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## **Manual on Brief Ethnographic Interviewing: Understanding an Issue, Problem or Idea from a Local Perspective**

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### **Overview**

The brief ethnographic interviewing methods described in this manual were originally developed for use by NGO's providing psychosocial and mental health interventions to address two recurring needs - how to quickly and systematically gather and organize information (needs, problems, beliefs, strengths, etc.) when implementing programs with new populations or communities or develop culturally relevant indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of psychosocial and mental health interventions.

The technique involves using a brief semi-structured interview, framed around a question, to systematically collect information on a specific topic of interest from a community or population. The responses collected with the interview become 'data' which can be summarized through a variety of human and/or statistical means to identify common underlying themes. The technique can be applied for a variety of purposes including:

Rapid needs assessment: Brief ethnographic interviewing can be a useful technique for quickly and systematically gathering information from on an area of interest, such as how people prioritize their current needs or conceptualize war related distress.

Creation of new assessment or program evaluation measures: The brief interviewing technique can be used as a method for collecting a random sample of response data from a community which can be used, along with other available sources of information, when creating program evaluation indicators (e.g., identifying local idioms of distress). Because these indicators are based on unfiltered comments from members of the community they tend to reflect local ideas and beliefs more accurately than those included on measures imported from other places.

Field validation of existing measures: Many times program staff would like to use, or adapt an existing measure as a clinical assessment tool to evaluate change in behaviors, attitudes or distress levels among the population receiving their services.

However, they may be concerned as to whether the items on the measure, or even the underlying constructs being measured, are meaningful and appropriate for the local population. Interview response data can be used as a way of evaluating whether the ideas reflected with existing tools are also reported and experienced by the community where services are being offered (when more formal methods of validation are not possible or appropriate).

Conducting research: The brief interviewing and data reduction methods described in this manual can also be used for examining the underlying structure of a set of beliefs, ideas or behaviors among a population or community. Analytical examination of the information collected through interviewing can be done with varying degrees of organizational or statistical sophistication depending on how the results will be used.

### **Description of the Methodology**

The brief ethnographic interviewing methodology is described in general terms, with suggestions given for adapting it for specific uses or alternate circumstances whenever possible. The methodology is, by design, open to change and adaptation and we have discovered in applying it with differing programs in diverse contexts and cultures, that there is almost always a need to adapt to the actual skills, needs and demands of specific programs and settings.

The examples used to explain the methodology all involve gathering information that is related to people's conceptions about important emotions or behaviors. However, there is no reason that the method couldn't be used to systematically gather information about other sets of beliefs or ideas, such as what people believe constitutes a 'well-functioning school' or a 'good government'.

### **Creating the Interview**

**Formulating a question**: The interview is created around a question, or series of questions, the answers to which become the 'data' that can be used for a variety of purposes (see Example Question below). The question(s) can be as broad or specific as you wish, depending on your purpose and previous knowledge of the community. We usually frame our questions broadly in an effort not to lead people in their choice of responses. In addition, it is also true that when we are working in unfamiliar settings we often don't know enough to ask the narrower questions that are more central to our interests, and we don't want to make assumptions that might bias what we learn. For example, in our line of work we are often interested in understanding local needs around mental health, the psychological and emotional problems people are having following some traumatic event. But if we ask people a question like "*think of someone you know who is having mental health difficulties because of the war*" we are already making the assumption that this is a problem area for the community. If we ask the broader question "*think of someone who is having problems from the war*" we learn something in the process. If we don't get any responses related to mental health, that tells us something important. On the other hand if we do get a lot of spontaneous responses related to mental health, we can be more confident that this is in fact a problem that the community recognizes, and not simply one that we are defining for them through our assessment process.

Your interview question should be brief, and stated in the simplest way possible. The wording is crucial and time should be taken to ensure that interviewees will understand what is being asked in the way you intended. Make sure to field-test your interview question with the community you will be conducting your interviews with (see Practice Interviews, below)

It is suggested that the question be worded in a way that it asks the interviewee to think of a real person, someone that they know, rather than respond about a 'generalized person' based on their experience with many people. Real examples tend to be more specific and, of course reflect actual behaviors, emotions or attributes rather than what someone 'should' act like or feel. Asking the interviewee to think of someone other than themselves avoids problems of self-disclosure or issues of 'secondary gain' that can occur when interviewees suspect that you represent a program offering services and that responding in a particular way might result in assistance of some kind.

