

2. Conducting a Semistructured Assessment

2.1 The GAIN as a Semistructured Assessment

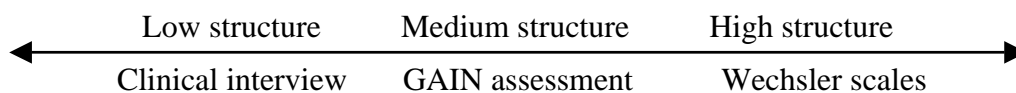
The goal of any assessment is to collect reliable, valid data. Reliable data is data that doesn't waver; for instance, if we ask the participant the same question twice, we will get the same answer twice. Valid data is truthful data, accurate data, data that precisely captures and describes the phenomena that we intend to measure. Neither is sufficient by itself. Participants in an interview can reliably give an invalid answer because they misunderstand the question. Conversely, a clinical insight by one interviewer might lead to further clarification of a participant's response, thereby increasing its validity, but this same response may not be replicated when the same question is asked by a different interviewer.

The "old school," classical-learning theory of assessment administration in the field focused on collecting reliable data at the expense of valid data. This administration style is a very rigid "stimulus-response" model. The interviewer asked the question exactly as printed (stimulus), and whatever the participant answered was recorded (response). Why? Because this administration style leads to the most reliable answers. It didn't matter whether the participant misunderstood the item or had a question about the item or gave an answer that didn't make sense—the focus was strictly on stimulus-response and reliability. So what happened? Answers were reliable, but not necessarily valid. Because of concerns about validity, the field now encourages interviewers to incorporate some common sense into assessment administration in order to increase validity.

The GAIN is a *semistructured assessment*, a cross between a clinical interview and a highly structured, standardized assessment (see exhibit 2-1). Although a clinical interview typically contains a series of topic areas to cover or even a list of general questions, the clinical data-gathering session follows the participant's lead. Follow-up questions are based on information provided by the participant, and areas needing further explanation are probed. On the other end of the spectrum, a highly structured, standardized assessment like one of the Wechsler intelligence scales (e.g., Wechsler, 1997) has very rigid rules of administration. The focus is on reliability of administration so that all participants experience the same test. Attention to standardized administration is in response to the need to compare answers against a set of norms that were collected under identical testing conditions.

Conducting a GAIN assessment, on the other hand, balanced the reliability needs of a standardized assessment against the validity needs of a clinical interview.

Exhibit 2-1. The Continuum of Assessment Administration Styles



Several aspects of the field of substance abuse treatment are propelling clinical practice toward moderately structured assessments such as the GAIN. First, although the clinical interview is a powerful data-gathering approach, its lack of structure invites room for error in the hands of less experienced staff members. The field of substance abuse treatment has a high rate of staff turnover, and many clinicians lack experience. Although an experienced clinician can quickly hone in on a participant's major difficulties and can use probes effectively to conceptualize problems and gain insights into the client, clinical interviewing skills take time to develop, sometimes longer than a staff member may choose to stay in the field. Moreover, the average substance abuse participant presents with multiple interacting problems that even experienced clinicians have trouble reliably identifying as the primary problem. In a continuum-of-care model the staff member conducting the intake assessment may not be the primary counselor or is just one member of a larger team. It is thus difficult for other team members to know what information was or was not asked, leading many teams to conduct redundant assessments (costing time, money, and the goodwill of the participants) or to have to "discover" things as they go along. For these reasons, the field is pushing clinical practice toward more structured assessments.

In the pages to follow, a set of GAIN administration guidelines will be introduced. However, each will also be tempered with a dose of common sense. Keep in mind that with the GAIN assessment the focus is on *standardization of understanding* over strict *standardization of administration*. Our goal is for participants to understand the items as we intend so that they can give valid answers. Sometimes we will need to deviate from our administration guidelines if those guidelines prevent the participant from understanding an item. Knowing when and how to deviate from the assessment guidelines is the true challenge in GAIN administration.

For the sake of clarity the instrument or inventory will be referred to as the "assessment." The person administering the assessment, usually a clerk, intake worker, counselor, administrator, or research assistant, among others, will be referred to as the "interviewer." The person answering the questions, elsewhere referred to as the patient, client, or person who has since left treatment, will be referred to as the "participant."

2.2 Ten-Plus-One Guidelines for Assessment Administration

Exhibit 2-2 lists guidelines for administering the GAIN assessment. The first ten guidelines are relevant to administering most assessments. The eleventh guideline, "Use common sense," is specific to conducting a semistructured assessment such as the GAIN. Using material adapted from Dennis, Rourke, and colleagues (1995), each of these guidelines is discussed in this section along with examples illustrating why they are so important. The admonition to use common sense will be woven throughout the discussion, using examples from actual GAIN administrations.

