

Qualitative Interviewing

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Abstract: Qualitative interviewing is a data collection method employed by many researchers who are interested in gathering primary data. Basically, interviewing people could be viewed as engaging them in storytelling. Both the researcher and the researched co-construct knowledge through negotiation within their different social and historical contexts. The article explores key issues about qualitative interviewing including: history of qualitative interviewing, definitions, types of interviews while giving the importance of qualitative interviewing. In addition, it covers the art of designing the interview questions, preparations for interviews, sampling of participants and data analysis. Lastly, the paper ends with a brief mention of the limitations and weaknesses of interviewing as a data collection method.

Keywords: Qualitative interviewing, types of interviews, participants and data analysis.

INTRODUCTION

“The best interviews — like the best biographies — should sing the strangeness and variety of the human race.” [British Journalist – Lynn Barber]

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomenon. Its various genres are naturalistic, interpretive and increasingly critical, and they draw on multiple methods of inquiry [1]. Qualitative researchers typically rely on four methods for gathering data; participating in the setting, observing directly, interviewing in depth and analyzing documents and material culture. This paper explores qualitative interviewing as a tool for data collection in qualitative research. It covers the history of qualitative interviewing, definitions of interviewing, types, and the reasons why qualitative interviewing is important as a data collection tool. Additionally, the paper discusses designing the interview questions, preparations before interviews, sampling of the participants and analysis of the data gathered. Lastly, a critique of interviewing as a research technique is examined.

Interviewing is an interesting endeavor and its power to let people tell who they truly are, in their own voices is immeasurable. The words of Lynn Barber, a British journalist sums it all when she writes, “The best interviews — like the best biographies — should sing the strangeness and variety of the human race” [British Journalist – Lynn Barber]. Generally, interviewing people could be viewed as engaging them in

storytelling. It is an attempt to gather stories. Jacob and Furgerson [2] maintain that qualitative researchers “collect people’s life stories in order to study various aspects of the human experience and the primary way [of] gather[ing] stories is by interviewing people” [p. 1]. Since people can relate to a good story, storytelling has been used from time immemorial to inspire action and push for solution against hunger, violence, corruption and other challenges in society. Therefore, Jacob and Furgerson [2] confirm that interviewing people is asking them to share their stories and should be done with skill.

History of Qualitative Interviewing

According to Glesne [3] qualitative interviewing refers to practices that seek to interpret people’s constructions of reality and identify patterns in their perspectives and behaviours. Researchers assert that in-depth interviewing in qualitative research emerged between 1920s-1930s in Chicago school [4, 5, 6]. These texts seem to agree on the fact that Chicago School was the birth place of both interviewing and life stories with the aim of giving ‘marginalized’ voices a chance to share their stories. Open-ended questions dominated the interviews during this period. The main aim for asking open-ended questions was to enable participants to speak to their experiences giving as many details as possible, answering the questions freely from their own frame of reference. In other words, avoiding structured questions was viewed as a way of respondents’ freedom to share their experiences without

being confined by rigid question structure. This form of study targeted those community members who tended to be ignored and un-respected in society such as prostitutes, slaves, criminals, and immigrants [6]. The researchers viewed this type of study as important in helping the participants understand and make meaning of their situations, issues influencing them, opportunities and challenges, thus, acting in a creative manner to better their situation.

Qualitative interviews were utilized in different degrees in the field of social sciences throughout the 20th century [7]. According to them, “although systematic literature on research interviewing is a phenomenon of the last few decades, anthropologists and sociologists have long used informal interviews to obtain knowledge from their informants” [p. 9]. This statement provides evidence that using information solicited through interviews as knowledge is not a recent practice.

Viewed from a different perspective, Broom [5] believes that qualitative interview is rooted in interpretive/constructionist tradition of data in social sciences rather than measurements and numbers. Broom continues to state that interpretive theory fits best when researching on symbolic interaction, grounded theory, and phenomenology, ethnography, post-structuralism and post-modernism. For social scientists, constructionist theory is significant because it creates ripples to the dominance of quantitative research, bringing about another lens to look at research issues.