We ask them not to disclose the name of the person they are thinking about. This, of course, avoids problems of confidentiality and allows the interviewee to describe the person they are thinking of more freely.

Example Question:

*"It would be very helpful for us to know how people can tell a child's life is going well. Think of a child from your community, or that you know, who is doing satisfactorily, but don't tell me who it is. The child doesn't have to be the best child you know but a child that is doing satisfactorily. I am going to ask some questions about what this child is like"*

**Designing the interview:** Once you have developed the question(s) the interview can be quickly constructed. We often open with a statement that informs the interviewee something about why we are gathering information. Some examples include:

*"We would like to understand how to know when children are doing well..." or "We are trying to understand what makes a good leader..." "It would be very helpful for us to understand the kinds of problems people have had because of the war".*

If there are sub-populations, such as males and females, that you want represented in your sample data, you will need to repeat the question for each group. We recommend letting the interviewee respond spontaneously to the question the first time and then follow up by repeating the question for other sub-populations of interest. For example, if an interviewee, when asked to "think of someone who had problems because of the war" spontaneously thought of a man, you would want to repeat the question, but this time ask them if they can "think of a woman who has problems because of the war"

See *BEI Appendix III: Example Interviews*, to see how all these pieces go together to form an interview.

**Determine interviewing logistics:** Plan your sampling method so that the sample of interviewees represent the “community” that you are interested in. The community might be the “village or region”, or it may be “parents”, “women” or “children”. The community could be as broad as ‘country’ or as narrow as ‘widows living in a village’.

Determine the number of interviews: As with many parts of this method, the number of interviews you will want to conduct will depend on the resources available (e.g., staff, time and funding) your purpose (e.g., needs assessment, program evaluation or research) and the number of “sub-populations” you are interested in.

It is useful to have between 150 and 250 responses for each sub-population of interest. For example, let's say you are interested in exploring “war problems” in a population. You will need to decide if you are interested in examining these problems in the general population of adults or sub-populations of the community, such as men, women, teen girls, teen boys, young girls, young boys, etc. If you are creating indicators to use in program evaluation and you only work with teenage girls, you could limit your interview question to this population.

The interview is designed to elicit four responses per sub-population (e.g., adult women) for each interviewee. If you want to have 200 responses you will need to conduct 50 interviews, or more if you plan to ‘narrow’ your responses according to a criteria (see below: Narrowing responses). In our experience the actual interview takes about 15 minutes. This does not, of course, include travel time, locating interviewees, etc. If you had five interviewers conduct 10 interviews each (say 2 per hour) you could collect your 200 responses in 5 hours. Obviously there is an advantage in having more trained interviewers, especially if you are interested in a variety of communities or sub-populations or are going to do extensive narrowing of responses. You can get by with fewer responses (e.g., 100); however, fewer responses limits the range of descriptors you will have for each dimension and reduces the chances of uncovering rare, but unique responses, which may be informative.

Training interviewers: The interviewers are the most important part of the measurement process. If they do not elicit and accurately record good responses (the data) the rest of the process can be difficult, confusing or meaningless. You should select individuals who are comfortable and at ease approaching and talking with strangers. Good training is imperative and should cover the following material:

- Asking the interview question: Instruct interviewers on how to ask the question as it is given, without paraphrasing, rewording or elaborating – *except* when clarification is required because the interviewee does not understand the question or does not understand what they are being asked to do. When this happens, interviews should begin by clearly repeating the question, and provide only as much additional information or guidance as is needed. They should try not to give any example responses that might lead the respondents to give similar answers.

