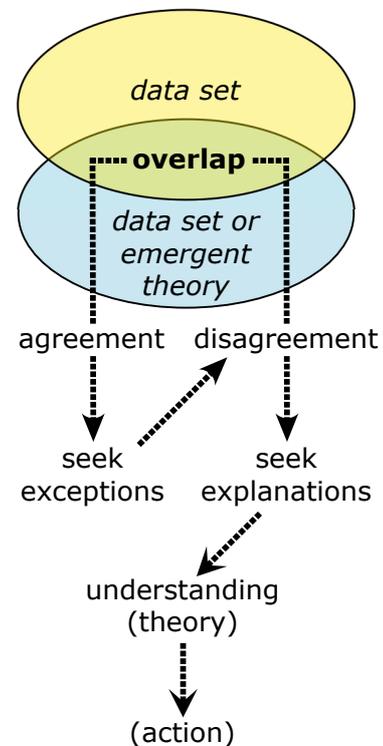
In the early stages of data collection, you develop probe questions by comparing interviews. With two interviewers, compare the two *present* convergent interviews. With a single interviewer, compare the present interview to the *previous* interview(s).

In the later stages you compare the present information (from one or two interviews) to the *emergent theory* (etc.) from earlier data collection.

For the most part it's more efficient to limit your attention to the *overlap* between present data and past data or emergent theory. Idiosyncratic information from a single participant can usually be ignored.

Probe questions are intended to deepen your understanding of (in other words, your theory about) the situation you are researching. In developing probe questions you will build good theory efficiently if you:

- 1 Limit your attention to the *overlap* between present data and either past data or emergent theory



- 2 When present data **agree** with past data or emergent theory, develop *probe questions* that seek out **exceptions** to the agreement
- 3 When present data **disagree** with past data or emergent theory, develop *probe questions* that seek **explanations** for the disagreement.

Note that when exceptions are identified in “2” above, they then actually constitute disagreements. Explanations for them can then be sought. *The disagreements drive the theory development or diagnosis or evaluation.* Steps “2” and “3” are the key part of the engine for data analysis, allowing the continuous refinement of understanding or theory from interview to interview.

Because in each interview you are probing for exceptions, you continue to challenge your emergent ideas. These are the steps that allow you to claim, at the end of the research or diagnosis, that your conclusions or hypotheses are valid. You have derived them carefully from the data. Informants who understand the situation from their lived experience have interpreted the data. The conclusions have survived multiple and vigorous attempts to disprove them.

The process is analogous to constant comparison in grounded theory. The overlap in data sets (or between data set and emergent theory) yields the probe questions. The answers to those probe questions further refine the theory. In the interview program as a whole, the theory (or interpretation or diagnosis or evaluation) converges to its final shape.

As mentioned, this process for data analysis is not limited in its application to convergent interviewing. You can apply it whenever you have multiple data sets from which you can develop an emergent theory or diagnosis or evaluation. I’ve used it to compare and interpret data from multiple focus groups. Then, later in the same study, I’ve compared the results of focus groups, as a whole, to the results of a program of convergent interviews.

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## **Further issues**

I'll now address in a little more detail some of the issues raised briefly in the previous discussion. However, it's not my intention that you regard them as any "best way" of doing convergent interviewing. Please treat them as encouragement for further thought and experimentation. There is also by now a very substantial literature on convergent interviewing, accessible using search engines such as google scholar <<http://scholar.google.com>>.

(A search on google scholar just now, July 2017, for "convergent interviewing" enclosed in double quote marks yielded over 900 hits.)

### **Opening question**

The purpose of the opening question is to elicit relevant information without constraining the participant. An ideal opening question therefore does no more than define the boundary within which information is wanted.

On occasions I've found the following question has worked well for research on employee satisfaction: "What do you like most, and what do you like least, about working here". However I now prefer, and mostly use, "Tell me about X", where "X" is the organisation or community. This is the opening I use for community or organisational diagnosis. Another example useful in much research is "Tell me about your experience of X", where "X" is the topic of interest.

In general I think it is better to ask too broad a question than too narrow a question. It is easy to narrow the scope later. Ask too narrow an opening question and you may miss some important information. Worse, you may never be aware that you have done so.