Data gathered through qualitative interviews is analyzed to understand the meaning constructed by participants. Since “interview knowledge is produced in a conversational relation; it is contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatic” [7]. Therefore, the conception of knowledge gathered through interviews differs from a quantitative research, which seeks to quantify given facts. Rather, both the researcher and the researched co-construct knowledge through negotiation within their different social and historical contexts [5].

Interviews are attention-grabbing and using them to solicit data is quite interesting. During the interviewing process, interviewees get a chance to talk freely and share their world with others [2]. It is important to note that the free sharing may be affected by interviewee-interviewer relationship. Since we all know about issues going around us, our ability to symbolize the same through language is easy. It is also gratifying and inspiring to tell other people about our experiences as long as we do not get hurt in the process. Again, the answers required from interview questions are not aimed at evaluating the respondents but in understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of their experiences. Examining how qualitative interviewing has developed with time,

Rubin and Rubin [8] opine that it gained momentum in 1960s, especially among health researchers due to its ability to figure out what events mean, how people adapt, and how they view what has happened to them and around them. It is this complexity and subjectivity that underpins qualitative interview-based research projects.

Qualitative Interview Defined

Interviewing is a popular mode of data collection in qualitative research. Interviewing in particular is “a conversation with a purpose” [9]. Patton [10] views qualitative interviewing as “a process to allow the researcher to enter into other person’s perspective” [p. 341]. It is a type of data collection process which involves interaction between the researcher and the respondents to gain an understanding of the respondents’ experiences and situations in their own words. Patton [10] further argued that “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” [p. 341]. The researcher in this sense becomes a ‘student’ of the participants and learns from the conversation, which becomes raw data requiring interpretation for easy understanding.

In relation to the process of interviewing, the fact that people are interested in other people’s stories and enjoy talking makes the process easy. The discussions are based on a interview topic or the subject matter of shared interest between the researcher and the researched for meaning making [7]. Since Kvale and Brinkmann argue that interviewing is a skill such as driving. It could be visualized as the work of fine art, while symbolizing the interviewer as a great artist just like potter, artist, painter, or one who makes baskets with an aim of producing fine and impressive results.

While Rubin and Rubin [8] views interviewing as the art of hearing data, Kvale and Brinkmann picture it as a craft. They compared learning the interviewing skill with memorizing a math figure where much practice is required to master the formula. They conceptualize it as a craft because some management skills are required. Like patient management, interviewing is learned through apprenticeship or hands on experience. Even after learning, much practice and working with a community of experts or interviewers is required, similar to masonry, woodwork, and weaving.

Literature explored suggests that if anyone is interested in knowing about other people’s culture, perceptions, attitudes and their world and lives, talking to them would solve the problem, but it has to be done skillfully in order to achieve good results. Patton [10] compares interviewing with a matrimonial relationship when he states: “Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed door there is a world of

secrets” [p. 340]. Meaning that a good interview depends on the interviewer, just like the way a good marriage depends on the parties involved. Likewise, a good interviewer develops nurtures and comes up with good interview results.

Rubin and Rubin [8] point out that the interviewing relationship could be affected by several factors including the personality and the emotions of the researcher, gender, ethnicity, social class, shared understanding between the researcher and the researched and the ethical reasons. A case in point could be a cultural clash based on not knowing a certain culture as an interviewer or researcher. Based on the cultural expectations of the researched, the interview may become a total failure.

Again, Kvale and Brinkmann [7] liken the interviewer to a traveler and an excavator with an aim of telling a story of their missions. This task of digging up knowledge from humans and other facilities is not easy and this is resounded by several experts in qualitative research [6, 10]. While a traveler may not know all about the mystery on a journey, an excavator has to unearth the mystery that which lies hidden under the ground. Similarly, an interviewer goes to the field with an aim of telling the story of a certain topic and the narrative becomes the mystery that the study unravels.