- Verbatim recording of responses: Provide instruction on verbatim recording of responses in the language in which the responses are given. Translation, if necessary should be done later. This point is extremely important and needs to be emphasized and practiced during the training phase. In our experience it is very common for interviewers to summarize responses, often losing a lot of rich and unique information. For example, "she takes pride in her home by keeping it very clean" becomes "she cleans her home" or even "does domestic work".
- Eliciting specific responses: Teach and provide practice on ways to probe for specific informative responses. For example, if given a response like "he has emotional problems" the interviewer should probe with "what do you mean by emotional problems? Can you give me an example?". Categories like "emotional problems" or "community involvement" may emerge during the data reduction (response sorting) process, but it is important that the original responses contain enough detail to capture the variety of emotions, feelings or behaviors that underlie the category.
- Practice interviews: The interviewers should practice interviewing each other first, followed by interviewing several people from the community of interest. This is also an opportunity to field-test your interview to ensure that the questions are being understood by people in the way that you intended and that the responses you are eliciting will provide you with the data you require. Continue the practice exercises until you are satisfied with the quality of the responses being collected.

**Conducting the interviews:** Interviewers should go into to the community and conduct the interviews according to the sampling plan. While the interviews are quite simple and do not take long, it is helpful not to schedule too many in a day. Interviewers tend to rush to make sure they keep on schedule which can impact the quality of the work. The number of interviews scheduled will vary widely according to the number of interviewers and the amount of time that they have to devote to the task. With a sufficient number of interviewers the task can be completed in one day. If only a few people are available, or if interviewers have limited time, the task could extend over days or weeks. Whenever possible, it is good to have interviewers come together to discuss their progress and examine the responses they are getting so that adjustments can be made or additional training can be conducted if necessary.

### **Organizing and Analyzing the Data**

**Compile the response data:** While the interview responses are interesting and informative on their own, they are often more useful when compiled or 'grouped' into common themes or dimensions. This can be done in a variety of ways, from simple large group sorting techniques to quite sophisticated and structured statistical techniques (see appendix I: *Statistical Analysis for Sort Method Data*). When selecting a specific technique, consider your ultimate goals for the data, available resources (e.g., time and money) and the skills of the staff that will be compiling and analyzing the data.

Before data can be compiled into groups the responses need to be transcribed onto cards (with the exception of Table Sorting: see below). Responses can be entered

into a computer database so that they can be manipulated and printed or they can be copied by hand directly onto cards. Computer software like MS Excel or a 'label template' function in a word processing program like MS Word can be used to store the responses and print them onto cards. However, for many purposes having the interviewers hand transcribe the responses onto cards is the simplest and least labor intensive method. Use whatever method works in your situation.

**Narrowing responses:** If you framed your interview question broadly, or for any reason obtained a number of responses that are not related to your ultimate goals, you may want to narrow them to those that you believe will be meaningful for your purposes. For example, if you conducted interviews asking about "problems related to the war" you will likely have many responses related to material loss (e.g., "her house was burned down" or "his car was taken"). While these responses provide useful information about the range of problems people have experienced and what they feel is important, a program that offers social support or mental health services is unlikely to have an impact on these problems. If your goal was to use the data to create a measure of program impact, you may want to limit the responses you include in your data reduction process to those that reflect behaviors or symptoms that might change as a result of a psychosocial or mental health intervention.

A suggested method for limiting the number of responses is to have two staff independently rate the responses as to whether they would change as a result of the interventions offered. You can use a third rater to examine items on which the original raters disagree, or have raters meet to confer on these responses and agree on their inclusion or exclusion. Response data can be used in different forms to serve multiple purposes. For example, all the data could be used for informing staff about the general construct of interest (e.g., competence, war problems, vulnerability) while a reduced sample of items could be used to create indicators for an assessment tool.

During this process you will also want to eliminate any responses that simply do not make sense. Occasionally there are responses that seemingly made sense when written that later, out of context, have lost their meaning. Retaining these items continues to cause confusion throughout the data reduction and interpretation process.

**Organizing the data:** Once the responses have been transcribed, examined, cleaned up and narrowed (if necessary) they are ready to be organized into meaningful groups that reflect common themes or dimensions. One of the simplest and most efficient methods for organizing responses is to have people sort them. There are a number of ways that the data can be sorted, once again, depending on your resources and purpose.

- Select sort method: The three methods we've used most frequently are:
  - Single group sort: A single group of sorters - we recommend at least 4 and no more than 8 - work as a team to decide which cards should be grouped together. This may be the quickest method for grouping the response data and is often a great participatory process that generates lots of interesting discussion. However, it has limitations in that you cannot compare the results

with the results of additional sorts as you can when you have multiple groups or multiple individual sorters.

