

Using interviews as research instruments

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Abstract

Research differs in a number of aspects but they do have some commonalities. Many facets are involved in conducting research. One very essential factor is collecting data. Data collection can be gathered from a number of sources, which include documents, the workplace, the Internet surveys, focus groups, field notes, questionnaires and taped social interaction or interviews. This article focuses on interviews as a method of data collection—namely structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and non-directive interviews, and some of the ethical issues involved in conducting interviews.

Introduction

Research differs in a number of aspects but they do have some commonalities. What do action research, evaluation research, ethnography, phenomenology and others have in common? One of the common aspects is the need to collect data. Data collection can be derived from a number of methods, which include interviews, focus groups, surveys, telephone interviews, fieldnotes, taped social interaction or questionnaires (Heaton, 2004, p. 37).

Data collection is an essential component to conducting research. Data collection is a complicated and hard task. By and large it is also very difficult to say which is the best method of data collection. O'Leary (2004, p. 150) remarks "Collecting credible data is a tough task, and it is worth remembering that one method of data collection is not inherently better than another." Therefore, which data collection method to use would depend upon the research goals and the advantages and disadvantages of each method (Ibid.).

In order to collect data, the researcher should be able to access the data that needs to be collected for the study. Data can be gathered from a number of sources including written documents, records, workplaces, the Internet, surveys or interviews. This article discusses data collection from four types of interviews—structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and non-directive interviews as well

as examines some of the ethical issues involved in conducting an interview.

Interviews

Interviews are a systematic way of talking and listening to people (<http://www.who.int>) and are another way to collect data from individuals through conversations. The researcher or the interviewer often uses open questions. Data is collected from the interviewee. The researcher needs to remember the interviewer's views about the topic is not of importance. The interviewee or respondent is the primary data for the study.

Interviewing is a way to collect data as well as to gain knowledge from individuals. Kvale (1996, p. 14) regarded interviews as “... an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data.”

Interviews are ways for participants to get involved and talk about their views. In addition, the interviewees are able to discuss their perception and interpretation in regards to a given situation. It is their expression from their point of view. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 267) explain “... the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable.”

The researcher has to know and select the appropriate method for addressing the needs of the research question. Then, the researcher has to make a decision and choose the right method for that study. Data collection has its complexities and demands. This article assumes that the right data collection method is interviewing, which “... has its own issues and complexities, and demands its own type of rigour” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 162).

It is the role of the researcher to ask questions. The questions ought to elicit valid response from respondents. Hoyle, Harris and Judd (2002, p. 144) comment that questions have “... dual goals of motivating the respondent to give full and precise replies while avoiding biases stemming from social desirability, conformity, or other constructs of disinterest.”

Interviewers that have been properly trained, and play the proper role of the interviewers along with well-designed questions can conduct a good

interview. Hoyle, Harris and Judd (2002, p. 145) agree "... proper training and proper interviewer behavior can help greatly in achieving the goals."

There are many reasons to use interviews for collecting data and using it as a research instrument. Gray (2004, p. 214) has given the following reasons:

- There is a need to attain highly personalized data.
- There are opportunities required for probing.
- A good return rate is important.
- Respondents are not fluent in the native language of the country, or where they have difficulties with written language.

It is necessary for the researcher to prepare before the actual interview. The interview starts before the interview actually begins. This is the researcher's preparation stage. Once the interview is conducted the researcher needs to make sure that the respondents have:

- A clear idea of why *they* have been asked;
- Basic information about the purpose of the interview and the research project of which it is a part;
- Some idea of the probable length of the interview and that you would like to record it (explaining *why*);
- A clear idea of precisely where and when the interview will take place

Gillham (2000, p. 38).

Also the interview needs to be effective and this is the responsible of the researcher. The researcher ought to have the following skills and abilities

- An ability to listen;
- An ability to be non-judgmental;
- A good memory;
- Ability to think on his/her feet
(<http://cerg.csse.mongash.edu.au>).

An interview guide is also an essential component for conducting interviews. An interview guide is the list of questions, topics, and issues that the researcher wants to cover during the interview. The interview guide should be clear and avoid ambiguity. The researcher ought not ask personal or illegal questions and be comfortable with silences and wait for the respondent to speak.

WHO (<http://www.who.int>) suggested six steps to devise an interview guide, which include:

- Identify appropriate topics and questions;
- Decide on the level of detail;
- Draft the questions;
- Order the questions;
- List any probes or prompts; and
- Pilot the questions. Have the informant identify the problems during the pilot.

