

Interviews in Qualitative Research

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Session One Background and Overview



- Interviews have a long history in qualitative research and other fields such as journalism although qualitative interviews are quite different from journalism
- So widespread that interviewing is now seen as a 'natural' way to obtain information
- The way that interviews are used varies according to the purpose of the research and the methodology



- Waxed and waned in popularity
- Informal and in-depth interviews fundamental to ethnography
- Informal interviews also popular among Chicago School researchers in 1920s and 30s then later subsumed within sociology due to the popularity of survey research and standardised interviewing
- Semi structured interviewing emerged in 1960s associated with symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology and development of grounded theory. Short often quite standardised interviews.



- Interviewing as we know it today developed in the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of qualitative research as a distinct field and the popularity of naturalistic research.
- In-depth and largely unstructured interviews.

Contemporary understanding of qualitative interviewing

The aim is to discover the interviewees own framework of meanings and the research task is to avoid imposing the researchers structures and assumptions as much as possible” (Britten 1995:251)



“I interview because I am interested in other peoples stories” Seidman 1991:1)

“the focus is on the ‘other persons own meaning contexts’” Schutz 1967:25
cited in Rice and Ezzy 1999:55



- Between more traditional social science interviews and more recent understandings of interviews arising from feminist, postmodern, narrative and social constructivist theories.
- Vessel of answers/speech events

- Interviewing is a very popular data collection method in health related qualitative research
- Associated with widely used methodologies in health related fields such as grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography
- Investigate issues from the perspective of those involved
- Allow for more in-depth understanding than focus groups
- Flexible method, many different ways to conduct them



Structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews

In depth unstructured interviews

Informal interviews



- Aim to collect data that is readily coded and quantified
- Questions with closed response categories
- Replicate same interview each time
- Derived from positivist research
- Not really qualitative research



- Focused interviews, guided interviews
- List of open ended questions but no expectation that each interview will be the same
- Interview guide, memory guide, dynamic over course of data collection
- Often used in studies where the same people will be interviewed several times, each building on the last



- Interviewer and interviewee are interacting, rapport building, humour and sharing come into play
- Slightly competing roles traditional interviewer role and sharing/reciprocity
- Naturally flowing conversation



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In-depth Unstructured Interviews

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- Informal approach and lack of distance between interviewer and interviewee
- Value in-depth understanding and participants point of view
- Shared experience, conversational intimacy
- Interviewer aware of topics they are interested in and will ask the interviewee to focus on this and ask clarifying questions etc



- Usual to hold several interviews with each participant
- Feminism, phenomenology, ethnography. Embody values of contemporary qualitative research (reflexivity, privileging the participant etc)
- Sometimes difficult to match with bureaucratic requirements or funding bodies, ethics committees



- Brief interviews held as an opportunity arises
- Often during participant observation but they also happen at either end of a planned interview
- Can be recorded in field notes
- Often very valuable

- Telephone interviews
- Email
- Real time messaging, message boards etc
- Video link or skype



Choosing an interviewing approach

- Choose a method that will obtain the type of data you need to address your research question
- Be guided by the methodology or choose a methodology that suits the methods you want to use
- Interviews and other methods (diarys, questionnaires, focus groups, observation, textual data)?
- Consider data analysis as this will also impact on style of interviewing and data recording
- Doable within constraints of your project

Discussion Session – break into two groups

- Ask questions about material presented so far
- Questions about the use of interviews in your own work

Session Two research design and planning interviews

A small icon consisting of two interlocking circles, resembling a stylized infinity symbol or a pair of eyes.

research|thanks to you



- General research ethics, NHMRC
- Ethics committees
- Information sheets and consent forms
- Privacy/confidentiality, protection from harm, vulnerable participants
- Interviews and ethical concerns – unstructured and informal interviews, relationship and trust with participants

- Guided by the purpose of the research/ the research question
- Purposive (theoretical), convenience sampling.
- Think carefully to make sure that you are not imposing your own assumptions about the most appropriate sample (i.e. class, ethnicity, sexuality, age



- Identifying and including in the study those information rich cases that will contribute to building a full understanding of the phenomena under study. Convenience sampling is choosing the easiest and most readily available people to be participants.



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Sampling cont ..

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- Transparency: The researcher describes and justifies how decisions were made about sampling
- Carry sampling strategy into the analysis

How many interviews to conduct?