Exhibit 2-2. Ten-Plus-One Guidelines for Assessment Administration

1. Ask the items exactly as printed.
 2. Ask the items in the exact order as printed.
 3. Ask every item specified.
 4. Read the complete item.
 5. Repeat items that are misunderstood.
 6. Read the items slowly.
 7. Do not suggest answers to the participant.
 8. Use introductory or transitional statements.
 9. Use neutral probes.
 10. Listen to responses.
- +1. Use common sense.
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1. Ask the items exactly as printed. This guideline ensures that all participants are responding to the same set of items—in essence, that everyone is taking the same assessment. It is very easy to change the meaning of an item by changing a word, leaving out a word, or reordering the words. Even slight changes affect meaning, which in turn affects responses and, ultimately, the validity of the data. For example, think how profoundly the meaning of item S8f (Do you currently feel that you can get the help you need in an alcohol or other drug treatment program?) changes if the interviewer accidentally inserts the word “not” after “can”: “Do you currently feel that you *cannot* get the help you need in an alcohol or other drug treatment program?”

Some of the items on the GAIN are long because they contain a list of signs and symptoms of various psychological conditions. However, it is important that words are not dropped from the items. For instance, dropping “a lot” from item M1d4 (During the past year, have you had significant problems with getting into a lot of arguments and feeling the urge to shout, throw things, beat, injure, or harm someone?) or the last few signs and symptoms (such as reading only “have you had significant problems with getting into a lot of arguments and feeling the urge to shout or throw things?”) yields a different item than intended.

When a participant uses alternative terms, like slang, to discuss a subject area, some interviewers have reacted by mirroring the language used by the participant. However, interviewers should not modify questions in this manner. An example of this occurred when a participant was asked how many children he had. The participant replied that he had “four brats at home.” In a subsequent question that referred to those children, the interviewer replaced the word “children” with the word “brats.” While it is the participant’s decision to refer to his own kids as “brats,” it changes the meaning of the item and can easily become an insult when done by the interviewer.

Bowing to common sense, there are a couple of situations where *not* reading the item exactly as printed would be appropriate. One such situation involves GAIN items that are intended to be open-ended items. That is, the interviewer asks the question, the participant answers, and

the interviewer codes the answer from a list of options, clarifying if necessary. These items are indicated on the hard copy of the GAIN assessment by parenthetical directions such as **(Clarify and code response)**. One such item is item E1, “What kind of housing do you currently live in?” Rather than reading the entire list of responses as printed, the interviewer allows the participant to answer, asking any follow-up questions to clearly narrow down the participant’s response. For instance, suppose when asked item E1, the participant answers, “an apartment.” Although at first glance it appears that the response should be coded as response choice 1, “A house, apartment, or room that you, your spouse, your partner, or your parents rent or own,” the interviewer needs to clarify whether it’s an apartment that the participant (or spouse, partner, or parents) rents or owns (response choice 1), a foster-home apartment (2), a rent-subsidized apartment (3), or a friend or relative’s apartment (4). The interviewer *could* read the entire list of possible responses, but to save time and allow for a more natural interactive flow, in this situation it is preferable to deviate from the guideline.

Another deviation involves incorporating into the items information that you know or learn about the participant. For instance, suppose that when asking the S2 items (When was the last time, if ever, you used [various substances]?) you learn that the only substance the participant has used in the past 90 days is alcohol. Subsequent items in the S2 series inquire about the participant’s use of “alcohol or drugs” during the past 90 days. In this situation, you can shorten the item stem to reference only alcohol, especially if the participant reminds you that he has used only alcohol during the past 90 days. This communicates to the participant that you are listening to his responses.

2. Ask the items in the exact order as printed. The items on the GAIN are ordered intentionally. Thus the meaning of any particular item may change or be unclear if asked out of sequence. It is also possible to miss some items entirely if the prescribed order is not followed. Is the entire assessment ruined if the interviewer unintentionally skips an item? No, though hopefully the interviewer notices the skipped item and goes back to it. It may be necessary to explain to the participant that an item was skipped and that you’re going back to it, especially if the assessment has moved to an unrelated set of items. It would be worse if an interviewer skipped an item and didn’t realize it or skipped an item but kept recording answers as if the item was not skipped, thereby recording responses for the wrong items.

