

## Key Informant Interviews

A key informant interview is a loosely structured conversation with people who have specialized knowledge about the topic you wish to understand. Key informant interviews were developed by ethnographers to help understand cultures other than their own. A good key informant can convey this specialized knowledge to you.

### Reasons to Use Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews let you explore a subject in depth. The give and take of these interviews can result in the discovery of information that would not have been revealed in a survey. Key informant interviews provide opportunities for the following:

- **Examining specialized systems or processes.** Key informants can help you understand the systems that affect drug and alcohol abuse. For example, you could ask a parole officer to explain how juvenile probation works (which might reveal strategic points for intervention).
- **Identifying target populations or issues that you may want to investigate further.**
- **Gathering information when cultural barriers make survey or focus group research difficult.** Key informant interviews with community leaders who know their communities well, and have the skills to work with the mainstream culture, can provide the information you need.
- **Refining your data collection efforts.** For example, key informants can tell you, “Don’t advertise for respondents in that paper—nobody reads it.” Or “Offer incentives before Christmas, because that’s when people need money.”
- **Clarifying the findings of your quantitative research.** For example, suppose a survey done a year into your program revealed a dramatic increase of drug use in your community. Interviews with law enforcement officials could reveal that this increase was the result of increased availability of less expensive drugs—something your program did not anticipate and was not designed to affect.
- **Assessing progress.** For example, interviews are often used in coalition work to assess the progress of the coalition.
- **Generating recommendations.** For example, interviews with school prevention specialists might help you understand the gaps in their services and help you target your program to fill these gaps.

- **Mobilizing the community.** People who are directly involved in your data collection efforts are more likely to be invested in your prevention activities.

Key informant interviews have some advantages over other forms of data collection. They are easier and less expensive than focus groups since they involve only one respondent and one interviewer and do not require incentive payments, refreshments, or special facilities. Other benefits include the following:

- They are inexpensive and fairly simple to conduct.
- They provide readily understandable information and compelling quotations for reports.
- They are flexible, as questions and topics can be added or omitted during the interview.

### Deciding What to Ask

One of the challenges of writing questions for key informant interviews is allowing the respondents enough leeway to provide information that represents their special knowledge and perspective while keeping the interview focused on your programmatic needs. Here are some tips that will help you prepare questions that are responsive to both these needs:

- **Know your purpose.** A key informant interview is not just an informal chat. Prepare questions that will help you learn what it is you want to know and that will take full advantage of the respondent's experience and expertise. Be prepared to follow-up on your questions.
- **Do your homework.** Know something about the person you are questioning and the types of information and perspective they can provide. Don't ask people for information they don't have. And don't expect them to know what you need. Be prepared.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Allow the respondents to explore an issue in their own words. For example, you might ask:
  - "What do you think about the drug prevention task force?"
  - "What has the drug prevention task force accomplished?"
  - "What, if anything, did the drug prevention task force not accomplish?"

Close-ended questions can result in short and not very meaningful answers. Limit "yes/no" questions to times when you need to make sense of what the respondent is saying—for example, "Let me see if I have this

correct: If the youth completes probation without any violations, his or her record is expunged?"

- **Ask one question at a time.** When you combine questions, the respondent may focus on the second question and ignore the first. Or, the respondent may allow the second question to bias the response to the first. For example, "How do you feel about your relations with the clinic staff and how can this relationship be improved?" should be asked as two questions:
  - "How do you feel about your relations with the clinic staff?"
  - "How can this relationship be improved?"

- **Ask questions that can be answered objectively.** Consider these two examples:

*Question:* What are the program's strengths?

*Answer:* The program starts fairly early in the morning and is over by 2:30 p.m. so the women can be home when their children come home from school. This really helps us recruit and retain participants.

*Question:* What do you like about the program?

*Answer:* I like the fact that it starts early in the morning. That way I have time to run errands after work and still be home at 5.

The first question yields useful information. The second question is more subjective and the answer is less useful since it represents the personal preference of the respondent.

- **Ask for examples.** Asking for examples can elicit concrete information. Again, contrast these two questions.