Qualitative interviewing is very useful because although research seeks to understand peoples’ actions and behaviors, it becomes difficult because some types of behavior are invisible and some actions take place in secret places [10]. Therefore, conversing with people as a very basic mode of human interaction becomes an important tool to a researcher. Patton believes that through conversation, one not only learns a person’s day-to-day struggles and thoughts but his or her feelings of joy, sorrow, fear and hope. Additionally researchers get personal voices and opinions about social, work and family issues of the interviewee. Many researchers concur with the argument that issues to do with feelings, thoughts, and emotions are well-explored through interviews.

Qualitative interviewing as a method of collecting data according to Rubin and Rubin [8] upholds the verbal way of gathering data from respondents. It encourages use of probes, follow-up questions and transitions for clarifications and adding more layers of data [10]. Although interviews are time consuming, the time is valuable and necessary to acquire the inner perspectives of the participants. Interviewing provides direct and rich responses in depth and breadth, providing a better understanding of the issue under study. To get rich responses, the researcher is best advised to have “introducing questions follow up questions, probing questions, specific questions, direct questions, indirect questions, interpreting questions and others” [7].

According to Kahn and Cannell [9], interviewing is “a conversation with a purpose” [p. 149]. Ambert *et al* [18], acknowledge the use of qualitative inquiry as supporting a natural look at the phenomena being studied. Qualitative in-depth interviews typically are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help reveal the participants views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. Importantly, they note that qualitative research is flexible and can be adapted to accept varied ways of knowing, including observation and interviews, rather than dealing only with analysis and deconstruction of already existing texts. In other words, the purposes of interview conversations are to acquiring data which helps in answering research questions.

Through interviewing, a researcher realizes the nature of participants’ social life, culture, and values. Once more, the interviewer understands the issues people confront in their daily lives and the meanings they attach to them. To ensure clarity and avoid half truths, interview experts encourage use of probes, follow-up questions and transitions [10]. These enable the researcher to follow up on issues of interest to the issue under study to elicit as much data as possible. Probes also help the researcher to keep the participants focused to the interview objectives in order to answer the research questions.

Interviews use language as a tool to connect the researcher and the participants [18]. In agreement with the use of languages in a careful manner, Kvale [11] advises that researchers should ask clear questions with follow up probes to maintain the meaning because what is clear to one will be unclear to another. Hence, he suggests that using short, clear words that are easy to understand and devoid of jargon. Interview words should also be sensitive to the interviewee’s context and worldview in order to make much sense. In order to overcome clarity and meaning problems, Kvale encourages researchers to use questions such as “Is it correct that you feel that...?; Does the expression...cover what you have just expressed?” [p. 135]. This is a sure way of confirming messages for proper interpretation by the researcher. While conducting interviews, the researcher should endeavour to establish the interviewing process as a caring relationship.

Types of Interviews

There are three types of qualitative interviews: structured, semi- structured and unstructured [7, 8, 10]. Although the focus of each is to elicit data based on individualized and sometimes focus group views and perception, they are slightly different and the results

could differ based on the choice employed. Each type of interview is discussed as follows:

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are also known as standardized interviews and they are straightforward with a standardized set of questions. These styles of interview limit the flexibility of both the interviewer and the interviewee. The degree of structure differs from heavily structured to lightly structure depending on the interviewer and or the researcher. These standardized questions are arranged and worded watchfully to ensure that the same questions and the same order are followed from the first to the last participant [10]. Patton contends that the importance of following the sequence religiously is to minimize variations in both posing and answering interview questions for easy evaluation and comparison of answers.

An example of questions that could be used in structured interview is as follows:

- To begin with, may I know where you were born, and your nationality?
- Please give me a chronological history of your educational background?
- Kindly tell me about your educational experiences when you were young as a female student in Indonesia?