- How to decide on the number of interviews conducted?
- Data saturation
- Style of analysis and methodology (again!)
- Purpose of research and the audience – acceptable sample size
- Budget and ‘doability’

- Tradition naturalistic research, participants select the setting often their own home
- Other settings such as workplaces, clinic rooms, public venues
- Safety
- Interruptions, kitchen tables, pets and partners



- Demographic questionnaire
- Audio recording (digital)
- Become familiar with your equipment before you start the interviews
- Field notes
- Keeping track of recordings and notes – time date location of interview and participant name or code
- Storing and maintaining research data safely and to protect confidentiality



- Full or partial transcription?
- Who should do the transcription?
- Time taken to transcribe
- As soon as possible after the interview to maximise recall
- If you are using a software package like NVIVO



- Background work. Will you need to do some preliminary work to prepare for the interviews
- Who will conduct the interviews?
- Recruitment and scheduling (don't do more than one interview a day if you can help it)



- Consider what is interesting from the respondents point of view and what is interesting from the researchers point of view
- Don't ask research questions
- Avoid why questions, choose how questions instead
- Asking a 'Do you think that ' question will result in very short answers
- Avoid leading questions such as "don't you think" or "do you agree that"
- Remember to use conversational probes to encourage elaboration

- Topic list or open ended questions
- Start with broad questions “tell me about”
- Avoid two in one questions
- Don’t have too many questions!



- Take 10 minutes and write a topic list or interview questions for a semi-structured interview for a project exploring employment trajectories – how people ended up doing the type of paid employment they are currently doing and where they see themselves working and what job they might be doing in five years time
- Then we will break into our groups and discuss these



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Being an interviewer


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- Accessing a setting
- Understand the language
- Decide how to present themselves
- Gain trust and build rapport
- Being a 'data collection tool'



- Connections, explaining what you want and why they should let you in, knowledge, courtesy
- Making your intentions known
- Gaining cooperation from setting participants
- Gaining formal permission if needed



- Use appropriate language to suit the participants
- Do you know enough about your participants to accurately interpret what they are saying (background work)
- Other languages
- Nonverbal messages, effects of setting on interview



- Image of a good person engaged in a harmless but important task
- Speak and act in a non threatening way
- Cultivate a relatively neutral role but be compassionate and sympathetic
- Expert or eager novice?
- Be respectful in the way you dress, making appointments etc
- Be honest, keep your word and don't make promises that you wont be able to keep



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- Before the interview
- After the interview



- May need to unlearn your interview skills related to case history taking or counseling
- Qualitative interviewing needs less directed questions and the interviewer should not feel to the participant like 'the person in charge'
- Not intentionally therapeutic and techniques designed to assist with this might actually inhibit the interviewee or close off discussion i.e. repeating back.
- Easy to fall back into your usual interviewing style



- Because you are conducting the interviews, everything about you will impact on the data collected
- Interview quality will be affected by many factors such as fatigue, personality, knowledge, and the impression you create with the interviewee and vice versa.
- You will nearly always be slightly disappointed when other people conduct your interviews
- It makes sense to practice interviewing



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Practicing Interviewing

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- Self reflection and critique
- To help us learn how we might deal with issues such as unexpected behaviours, emotional responses, maintaining interview flow, phrasing and negotiating questions



Practical Session


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- Break into pairs, find somewhere nice to sit and one of you will interview the other using their list of questions. Aim for 20 minutes interviewing at least.
- Gather back here and we will discuss the experience as a group



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Data management and analysis

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- Management the act of recording the data, storing it, preparing it for analysis
- Analysis, making sense of the research data to produce research findings/results



- Transcription (4 hours per 1 hour of interview)
- Protecting confidentiality using a pseudonym or code
- Notes taken during the interview
- Demographic questionnaires
- Field notes after the focus group
- NVIVO, computers

Analysing or interpreting interview data

- A workshop in its own right
- Thematic, narrative, discourse analysis
- Analysis should usually be ongoing and run alongside data collection



- Iterative approach
- ‘Data immersion’
- Coding
- Developing a scheme that describes ‘what is going on’. This is often called a list of themes



- Focuses on the way informants use stories
- Exploring not only what was said but how it was said
- Linguistic focus- language
- Sociological – what the narratives tell us about the way participants have experienced their lives and the narratives available to them



- Transparency
- Carry sampling strategy into the analysis
- Be guided by the research questions

- Style of presentation will again be affected by methodology, purpose of the research and the audience
- Writing up is part of the analysis
- Use quotations as examples, to add colour to your writing and as a form of transparency
- Read good examples of qualitative research to get a feel for what you are trying to do
- Also useful to present orally



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- Thankyou