- Multiple group sorts: This method of sorting is similar as the single group sort; except that two or more groups independently sort cards. Like single group sorting, it's participatory and sorters often find the process stimulating. It often takes more time and groups sort at different rates, but it allows you to compare the piles or categories of items created by different groups to see if common themes emerged. It is a way of assessing the reliability of your compiled data. While having more people is optimal, it is not always necessary. We recently had had two pairs of sorters sort interview responses and then compare their results. Then the four sorters completed a final sort of the responses together resulting in a consensus that was informed by their experiences with the data during the first round of sorting (this was a multiple group/single group method).
- Multiple individual sorts: This method is recommend if the goal is to analyze the results of the sorting process statistically, using principal components analysis, to examine underlying dimensions reflected in your response data (the pile data from different sorters is used to create a co-occurrence matrix. See appendix I: *Statistical Analysis for Sort Method Data* for details). We believe that having around 10 sorters is optimal, but have used as few as 6. Having an "extra" sorter or two is nice, in case you have to eliminate a particular sorter's results (see below).
- Select sorters: Ideally, you want to select people of the same culture and community as your interviewees. However you may need to balance that ideal with the demands of the task. Sorters need to have adequate literacy, and understand the task.
- Prepare a practice sort task and train sorters: People need practice to get the idea of sorting responses that "go together". We have used a short practice task of sorting descriptions of cars (see attached). The practice sort has been essential in allowing our sorters to understand the task. Have people sort the practice cards into piles of related items and think of a unifying theme to 'name' the each pile. Have people, one at a time, explain how they sorted their cards showing the others which cards they placed together and explaining why they grouped them the way they did. Discuss the similarities and differences in people's methods choices for grouping items. Obviously descriptors or characteristics of a "good car" may not work for training your particular group of sorters; however, we strongly recommend that you develop a similar practice task and provide training on the task.
- Instruct sorters on the goal of the task: Instruct your sorters to examine the cards and place them into as many groups of related items as they see fit. We suggest that sorters start with a random selection of say 50 cards and generate preliminary groupings. Then they should group the rest. When they have completed the sorting process they need to "name" each pile of cards with a word that describes their reason for placing items in it. For example a pile might be named "obedient / obeys parents", "clever in school" or 'physical problems'.

Let them know that that they may take as much time as they need and that they can modify their groupings along the way as 'new' categories emerge. It can be helpful to keep track of the time it takes each person, or group to complete their sort. People who sort too quickly may be unreliable. You can also review the names that sorters give to their "sort piles" and compare them with the actual items in the pile. If there is clearly no relation between the items, or the items and the name, you may want to re-consider using these sorting results to inform your work.

If you are using multiple sorters (individuals or groups) and want to examine the results statistically, the sort results need to record the in the following manner:

- Record the sorting structure: Once the sorters have organized items into piles, write down the names they have assigned to each pile and designate each pile each pile with a number. Then record the initials of the sorter and the number of the pile that the card was sorted into on the back of each response card. For example, if a sorter decides that a card belongs in their Pile 8, and their initials are KB, you would write 'KB: 8' on the back of the card. The number that is assigned to each pile is arbitrary; it is simply a way to record and/or track the cards that were placed together by a given sorter. If you have 5 sorters each response card should have 5 sets of initials and 5 numbers recorded on the back when all the sorting has been completed (assuming they sort the same card set sequentially. We often print a set of response cards for each sorter so that they can all sort at the same time. In this case, each set of cards has only the 'pile-sorter initial' code for one sorter).
- Record information about your sorters: Finally, you may want to record some basic demographic information about the sorters, including age, gender, level of education or ethnicity. Also document the strategy that you employed to select your sorters.

**Creating indicators and measures**: If the goal was to collect information for a needs assessment, examine the structure of a set of beliefs, interests or problems in a community, or validate the use of a particular measure, the results of the sort process will provide the needed information. However, if the intention was to collect information that could be used to inform the creation of new indicators for program evaluation, additional steps need to be taken.

**Important Note**: It is important to stress that the process of sorting the interview response data does not automatically produce a set of indicators or measures. In the end, deciding what items to include, selecting appropriate scale descriptors, etc. is a rational process that will entail the thoughtful and creative input of program staff and should take into consideration any other relevant information available (see Process Flow Diagram at the end of the manual).