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are also known as semi-standardized or focused interviews. They normally allow for a focused conversation between the researcher and the researched [8]. According to Patton [10], semi-structured interviews are “general interview guide...outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before the interview begins” [p. 342]. Patton suggests that the guide could be used as a basic checklist to ensure comprehensive coverage of all topics under investigation.

Unstructured Interviews

This type of interview is un-structured, non-directional and flexible, taking the shape of a casual conversation. It uses not interview guide because consistency is not important. In fact, interviewees are encouraged to speak openly and frankly giving as much detail as possible. Interviewees share their opinions, impressions and experiences. The only challenge posed by un-structured interviewing is that the researcher may not know which issue to follow and which not to [7]. Therefore, researchers are cautioned to be good listeners and in order to elicit as much information as possible. Unstructured interviews are the best especially on topics which less or nothing is known about.

Why Qualitative Interviewing?

According to Kvale and Brinkmann [9], the way we interview depends on what we want to find out. Therefore, qualitative interviewing is a quest with a mission of learning about different people’s experiences in different situations, contexts and countries based on their cultural views, their problems and solutions. It is clearly seen that interviewing, entails wanting to know how other people’s issues and practices are similar and different from the researchers. Through qualitative interviews, researchers clearly understand experiences and reconstruct events even when one did not take part in [8]. Through interviewing other people, one describing social and political events and processes by telling how and why such things happen. Surprisingly, qualitative interviewers enter into important personal issues or information of their interviewees, thus, using their skills to interpret or give a report in detail. If a clean relationship is to be retained by the two parties, a high sense of confidentiality and anonymity is called for [7]. Embarrassing the participants not only becomes an overpass of trust on the part of the interviewer but disrespect to others.

Kvale [11] maintains that interviewing is a process of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. The result is to understand the major points of their message and how it compares [similar and different] to our own situation. As researchers using this mode, not only do we need to be a good conversationalist, but good listeners in order to produce data that is authentic and credible. As a method of creating research knowledge in the social sciences, “qualitative interviews are now increasingly employed as a research method in their own right, with expanding methodological literature on how to carry out interview research” [p. 11]. This comes about through studying and producing thick and deep descriptions of a situation or phenomena under study.

Broom [5] holds that people are complex and their complexity lies in the different identities and contexts of our lives. Broom believes that understanding other people could be made easier by researching them, thus, using qualitative interviewing to discover the intricacies of their experiences and the meaning they make out of their day-to-day lives. This makes it easy to learn about other people’s cultures, beliefs and ways of living and solving problems. Miller [6] opines that qualitative research is not simple to do as many students would be tempted to think. He continues to warn that the amount of data from few interviews is much and transcribing is long and time consuming. However, this factor does not make the method avoidable but requires commitment and sacrifice on the part of the researcher. Although qualitative interviewing and data analysis is not easy to master, rigorous training coupled with much practice before engaging in this endeavor is necessary.

Designing the Interview Questions

Kvale and Brinkmann [7] suggest that there are some questions to avoid during interviewing. For instance, questions that need yes and no answer elicit less data. If such questions are unavoidable, the authors suggest “when designing an interview project, the ‘why’ and ‘what’ questions should be asked and answered before the question of ‘how’ is posed” [p. 133]. Following their voiced caution, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answer questions should be avoided and more so questions that start with ‘why.’ In designing these questions, the main beauty of using qualitative interviews and any style of questioning which limits the interview responses from detail should be avoided or probed further.

Ethics and morality are very important factors which dictate fieldwork relationships. History has taught us that some researchers are not honest or considerate of participants for intended or unintended reasons. In order to be clean and blameless, researchers are advised to adhere to the IRB standards, seek consent from the participants and retain confidentiality and respect [7, 2]. Communicating the consequences of the study to the participants is also advised for informed choices to be taken by participants before committing themselves for participation [11]. Ethics becomes a huge factor to consider especially when researching the other. Some researchers conduct interviews with a will to label the other which is done at the expense of either truth or understanding. It is very important to be respectful to the researched because their time and consent to be interviewed cannot be quantified in monetary terms.