Some items on the GAIN are intentionally skipped depending on the participant’s responses to earlier questions. For instance, if a participant is age 18 or older, it would not make sense to ask who has custody of her. Following the instructions on the GAIN is important to avoid asking items that should be skipped and thus prevent violation of the guideline to ask items in the order printed.

3. Ask every item specified. It is not unusual for an interviewer to have basic information about a participant before that participant shows up for an assessment. Likewise, during the assessment the interviewer learns a lot about the participant, either through casual comments or answers to items. Sometimes this information appears to answer items that appear later in the assessment. To avoid looking like she wasn’t listening or perhaps to avoid provoking the participant, an interviewer may be tempted to enter the answers to items without asking them. It is important that interviewers resist this temptation to assume a participant’s responses. It is

not unusual for an interviewer to get only partial information to a previous item, and the participant may very well answer more fully when asked a seemingly redundant item.

The following strategy can be used to help interviewers resist this temptation. When the interviewer receives information that seems to answer a later item, it can be recorded in the margin near the item where it was received. Later, when the related item occurs, the interviewer could acknowledge to the participant that she remembers what was said earlier. For example, the interviewer might say, “We’ve already talked about this topic a bit, but let me ask...” or “You’ve told me something about this, but this next item asks....” Then the item should be asked exactly as it is worded in the assessment.

4. Read the complete item. Some of the items on the GAIN are so long because they contain lists of specific examples or signs and symptoms of various conditions. If a participant interrupts, offering an answer before the interviewer is finished reading the item, it may not be a valid answer. For example, item S9j asks, “When was the last time you used alcohol or other drugs where it made the situation unsafe or dangerous for you, such as when you were driving a car, using a machine, or where you might have been forced into sex or hurt?” Notice how there is unique information throughout the item. If the participant answers “no” to that item before the interviewer has a chance to finish reading it, there is no way to know whether the answer is really accurate. For example, if the participant heard only through “driving a car,” he wouldn’t hear “using a machine” or “where you might have been forced into sex or hurt,” both of which could change his response if his initial answer was “no.”

It’s not unusual for a participant to answer before the interviewer is done reading the item, but then upon hearing the rest of the item, say, “Oh, no, the answer should be ‘yes.’” When this happens, let the participant know that you must read the items through to the end. Do not accept a premature response to an item.

However, there is one situation where reading the entire item is not necessary. Using the example above, “When was the last time you used alcohol or drugs where it made the situation unsafe or dangerous for you, such as when you were driving a car, using a machine, or where you might have been forced into sex or hurt?” if the participant answers “yes” to the item before the interviewer is finished reading the item, the interviewer can stop reading the item and the answer can be accepted (because the participant has already responded to at least one factor in the item). Answering “yes” to a partial list of signs and symptoms is sufficient for answering the item. However, answering “no” to a partial list of signs and symptoms is not sufficient, and the interviewer would need to finish reading the item before an answer was accepted.

5. Repeat items that are misunderstood. Sometimes participants don’t understand particular items or even words within the items. In highly structured assessments, interviewers are not allowed to explain items that are clearly misunderstood; the items are simply repeated. However, because our focus is on collecting valid data, interviewers *should* repeat items that are misunderstood and provide further clarifying information if necessary. It may be necessary to define words or give examples, but in doing so the interviewer must be very careful not to change the meaning of the item. Definitions offered should be accurate, and examples should

be relevant. The interviewer should do what is needed to help the participant understand the item. However, after offering a definition or example and being assured that the participant understands, the interviewer should repeat the original item.

A dialogue between an interviewer (I) and participant (P) regarding an item on a personality assessment (First, Gibbon, Spitzer, Williams, & Benjamin, 1997) is offered as an example.

I: Yes or no: during the past year, did you think that it's not necessary to follow certain rules or social conventions when they get in your way?

P: What do you mean by "social conventions"?

I: Let me give you an example. Do you have rules you have to follow at your school?

P: Yeah, like we aren't supposed to chew gum in the classroom.

I: Okay. Do you follow that rule?

P: No.

I: (Interviewer circles "no" on assessment.)

In this example, the interviewer elicited from the participant an example of a social convention that the participant does not follow. However, rather than returning to the original item, she recorded the answer to the example as if it were the answer for the item on the assessment. She should have used this example constructively by returning to the original item:

I: Okay, so no gum-chewing in class is an example of a social convention in your school, and it happens to be a social convention that you don't follow. Now let's go back to this item and think more generally. Yes or no: during the past year, did you think that it wasn't necessary to follow certain rules or social conventions when they get in your way?

