

# Interviewing in Qualitative Research

### 3. Interviewing: When?

Always remember that there are alternative methods

- analyzing documents
- historical research
- analysis of interaction based on tape recordings and video
- visual data
- even questionnaires

Before you decide to interview, think about these alternatives, and justify your choice of interviewing!

Interviews are good, when

- you're studying meanings (how people understand, see, experience something)
- you want to produce quickly descriptions of some company
- it is difficult to explain things with qualitative data

- interviewing may take you surprisingly long back in history
- often, it is the only practical method available
- time and budget constraints, ethics, etc.

Interviews should not be used, when

- you're primarily interested in quantitative information
- in many types of contents
- for example, interaction
- it is susceptible to biases: embellishments, forgetting, even lying
- esp. conflict situations!
- if you are studying complex processes, then documents and descriptions written when things took place are a better source of information

### 5. Questions

Remember: research questions are not questions done to interviewees!

The Research Guide

Open or closed questions?

#### The Order of Questions

- warming up questions
- questions close to the interviewee first (his/her work...)
- sensitive questions at the end
- simple questions first, abstract questions at the end
- time logic in process studies
- closing questions
- at the very end check whether something else should have been asked!

#### Order Matters!

- crucial to the flow of the interview
- good order improves data and the validity of the study
- a good organization keeps the interviewee on leash, s/he does not rush ahead too quickly
- it also minimizes the risk that the interviewer gets confused
- helps to organize the interview
- the interviewer remembers what has been talked about and what's still left to be done

#### Don't put in Too Many Questions!

- a large amount of questions
  - confuses the interviewer
  - the risk of forgetting something increases
  - the conceptual logic of the interview guide may be lost
  - causes time shortage at the end, where more time would typically be needed
- leaves little time for elaborating answers

- thus, make only a few main questions
  - perhaps 5-8 for one hour
- you can have sub-questions underneath the main questions aid memory rather than are read to the interviewee

#### 6. Interviewing

As such, interviewing is very simple

- the interviewer asks, questions are followed by the interviewee's answer
- sometimes answers are followed by an additional question *based on* the answer
- you can plan these ahead to some extent; often they are spontaneous

Questions may become increasingly specific during the interview

#### Interviewing techniques

- writing during interview
- taping

#### Interviewing situations vary

- one interviewer, one interviewee the simplest case
- often a group: then you ought to think about group dynamics

## 7. Transcribing

- to make data useful, it must be transcribed
- transcription is time-consuming and fairly expensive
- how accurately? - Enough but not too much detail!

## Expanding the Technique

- Or course, there are several variations to this technique
  - in marketing in particular, it is customary to bring in various “props” to interviews:
    - pictures, things, appliances
    - interviewing with photographs may be a good way to keep reactivity at bay

- “Critical incident” technique in molding questions:
  - Questions focus on critical junctures of experience (or whatever), with the aim of identifying themes

## Interviewees vary: elite interviewing

- the choice of interviewees among elites:
  - sampling based on access to information, judgment rather than on sheer numbers
- getting an interview from elites and their utility expectations
- cognition
- remember your homework!
- tandem interviewing
- problem: price, esp. in international studies

## Group Interviewing / Focus Groups

## Term

- Originally, the term “focus groups” came from the sociologist Robert Merton (1940s)
  - today we often talk about “group interviewing” instead
  - interviewing several people simultaneously
  - economic, good data source, sometimes more reliable than individual interviews

## Things to remember

- Group dynamics
  - meaning...
  - may be a great benefit...
  - ...but also destroy the interview: if someone dominates the situation, data may be seriously biased

## Design principles

- To make sure group dynamics does not get out of hand, we ought to
  - keep groups no larger than 8 people (4-6 works best)
  - keep groups fairly “equal” -- this makes sure that no one dominates discussion
  - the price is that we need typically several groups

questions?

## Documents

- Documents are a good source of information for every researcher, not just historians
  - typically easy to collect, store, manage, use in writing
  - non-reactive: documents have not been produced for the researcher

- Problems

- biases:
  - elites, organizations, produce documents more than, say, ordinary people
  - decision-making: many documents show the world as an object of administration
- access and finding materials
  - modern bureaucracies produce tons of documents
  - archives have their own logic, different from the researcher's

- access

- often key documents are hard to get from archives
  - both personal documents and key decision-making documents
- public and private sectors differ:
  - in the Nordic countries, the public sector is relatively open

- In searching documents, common-sense helps
  - institutional and personal documents differ in style, content, and storage
  - public and secret documents further divide documents

## Criticism of Sources

- Before building an interpretation on some document, go through this procedure
  - search the original document, the one closest to the object of interest
  - study its content before you trust it:
    - contradictions, illogical features, too much logic;
    - the writer's ability and motives to tell the "truth"

## Oral history

- Historical memory exists not just in documents, but also in minds
  - interviewing is a good source of information
  - read Paul Thompson's marvelous book "*The Voice of the Past*".

## Textual analyses

- Keep in mind...
  - it is possible to study how texts construct reality
  - rhetorically... in terms of stories...
    - for example, how personnel categories are ordered tells about an organization's values
    - see Silverman, David, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, which is a good source for textual analysis

## The Sample Perspective

### Fact or Sample?

- Pertti Alasuutari made a distinction between two ways of treating data
  - as facts - documents of something outside data
  - as sample - something that is interesting as such

### Fact(ist) understanding

- This is the traditional way of treating data
  - the assumption is that there is something out there ...which your data is supposed to represent (more or less accurately)
    - in designing your study, you concentrate on making sure that there are as few biases as possible

### Sample perspective

- Here, some piece of data is interesting as such
  - analysis concentrates on that piece of data... without any attempt to guarantee see whether it describes something else accurately
  - that is, data is a sample of something - culture, meaning structure, whatever

### Differences and implications

- Understanding the nature of data
- working style in both data gathering and analysis

- methodic implications are dramatic
  - what is good research? Criteria for a successful study are dramatically different:
    - In factist perspective, it is the quality of data, accuracy of description, and possibly theoretical explanation based on description
    - in sample thinking, it is the quality of explication of data: whether you find something new

## Example

- narrative analysis...
- discourse studies...
- studying culture...