*Question:* Could you describe the way you begin a session?

*Answer:* I have all the participants introduce themselves, their agencies, and whether they've worked with any of the other people in the meeting.

*Question:* How do you begin the session?

*Answer:* I begin with creating an open rapport.

The first question elicits usable information, as is. The second question requires a follow-up question, such as "How do you create an open rapport?"

- **Conclude by asking** “Is there anything important you think I missed?” Remember, you are interviewing key informants because they know things you do not.

## Other Tips for Conducting Key Informant Interviews

Although key informant interviews are more informal than other forms of data collection, they still require a structure to be effective. Your respondent is more likely to take you seriously (and provide better information) if you are prepared and the conversation has direction. Tips for conducting key informant interviews include the following:

- **Begin by introducing your project and purpose.** Remind the respondent about your purpose and the ultimate use of the information. Also, explain who will have access to your interview notes and whether the respondents will be identified in any reports or public discussions of your investigation.
- **Start with an easy question.** For example, ask how long your respondents have been in their jobs. This will set them at ease and provide a context for analysis (as someone who has been on the job for six months will not have the same perspective as someone who has been on the job for 10 years).
- **Ask your most important questions first.** You might run out of time. This is especially important when interviewing people whose job might require them to end the interview early (such as emergency medical service or law enforcement personnel).
- **Ask the same (or parallel) questions of several respondents.** For example, you might want to ask all respondents connected with a particular prevention program (or system) to list the three things they would like to see improved. Answers from a number of different people in a system can reveal programming obstacles or places in which the system needs to be improved.
- **Don't move to a new topic prematurely.** Don't leave important issues hanging—you might run out of time before you can return to them. Also, you will get more useful information by discussing one subject at a time.
- **Be prepared to ask the same question in another way.** Prepare several questions that try to elicit the same information. Turn to the alternate questions when your first question just doesn't do the job.
- **Don't get stuck on a question.** Sometimes you just won't get the information you want from a particular respondent. Know when to move on

so you don't frustrate yourself or antagonize your respondent by trying to elicit information that he or she does not have, cannot articulate, or isn't willing to share.

- **Don't let the interview go much over an hour.** The people you chose as key informants are likely to be busy. The quality of the conversation can deteriorate if they feel rushed. Many of your respondents may be people with whom you might want to collaborate in the future, so don't antagonize them by letting an interview go on too long.
- **Record the interview if possible.** And take notes. As with focus groups, transcribe the recording and type up your notes as soon as possible after the interview is completed. Don't forget to get the respondent's permission to make an audio recording.

## Data Analysis

Analyzing data from key informant interviews can be challenging. It is sometimes difficult to judge the validity of the information received from one person. People's perceptions differ, they can make mistakes, or they can tell you what they think you want to hear. They may not be candid. You need to critically evaluate your key informant data based on your knowledge of the field and your community.

Crosscheck responses on the same topics from all your key informant interviews, as well as with any other data you may have obtained (either by collecting your own data or obtaining data from existing sources). Check the information for inconsistencies and incongruities. Ask yourself if your respondents' expertise or experience puts them in the position to know what they have told you. Finally, if there is a question about the interpretation of an important point, call your respondents and ask them to clarify the information.

## A Note on Confidentiality

Confidentiality can be a difficult issue for key informant interviews, especially in small communities. For example, if you report that law enforcement officials felt the school district was not cooperating with them on substance use/abuse issues, and the only law enforcement official you interviewed was the police chief, the source of the information is obvious. Be very clear with informants before the interview begins about how this information will be used and whether they will be identified or quoted in a report or public forum. And remember, some valuable uses of key informant interviews (such as helping to design, or helping to analyze the results from, other data collection efforts) do not require that the informants be identified.

As mentioned earlier, the best way to understand what is going on in your community or with your program is to collect information using a variety of

methods. Key informant interviews are especially useful in their ability to provide qualitative information that supplements or clarifies what you have learned from surveys, focus groups, and existing data sources. They can also help you design other data collection efforts by providing guidance on the target audience and the types of questions you may want to ask.

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