Preparations Before Interviews

Each interview needs preparation on the research’s part. This involves structuring the interview questions and getting interview equipment ready in order to have it easy during the interview process [6]. There are many things to consider about interview including the venue, the recording, my note book and pen, interview guide, the length of the interview and the depth of the information being sought. This is to be done bearing in mind the amount of data, the efficiency of the recording equipment and the transcription process. Although Wengraf [12] suggests that having spare recording equipment is necessary to avoid failure, it is also necessary to be equipped with several pairs of batteries for the digital recording devices.

Interviews could be started by setting the tone; by exchanging greetings with the respondents. Berg [13] argues that the interviewer should never start the interview cold. Establishing a rapport with the selected respondents before the interview date enables them to get in a relaxed situation. Other than recording, taking notes during the interview is necessary though this has to be done consciously in order not to use all the time in

writing and fail to ask questions. Recording conversational interviews which aim at eliciting personal stories is highly encouraged even when notes are being taken, terming it as “A full verbatim account” [6]. Berg warns that interviewing could be ruined just at the starting point after all the pains of designing, setting date and time and getting ready for it. In order to ensure the process runs smoothly, he gives researchers a list of Ten Commandments in interviewing to guide their steps when granted an interview. Berg [13] writes:

- Never begin an interview cold
- Remember your purpose
- Present a natural front
- Demonstrate aware hearing
- Think about appearance, dressing
- Interview in a comfortable place
- Don’t be satisfied with monosyllabic answers
- Be respectful
- Practice, practice and practice some more
- Be cordial and appreciative [pp. 129-130].

By these Ten Commandments, Berg reminds that as an interviewer, it is not about you the interviewer but the interviewee because the impression given by the interviewer may make or break the interview. Therefore, maintaining a respectful relationship becomes very essential.

Sampling of the Participants

Before interviewing the particular participants, a simple chat with several potential interviewees is important and, thus, results in “selective sampling” [6]. The rationale for talking to the potential participants is to ensure the selected interviewees are experienced and knowledgeable in the area of my interest [8]. Based on their rich educational experiences, one is able to solicit rich data based on their own stories, their opinions and impressions.

On selection of participants, Patton [10] suggests that when a researcher is interested in information rich cases, purposive sampling is the best way forward. Patton [10] emphasis that qualitative interviews focus on relatively small samples, even single cases, aimed at understanding in depth the issue under study. There is need to gain a clear understanding of the complex and diverse stories hidden behind each face in or outside the classroom. This could be true in all countries and at all levels of education.

Interview Data Analysis

Glesne [3] encourage that data analysis be done simultaneously with data collection. This enables the researchers to focus and shape the study as it proceeds. The researcher is called to reflect on the data, work to organize them and discover what the data have

to say. Writing memos, developing analytic files, applying rudimentary coding schemes, making connections among stories and writing monthly reports will help in managing and learning from the information received.

Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining the scraps of data collected. This data comprises of observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents and notes from relevant literature. By putting likeminded pieces together into data clumps, one is able to develop framework. After which the data clumps are placed into a meaningful sequence that contribute to the parts of the researcher's manuscript.

There are electronic softwares that are available in the market to facilitate qualitative data storage and analysis. The software according to Schumacher and Mcmillian [14] has become increasingly easy to use as well as more sophisticated. The most popular software products for educational researchers include the following: MaxQDA, ATLAS.ti, Ethnograph, Nvivo and HyperRESEARCH. These softwares are able to analyse and combine text, audio, and visual elements as well as different codes. They might not have all the capabilities that are needed, so supplemental hands on procedures are necessary.