If a participant offers an illogical answer to an item, a simple repetition of the item is often sufficient for the participant to understand his error and reconsider his response. If an illogical answer is offered a second time, define any necessary words or explain the meaning of the item, ending with a repetition of the original item.

6. Read the items slowly. This is very important. Sometimes as interviewers get more and more familiar with the assessment, or in an attempt to move an assessment along quicker, they start to speed up. Keep in mind that even though it may be the fortieth time that the interviewer has read the assessment, it is the participant's first time hearing it. The participant needs time to consider individual words and phrases as well as the complete item in order to provide the information requested. Studies have shown that the reading pace established by the interviewer is one of the critical elements of the assessment. A pace of about two words per second is considered optimal. This allows the interviewer time to enunciate every word carefully and gives the participant time to listen and formulate a careful response.

When interviewers read questions slowly and carefully, they are demonstrating desirable behavior that should be copied by the participant. If the interviewer seems to race through the assessment, the participant will probably respond by providing short, terse responses. One clear indication of delivering items too rapidly is the participant's frequent request that items

be repeated. Take the time in the beginning of each interview to let participants learn how to answer items and they will move faster as the interview proceeds and similar types of questions are asked.

7. Do not suggest answers to the participant. Suggesting answers to the participant is an easy pitfall to stumble into and can happen through the interviewer's verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

In the verbal realm, remember that the responses need to come from the participant, not the interviewer. Sometimes a participant will offer a response that is not within the set of defined response choices. For example, in response to a yes/no item, the participant may respond, "sometimes." In these situations it's important that the interviewer clarify the response with the participant without offering an answer. Saying "Would that be 'yes' or 'no'?" or "So should I put 'yes' or 'no'?" are two possible responses for the interviewer. Note that the interviewer is clarifying by offering several options (yes *or* no) rather than proposing only one option (yes). It would not be appropriate to offer to the participant, "So do you want to go with 'yes'?" or worse, to assume that the participant meant "yes" and circle that response without asking for clarification.

For items that make use of response cards, if the participant offers a response that is not one of the available responses on the card, clarify rather than assume: "So using this card, what would your answer be?" It typically takes only a few requests for clarification until the participant routinely consults the card for a response.

As a third example, suppose in response to an item that begins, "During the past 90 days, on how many days did you...?" the participant says, "About half the days." If the interviewer responds with "45 days?" she is asking for clarification, but her clarification also suggests the answer. Better ways to clarify would be, "So how many days would that be?" or "So how many days should I put?" If the participant asks you to work out the math for him, that is fine as long as you confirm the response with the participant: "You used on half the days, so 90 divided by 2 is 45, does that sound okay to you?"

As a final verbal example, when giving qualitative, open-ended answers—referred to on the GAIN as verbatim responses—sometimes participants will offer sketchy responses. The interviewer should follow up with the participant, asking appropriate clarifying questions in order to get a response that clearly answers the question. The interviewer may understand what the participant meant, but someone else coming along after the fact to code verbatim responses may have no idea what was meant if only a few cryptic notes that don't appear to answer the question are recorded.

Suggesting answers nonverbally can be very subtle yet can have powerful effects. For the duration of the assessment, the interviewer needs to wear the "data gatherer" hat. This requires being an unbiased reporter and suppressing value judgments or the natural instinct to help. Facial expressions can very easily reveal reactions to the content of a response. Interviewers should avoid giving any cues to the participant about whether she approves or disapproves of a participant's response. Keep in mind that participants are typically anxious to please

interviewers and will, on a conscious or unconscious level, try to shape their answers if they feel that the interviewer does not approve of a behavior. If the interviewer is a clinician, remember that the opportunity to use clinical skills will come after the initial assessment. While administering the assessment, try to avoid these pitfalls and remain an unbiased recorder and reporter of the information that the participant offers. Remember, during the assessment the interviewer is simply trying to gather reliable, valid data; counseling is the next step.

8. Use introductory or transitional statements. The introductory and transitional statements are printed on the GAIN instruments. They are important to include because they provide delimiting or defining information (e.g., defining the word “significant” at the beginning of the Mental Health section; focusing the participant on treatment only for drug and alcohol use (S4-S7), only for physical health problems (P11), or only for psychological problems (M5)) as well as a natural shift between scales that cover different topics. Interviewers should include these statements during administration.

Although it is not acceptable to paraphrase items, paraphrasing of introductory or transitional statements is acceptable if all of the important information provided in the statements is included in the paraphrase. For instance, the introduction to the GAIN is written around an outline of important points. Any paraphrase of that information must cover all points. It is strongly suggested that if one plans to deviate from the introductory statements as printed on the GAIN, one uses a script that is tailored to a project’s specific population and includes all necessary information. Paraphrasing on the fly is difficult to do and often results in confusion for the participant. A sample script written for introducing the GAIN-I to an adolescent population is found in attachment 4-4 in chapter 4 (“Quality Assurance in GAIN Administration”).