### **Encouraging a response**

If you show that you are passionately interested in what the participant has to say, almost all participants will experience this as an affirming experience. Rapport will usually develop quickly. In my experience there will be less censorship by the participant of what she or he says. When I first began to do in-depth interviewing I

was surprised by how willing participants were to take risks in what they were prepared to say.

Establishing rapport is therefore important. There is literature that describes techniques for rapport building. But unless done very well, they risk being perceived as not genuine. This subverts their purpose. There is a simpler approach, I believe. Give the participant genuine, undivided attention, fuelled by your natural and intense curiosity. Rapport will then usually develop without conscious effort.

With most Caucasian participants, maintaining eye contact helps greatly. This is partly why I use a memory system (see next section) rather than taking notes. I've found that each time I lose eye contact to take notes, the development of rapport is slowed.

Non-committal verbal responses can be used: "yes", "mm-hmm" and the like. Saying "Tell me more" works well, as does repeating the last word or the key word in a response with a questioning intonation: "Trust?". A pause will often be enough to encourage a participant to say more about the current topic. It's better not to prolong it so much that it raises anxiety and thus destroys rapport. I would guess, though, that most interviewers could use longer pauses than they presently do.

When participants tell the story of a situation rather than giving brief responses, you'll often get richer information. Stories, as storytellers have long known, carry meaning on multiple levels. Asking for *examples* will often trigger the change to storytelling. So will asking, "How did it start?" or "What happened?". A participant who has switched to storytelling will often then continue in that mode.

(Interviewing small groups of two or three people at a time increases the use of story in responses. One person's story triggers the recollection of others' stories. However, you may also lose some of the more sensitive information that individual interviews provide.)

### **Note-taking during the interview**

As mentioned above, detailed note taking interferes with the development of rapport. Quality of information then also suffers. My own approach is to use a memory system that allows me to recall up to 20 themes in sequence (or with more

effort on my part, up to 40 themes). From this I can reconstruct an interview in substantial detail. I've worked with colleagues who were unwilling to do this; instead they learned to take key-word notes without losing eye contact. From these brief notes they too can then reconstruct the interview in some detail.

The following paragraphs give a brief description of my mnemonic method.

I have cue words for the numbers from 1 to 20. I've deliberately and thoroughly overlearned them so that when I hear a number between 1 and 20 I immediately think of the corresponding cue word, and vice versa. My cue word for "1" is "run", and for "2" is shoe. Yes, they all rhyme. I won't tell you the other 18, because it will work better for you if you devise your own.

When I was learning my cue words I carried around a set of 20 flash cards with me, each with a cue word on one side and the corresponding number on the other. Some cards had the number uppermost, and some the cue word. When I had some spare minutes I would shuffle the cards. Then, viewing them one at a time I would try to recall the number or word on the other side of the card. I did this until recall for all cue words and numbers was immediate and automatic.

Digitally recording an interview can also initially slow down the development of rapport, though only initially. Partly for that reason I usually avoid it. More importantly, I would rather conduct a second interview in the time that it would take to listen again to a recorded interview. The protection that a transcript provides is less necessary with a process such as convergent interviewing that continually challenges emerging hypotheses. In addition, waiting for a transcription makes it difficult to analyse and interpret data concurrently with the interviewing.

Alternatively, it lengthens the process.

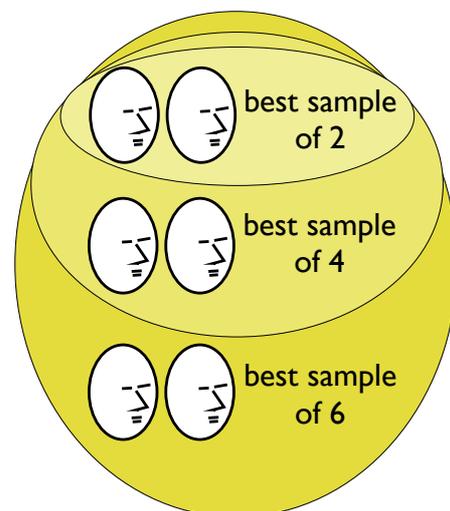
Abandoning recording won't be everybody's choice. Thesis candidates, particularly, may justifiably fear leaving themselves vulnerable to examiners' criticism. Or they may have a supervisor or research committee or ethics committee that insists on transcripts being returned to participants for correction. I think these views of examiners and supervisors and committees are misguided; but they exist. These or

similar reasons may require the use of digital recording. Perhaps then it will be enough, later, to check the final outcomes of research or diagnosis against a random *sample* of the recordings. Otherwise, the interlocking of data collection and analysis is destroyed, and with it, one of the key sources of efficiency and rigour. For me that's far too high a cost.