Summarizing Interviews as a Research Technique

Qualitative interviews are an important toll in data collection since when used; the researcher is in a position to understand the issue of investigation from the participants' point of view [11]. Additionally, interviewing uncovers meaning of subject experiences based on their own perspectives and in their voice. The researcher takes control of the information acquired through an organized mode of conversation of every life. From Kvale [11] perspective, one can imagine how a useful tool interviewing is in qualitative research. This may explain why the use of interviewing has become so popular among researchers. However, although Cassell and Symon [15] claim that there is a danger in using this data collection tool in a simplistic and sometimes crude manner, thus, losing its technical sense, interviewing is still viewed as a strong method of collecting authentic data. According to Cassell and Symon, "the . . . danger for qualitative researchers using interviews is that they may feel the method is so familiar and straightforward as not to require much thought about what they are doing" [1994, p. 1]. Interviewers should be experts who have been trained and know what they are looking for including adhering to the dos and don'ts of interviews making it favorable and strong enough to collect useful data.

To achieve best results from qualitative interviewing, the interview design needs to be comprehensive. Cassell and Symon [15] argue that the researcher has to show evidence of putting much

thought into the design and execution through several landmarks in the work just like using other tools of data collection. For instance, readers expect a definition of the type of interview, interview process description, construction and use of interview guide, analysis based on reliability and validity and critique of the method.

As Kvale [11] concludes, qualitative interviewing captures much of the participants' views about an issue, connecting it in a meaningful relation. In other words, qualitative interviewing faces some short comings, just like any other mode of data collection. To curb its flows, qualitative researchers have a tendency of combining it with other methods such as observation and document analysis, which still lack participants' point of view and voice. The value of choosing a data collection method which gives more advantages to our research is stressed by O'Leary [16] when he writes:

Collecting credible data is a tough task, and it is worth remembering that one method of data collection is not inherently better than another...and the data collection method would depend upon the research goals and the advantages and disadvantages of each method [p. 150].

With this in mind, qualitative interview is a strong method of gathering data through talking to people despite the disadvantages associate with it.

Topic selection is expected in qualitative research for it provides a guide and a focus to the study. In the research world, topics act the names or labels to all pieces of study. Stories told by participants from their personal experiences in research are important because they unearth what lies hidden behind the faces of female students in every classroom, which is contextual [17]. Such stories are important to students to reflect on them, teachers, parents and policy makers because they tell so much about issues which are otherwise unspoken but have an impact on female students' education. Foss and Foss assert that using personal experiences as data is important and is encouraged because it stands as truth.

It is this kind of importance and interest attached to a topic by a researcher which makes it adequate reason for choosing it as a study [8]. These authors continue to state that interviewer's personality and skill contribute greatly in determining an interview topic.

Scholars say that nothing is new under the sun, but, this saying could be reversed in the world of qualitative research because each study aims at producing new knowledge. Adding their voice to the importance of selecting an interview topic, Kvale and Brinkmann [7] state that choice could be driven by some knowledge gap, thus, seeking for theories to bridge the gap and or bring the missing piece on board.

Limitations and weaknesses of Interviewing

According to Mashall and Rossman [1], interviews involve personal interaction and hence cooperation is essential. Interviewees may be unwilling or may be uncomfortable sharing all that the interviewer hopes to explore, or they may be unaware of recurring patterns in their lives. The interviewer may not ask questions that evoke narratives from the participants because of lack of expertise or familiarity with the local language or because of lack of skills. In the same vein he may not properly comprehend responses to the questions or various elements of the conversation. At times interviewees may have good reasons not to be truthful. It is expected that interviewers should have outstanding listening skills and be skillful at personal interaction, question framing and gentle probing for elaboration. Volumes of data can be obtained through interviewing but are time consuming to analyse.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, qualitative interview could be termed as an oral administration of a questionnaire and is therefore a face to face encounter. To obtain accurate information through interviews, a researcher needs to obtain a maximum cooperation from respondents. Thus, establishing a friendly relationship with the respondent prior and during the interview process is quite important.

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