Types of Interviews

There are many types of interviews, which include:

- structured interviews,
- semi-structured interviews,
- unstructured interviews,
- non-directive interview.

This article discusses the aforementioned interviews and ethical issues involved in conducting interviews.

Structured Interviews

A structured interview is sometimes called a standardized interview. The same questions are asked of all respondents. Corbetta (2003, p.269) states structured interviews are

“ ... interviews in which all respondents are asked the same questions *with the same wording and in the same sequence.*” It would be ideal if

questions can be read out in the same tone of voice so that the respondents would not be influenced by the tone of the interviewer (Gray, 2004, p. 215).

Bryman (2001 p. 107) explains structured interview entails:

... the administration of an interview schedule by an interviewer.

The aim is for all interviewees to be given exactly the same context of questioning. This means that each respondent receives exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The goal of this style of interview is to ensure that interviewees' replies can be aggregated ... Questions are usually very specific and very often the interviewee a fixed range of answers (this type of question is often called *closed, closed ended, pre-coded, or fixed choice*).

This type of interview introduces some rigidity to the interview (Corbetta, 2003). For example, probing can be a problem area for structured interviews. Respondents may not understand the question and unable to answer it. Moreover, respondents may not have received sufficient information to answer the question. Bryman (2001, p. 118) clarifies,

The problem in either situation is obvious: the interviewer's intervention may influence the respondent and the nature of interviewers' ability in respondent's replies that does not reflect 'true' variation.

The strengths of structured interviews are that the researcher has control over the topics and the format of the interview. This is because a detailed interview guide is used. Consequently, there is a common format, which makes it easier to analyze, code and compare data. In addition, a detailed interview guide can permit inexperienced researchers to do a structured interview (<http://www.who.int>).

According to David and Sutton (2004, p. 160) another strength of structured interviews is "Prompting can be included with the questions and if a question is inappropriate, data on why no response was made can be recorded." Furthermore, non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures can be recorded.

On the contrary, drawbacks of structured interviews are they adhere too closely to the interview guide and may be the cause of not probing for relevant information. Also, since there is a set interview guide, the respondents may hear and interpret or understand the questions in a different manner. The researcher's verbal comments and non-verbal cues can cause bias and have an influence upon respondents' answers (Ibid. p. 161).

Semi-structured Interviews

On the other hand, semi-structured interviews are non-standardized and are frequently used in qualitative analysis. The interviewer does not do the research to test a specific hypothesis (David, & Sutton, 2004, p. 87). The researcher has a list of key themes, issues, and questions to be covered. In this type of interview the order of the questions can be changed depending on the direction of the interview. An interview guide is also used, but additional questions can be asked. Corbetta (2003 p. 270) explains semi-structured interviews as follows:

The order in which the various topics are dealt with and the wording of the questions are left to the interviewer's discretion.

Within each topic, the interviewer is free to conduct the conversation as he thinks fit, to ask the questions he deems appropriate in the words he considers best, to give explanation and ask for clarification if the answer is not clear, to prompt the

respondent to elucidate further if necessary, and to establish his own style of conversation.

Additional questions can be asked and some may be questions that have not been anticipated in the beginning of the interview. Note taking or tape recording documents the interview. This type of interview gives the researcher opportunities to probe for views and opinions of the interviewee. Probing is a way for the interview to explore new paths which were not initially considered (Gray, 2004, p. 217). Having " ... key themes and sub-questions in advance lies in giving the researcher a sense of order from which to draw questions from unplanned encounters (David, & Sutton, 2004, p. 87)."

The researcher conducting semi-structured interviews is freer one than conducting a structured interview (Kajornboon, 2004, p. 75) in which the interviewer does not have to adhere to a detailed interview guide. Patton (2002, p. 343) recommends to " ... explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject ... to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined."

The strengths of semi-structured interviews are that the researcher can prompt and probe deeper into the given situation. For example, the interviewer inquires about using computers in English language teaching. Some respondents are more computer literate than others are. Hence, with this type of interview the interviewers are able to probe or asked more detailed questions of respondents' situations and not adhere only to the interview guide. In addition, the researcher can explain or rephrase the questions if respondents are unclear about the questions.

The drawbacks are inexperienced interviewers may not be able to ask prompt questions. If this is the case, some relevant data may not be gathered. In addition, inexperienced interviewers may not probe into a situation. For example, if the respondents do not know how to use computers and do not want to use them in language teaching, the interviewer needs to probe and find out the reasons and ask for explanations.