On the few occasions that I've used a digital recorder I've placed it within reach of the participant and explained how it works. I've encouraged her to feel free to pause it at any time, either to say something off-record, or to ask to have part of a record deleted.

### Designing a sample

In compiling a sample of participants for convergent interviewing there are three aspects to be kept in mind. First, you are conducting interviews until you achieve saturation. You don't know the appropriate size of your sample until saturation occurs. Second, a maximum diversity sample will serve your purposes better than a random sample. You want to represent all views, and random samples under-sample minority views that may be important. Also, it is the differences and particularly *disagreements*



between participants that drive the analysis process. Greater diversity yields more initial disagreement and therefore deeper and richer eventual understanding.

Together, these two conditions imply the third — at each sample size, your aim is to have the best maximum variation sample possible for that number of participants. Ideally, then, the first person sampled will be the person most representative of the overall community or organisation or research population. The second person will be as different as possible to the first, while still being representative.

In effect, the previous paragraph suggests a process for compiling a sample using *indirect sampling*. The interviewers select a very small but representative sample (the direct sample) to act as a working party. That working party, drawing on its

knowledge of the situation, compiles the sample for interviewing — the indirect sample. The interviewers ask the working party the following questions in turn:

“Who is the person most representative of this organisation?” [or whatever it is]

“Who is a person as unlike the first person as possible, but still representative?”

“Who is a person as unlike the first two people as possible, but still representative?”

... and so on.

The above process is continued until the sample is complete. Sample participants are preferably interviewed in the order in which the sample is designed. That’s not always feasible — sometimes it’s necessary to interview participants in the order in which they become available. Even then, if possible it’s advantageous for the sequence of interviews to at least approximate the order in which the sample was compiled.

The required sample size is unknown at this stage. It’s therefore helpful to have an estimate. Some of the management literature has claimed success from convergent interviewing samples as small as six or seven.

For most purposes I’m reluctant to use a sample as small as this. My practice is to use a simple rule of thumb. Assuming two interviewers, for safety I continue interviewing for at least two pairs of interviews beyond apparent saturation. In preparation, in a typical organisation I compile a sample of 12 as a minimum. In a typical community or more diverse organisation I’d expect to have to use a larger sample again: perhaps 16. For a homogeneous population you may find smaller sample sizes adequate. However, my own practice is to regard too large a sample as safer than too small a sample.

Community samples often have their own problems. It may be difficult to assemble a working party with enough local knowledge to put together a good sample. If so, I ask them to do the best they can, and to compile half a sample. As mentioned earlier I then supplement this sample with snowballing. At interview I ask each participant to nominate a person whose views differ from hers, but that represent views held by at least some others in the community. This can be done in the closing phase of each interview.

### **One interviewer or two?**

Most of the preceding account has assumed that interviewers work in pairs. Doing so provides a further protection against interviewer bias. This isn't crucial, however. Convergent interviewing also has other protections against bias, especially in its pursuit (through probe questions) of *disconfirming* evidence. Using two interviewers can also shorten the overall time required to complete the sequence of interviews, which can be an advantage. I also think it enriches the interpretation of data.

On occasion I've further increased the rigour of interviewing by using *two pairs* of interviewers. Each pair used the convergent interviewing process described above, interviewed a different sample, and avoided contact with the other pair. When each pair achieved saturation, the theory was refined. The two emergent theories were then compared in a meeting of all four interviewers.

However, convergent interviewing works well enough with a single interviewer. Most of its features remain intact. It loses a little rigour, though not enough to be a concern. The single interviewer compares the first interview to the second, the third interview to the first two, and so on. When a theory (etc.) begins to emerge, each successive interview is then compared to the emergent theory.

### **Increasing participation**

As described above, convergent interviewing may not seem a very participatory process. You will note, though, that both the raw information and the eventual theory or interpretation come from the participants, not the interviewer(s).