Also, indicators will likely look quite generic and/or not significantly different from those developed in other communities or countries "e.g., a learning or education category for children); however, it is the descriptors that underlie or anchor the points on the scale that give your indicators the local meaning and make it relevant and useful in measuring change in a locally meaningful way.

- Examine the structure of the sorting results: Examine common themes or underlying dimensions that emerge from the combined sort task results (e.g., results of group consensus or principal components analysis). What types of responses were most frequently mentioned (i.e., what were the largest groupings of items or which factors contained the most items)? Did local ways of describing more universal constructs emerge (e.g., local idioms, or terms for expression of depression, or grief)?
- Combine with other types of information: This manual is limited to describing using brief ethnographic interviewing as a method for gathering information. However, we recommend that other methods be used in conjunction with this technique to enrich and expand the process. For example, you could also conduct Focus Groups and Key Informant Interviews to assess local ideas about your area of interest (e.g., well-being or problems related to the war). Most importantly, the knowledge of staff should be used as both an important source of information about what kinds of indicators would be important to include for program evaluation and as a filter for information from all other sources. Compare and combine findings from the different methods. There are many good resources available on conducting focus groups and key informant interviews and recommend resources are included in the appendix.
- Creating indicators. Program staff should come together to create indicators based on results of sorting and other useful sources of information. Have them examine the important domains that emerged from the response data. Identify areas, based on this summarized data from the community, which would appear important to assess. In creating indicators, it is important that they provide information that the program staff find interesting and useful. Don't bother to collect information that no one is interested in. This may sound simple, but it is amazing the amount of data that is collected that no one finds interesting or useful. Also, make sure that the indicators created are likely to change as a result of the interventions being offered or services being provided. Many problems, while important, may not change as a result of a specific psychosocial program, or may only do so after a very long time. It may be useful to create additional indicators for larger domains, or for more complex domains that have several important features.

While there is no 'magic number' for how many indicators to create, to begin with, fewer is usually better. In the enthusiasm of trying to 'not miss measuring any important area or construct' measures can quickly become burdensome and as a result not be well received or utilized by program staff. If staff discovers after using a set of indicators for awhile that an important piece of information is not being assessed, additional indicators can always be added.

- Test measure for utility. Once a set of indicators has been created, you will want to 'pilot test' it, or use it for a specified period of time, to see how it works as part of your intervention. Overtime you may want to adapt, add or drop indicators and refine your measure based on its demonstrated utility.