Unstructured Interviews

This type of interview is non-directed and is a flexible method. It is more casual than the aforementioned interviews. There is no need to follow a

detailed interview guide. Each interview is different. Interviewees are encouraged to speak openly, frankly and give as much detail as possible.

Usually the interviewer has received virtually little or no training or coaching about the interview process and has not prepared much. The interviewers ask questions that respondents would be able to express their opinions, knowledge and share their experience.

This can create some problems because the interviewer may not know what to look for or what direction to take the interview. The researcher may not obtain data that is relevant to the question of the study. The interviewer needs to think about what to ask and to ask questions carefully and phrase them properly and know when to probe and prompt.

In an unstructured interview the researcher has to be a good listener and note new or interesting data the interviewee gives. It " ... requires good communication and facilitation skills" (<http://www.who.int>).

The strengths of unstructured interviews are no restrictions are placed on questions. It is useful when little or no knowledge exists about a topic. So, background data can be collected. Unstructured interviews are flexible and the researcher can investigate underlying motives. The drawbacks of unstructured interviews are that they can be inappropriate for inexperienced interviewers. The interviewers may be bias and ask inappropriate questions. Also, respondents may talk about irrelevant and inconsequential issues. Consequently, it may be difficult to code and analyze the data.

Non-directive Interviews

The structured and semi-structured interviews are somewhat controlled by the researcher who has set the issues and questions. In non-directive interviews there are no preset topic to pursue. Questions are usually not pre-planned. The interviewer listens and does not take the lead. The interviewer follows what the interviewee has to say. The interviewee leads the conversation.

The interviewer has the objectives of the research in mind and what issues to cover during the interview. The interviewee is allowed to talk freely about the subject. The interviewer's role is to check on unclear points and to rephrase the answer to check for accuracy and understanding (Gray, 2004 p. 217).

The interviewer does not know which direction the interview will take. Non-directive interviews have their origin in dynamic psychology and psychotherapy with the objective to help patients reveal their deep-seated and subconscious feelings (Corbetta, 2002, p. 275).

The strengths of non-directive interviews are to find the deep-seated problem and the subconscious feelings. On the other hand, the drawbacks are that there are no directions or issues to explore which can cause some problems in coding and analyzing the data.

Ethical Issues

In conducting interviews, ethical issues are one of the main concerns. Confidentiality must be given. Respondents “should not be harmed or damaged in any way by the research ... It is also important that interviews are not used as a devious means of selling something to the respondent” (Gray, 2004 p. 235). If respondents are uneasy and become upset, the interview can be cancelled or postponed. The following is a list of some of the issues and suggested ethical solutions (Patton, 2000, p. 404-5 and Gray, 2004 p. 235).

- *Explain purpose.* Explain the purpose of the inquiry to the respondent.
- *Promises and reciprocity.* State what the respondent will gain.
- *Risk assessment.* Consider in what ways might the interview put the respondent at risk in terms of stress, legal liabilities, ostracism or political repercussion.
- *Confidentiality.* Reflect on the extent to which promises of confidentiality can be met. (Confidentiality means you know but will not tell. Anonymity means you do not know, as in a survey returned anonymously.)
- *Inform consent.* What kind of consent is necessary, if any.
- *Data access and ownership.* Evaluate who has the right to access data and for what purpose.
- *Mental health.* Consider how interviewer and interviewee mental health may be affected by conducting the interview.
- *Advice.* Appoint an adviser on ethical matters during the course of the study.
- *Data collection boundaries.* How hard will you push for data? What lengths will you go to in trying to gain access to data you want? What won't you do?
- How hard will you push interviewees to respond to questions about which they show some discomfort?

When an interview has been completed and is considered a good interview, the respondents ought to know more about themselves and their situation. However, the researcher must remember that the purpose of research is to collect data and not to change the respondents or their opinions (Gray, 2004 p. 235).

Conclusion

This article discusses using interviews as a research instrument and as a means to collect data. Interviews are one way to collect data and to gain knowledge from individuals. The type of interview to conduct will depend upon the objectives of the research.

Four types of interviews are discussed in this article: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and non-directive interviews. Some examples are given as well as the strengths and drawbacks of each type of interview. Lastly, ethical issues are of paramount importance so it is also examined.

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conductinginterviews29_7_05