Participants provide initial information in response to the opening question that they are asked. They offer more specific information in response to the probe questions, which are determined by information previously given. In other words, the interviewers deliberately manage the process in such a way that the participants provide the data *and the interpretation* of the data.

In addition, it is usual for there to be a small working party to help with preparing the sample. It is possible to engage the working party more fully in the overall process by treating them as equal partners throughout. For example they can be engaged in discussions about the process, the reporting of the results to the

organisation or community, and ways of improving the value of the results to the organisation or community.

On occasion I've also involved members of the community or organisation as interviewers. A convergent interview requires less skill than many forms of in-depth interview. At different times I've used organisational members, primary school students, and university students as interviewers. This followed about half a day of instruction and practice. Those who aren't comfortable with being involved find out relatively quickly, and decline further involvement except as participants.

In short, it can be more participative than it seems. It can sit comfortably even within the more participatory varieties of action research and similar approaches. Its incremental and emergent nature also suits the spiral process of action research.

## **Summary**

Let me summarise by restating the characteristics of convergent interviewing that seem to contribute the most to quality of data, and therefore quality of resulting theory or accuracy of resulting diagnosis or evaluation.

The aim of convergent interviewing is to collect and interpret quality data to develop relevant and valid theory (or interpretation, diagnosis or evaluation). The characteristics that achieve that aim include the following.

- Making the interview an affirming experience for the participant builds rapport. That in turn increases the potential quality of the data.
- Alternating data collection and interpretation within a cyclic process increases both efficiency and validity. Subsequent interview questions can then be framed to challenge and refine the emergent theory.
- A maximum-variation sample increases the likelihood that all relevant information will be contributed. Structuring a sample that is good at each sample size will increase efficiency and give richer comparisons between interviews.
- A combination of (initially-)unstructured content and structured process gives good outcomes. The unstructured content helps to ensure that participants provide information uncontaminated by the presumptions of the interviewers. The structured process builds efficiency and rigour.

- *Every* interview begins with the broad opening question, a question that is as unconstraining as possible beyond identifying the purpose of the interview. Every participant is therefore able to contribute an initial response without being influenced either by interviewer preconceptions or the views of other participants.
- Every interview (except perhaps the first pair) combines a broad opening question with increasingly specific probe questions. As mentioned, the opening question, being almost free of content, places no unnecessary restrictions on the information participants can provide. The probe questions continue to test and refine the emerging theory.
- Further, the more focussed or precise a probe question, the later in the interview it is asked. As far as possible, restrictions on participant responses beyond the needs of the moment are minimised.

If I were to use only one technique for collecting data from participants — though that is often unwise — convergent interviewing would be my choice. When I use multiple techniques, which is my usual practice, convergent interviewing is usually one of the techniques. Compared to other interviewing techniques I find it both efficient and rigorous. In the use of probes to pursue disconfirming evidence, it yields valid theory and interpretation.

Above all, though, I like the way the participants, not the interviewers, determine the information provided. The information they provide directs the process and determines the theoretical outcomes. In their responses to probe questions the participants also interpret the data and contribute to the emerging theory. To my mind, that neatly complements approaches that begin from a more predetermined research hypothesis.

As they say on the web, your mileage may vary. I haven't tried to hide my own enthusiasm for convergent interviewing. On the other hand, it hasn't been my intention to be an evangelist for it. There are many approaches to research and change, and to data collection and analysis. This is just one. If you have research aims or change aims, and it seems appropriate, I invite you to try it. If it doesn't work for you, I encourage you to let me know what you did, and why it didn't work.

## **Suggestions for further reading**

This is a small selection of the now-substantial available literature. I've mostly cited authors who have published studies using convergent interviewing more than once and can therefore comment from experience. Where available I've selected works that are peer reviewed and that offer some description (and in some instances critique) of convergent interviewing.

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- Williams, Wil, and Lewis, Duncan (2005). Convergent interviewing: a tool for strategic investigation. *Strategic Change*, 14(4), 219-229. doi:10.1002/jsc.719

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As it is frequently revised a later version may be available.

Bob Dick is an independent scholar. He has been a practitioner and an academic for most of the past 40 years and continues to work in both fields. In both he uses concepts and processes from action research, action learning and community and organization development to help people improve their work, learning and life. As he does so he uses action research to improve his own practice. He resides in Brisbane's leafy western suburbs with the love of his life, Camilla.