**(See Flow Diagram for Creating Indicators below)**

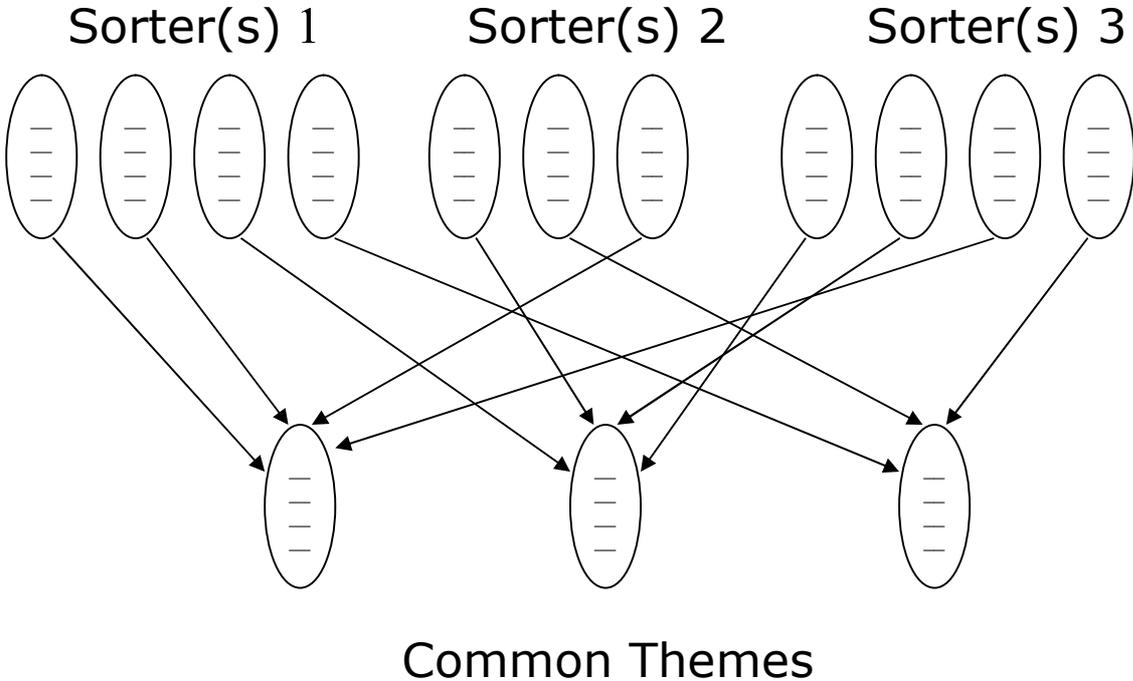
# INTERVIEWS



# RESPONSES



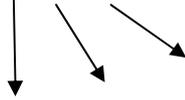
# RESPONSE SORTING



# CREATE INDICATORS

## Sort Data

Common Themes



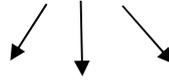
### Domain I

#### Indicators

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....

## Other Information (examples)

Staff Knowledge



### Domain II

#### Indicators

1. ....

Focus Group Information



### Domain III

#### Indicators

1. ....
2. ....

Key Informant



## Measure

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....



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## Instruction for a 'Practice Sort'

It can be very beneficial to have your sorters engage in a practice sort prior to sorting the actual response data. In our experience people catch on to the task quickly during the practice as it gives an opportunity for forming grouping strategies on a small set of items.

### 1. **Create a set of Practice Sort Cards for each sorter:**

- Print Practice Sort Card page (attached) and cut into individual responses to create an identical set of cards for each participant sorter. Note: if you plan to use the cards over several times, it is helpful to print them on thicker paper or card stock.
- Important: The practice set we've included is made up of items related to cars. If your sorters are not familiar with cars, or would not readily understand the types of items represented on the cards you should create a practice set that you think would be more understandable. For example, we have used cards containing 'things related to a home' in areas where cars were not common.

### 2. **Pass out the Practice Sort Cards:**

- Explain what the cards represent, for example "these cards contain responses about things related to 'good cars' (or 'things found in a home', etc.).
- Ask them to sort the cards into piles of responses that they think go together. They can make as many or as few piles as they like. Let them know that they will be asked to give each pile a name that describes the theme for responses in that pile.
- Remind them that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to sort the responses and avoid giving them examples of items that 'could' go together in some way.
- Ask them to work alone during the practice sort, even if you intend for sorters to work in small teams during the primary sorting task.

- Tell them that they can move cards around and/or change their piles as they go along.
- Let them know that everyone sorts at different rates, but that this is just a practice and a teaching tool so they shouldn't take too long.

### **3. Discuss the results of the Practice Sort:**

- Begin by asking each sorter to report how many piles they created.
- Go around the group and have the sorters discuss their piles, looking for and pointing out similarities and differences in how they sorted the cards.
- Remind them that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' combinations.
- Tell them that the purpose of this exercise was to give them practice sorting items into categories of items that 'go together' in a way that makes sense to them.
- Ask them if they have questions and clear up any confusion about what they are being asked to do.

**Response Cards for Practice Sort:**

Responses related to Good Cars

Copy and cut to create a set of cards for each sorter.

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 01. Has a great paint job     | 12. Has a powerful engine                   |
| 02. Has a really good radio   | 13. Has good breaks                         |
| 03. Has fancy trim on outside | 14. Does not need to be repaired very often |
| 04. Is economical to maintain | 15. Has a tape player                       |
| 05. Has power seats           | 16. Is comfortable to ride in               |

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 06. Has a CD player                            | 17. Has power windows       |
| 07. Is cheap to operate                        | 18. It has a sunroof        |
| 08. Accelerates quickly                        | 19. Is nice looking         |
| 09. Has good tires                             | 20. Gets good gas mileage   |
| 10. Has lots of room inside                    | 21. Goes very fast          |
| 11. Does not have any scratches from accidents | 22. Has leather seat covers |