9. Use neutral probes. As mentioned above, sometimes participants give less than clear answers. In these situations the interviewer needs to clarify the participant’s answer in a neutral way without suggesting an answer to the participant. Remember, the answers need to come from the participant, not the interviewer. Following are some ways to do this.

- Neutral comments: “Tell me more about that”; “Please explain that further”; “Can you give me an example?”
- Repeating the response choices: “Would that be ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”; “How would you answer using the response choices on this card? Past month, 2-12 months ago, 1 or more years ago, or never?”
- Rereading the item: It could be that the participant didn’t hear the entire item.
- Expectant pauses (“pregnant pause”): Wait for a few seconds and see whether the participant elaborates.

Probe only as necessary to obtain a clear response that meets the item specifications. If the item has an instruction that reads “MENTIONED” (analogous to “circle all that apply”), probe to the negative. That means the interviewer should continue to ask the participant for answers (e.g., “Anything else?”) until he says that there are no more.

10. Listen to responses. Asking items properly is important, but so is listening carefully to the responses. By listening carefully, the interviewer will be clued in as to whether or not the participant understood the item or was paying attention. For instance, suppose the interviewer asks, “During the past 90 days, on how many days did you use any alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs?” and the participant answers, “Forty times.” Note that the participant answered with a number of times, not a number of days. If an interviewer wasn’t listening carefully, she might miss that subtlety and enter “40” and move on.

Sometimes participants offer inconsistent answers across items on the GAIN. If an interviewer doesn’t mentally track the participant’s answers, opportunities to follow up on inconsistencies would be missed. When they occur, inconsistencies should be inquired about in a nonthreatening manner. For example, suppose for item S2c that a participant says she last used marijuana 3-7 days ago. However, when later asked, “During the past 90 days, on how many days did you use any kind of marijuana or hashish?” she answers, “none.” The interviewer should clarify these inconsistent responses. For instance, the interviewer could say, “Okay, on the item where I asked you when you last used marijuana, you said that it was 3 to 7 days ago. But then when I asked you on how many days out of the past 90 you used marijuana, you said none. Can you see how those don’t add up?” The interviewer could then re-ask both items for consistent responses.

Another example of an apparent inconsistency that should be clarified occurs between observed facts about the participant and the participant’s answers. Let’s say that an adolescent participant is brought to the assessment in handcuffs by a probation officer. When asked whether he has been involved in the criminal justice system, he answers, “no.” Under the “old school” an interviewer would record this answer and move along. But common sense tells us that things don’t add up. In a situation like this the interviewer should ask about the inconsistency in a nonconfrontational way, perhaps by letting the participant know that involvement with the criminal justice system includes juvenile detention, and then the interviewer should repeat the item. This said, if the participant wants to stay with a contradictory or unlikely answer, allow him to and move on. Don’t get into a fight with the participant, but note the inconsistency under (for instance) the Administration ratings section (item XADMj) at the end of the GAIN-I or in the “Additional Comments” section at the end of the GAIN-Quick.

There are situations when questioning an inconsistency is not recommended. For instance, suppose that the interviewer knows a fact about the participant through a trusted source, such as a probation officer. If the participant offers a response that does not line up with the information as reported by the probation officer, do not confront the participant on his answer. Rather, in the case of the GAIN-I and similarly structured GAIN instruments, note the inconsistency in the Denial and Misrepresentation area and the Administration ratings (item XADMj) at the end of the assessment. In the case of the GAIN-Quick, note the inconsistency in the Additional Comments area at the end of the assessment.

A final important situation that calls for careful listening occurs when a participant wants to tell the interviewer something in earnest that may or may not be covered on the assessment. Since the topic is important to the participant, the interviewer should take the opportunity to

demonstrate that she is listening but avoid getting into a long discussion. In this situation, the interviewer should let the participant know whether or not the topic will be covered later. If it will, the short discussion could be engaged in at that time. During the discussion, the interviewer should offer to write notes on the assessment to help convey the participant's message, read them back to the participant to make sure that what the participant wants to say is recorded correctly, and then refocus the participant on the interview. If the topic is not covered on the assessment, let the participant know but offer to write a brief note on the assessment to make sure the assigned counselor discusses the situation with him. Avoid getting into a detailed discussion about it, and refocus the participant on the interview.

+1. Use common sense.