

The language of research (part 10) — research methodologies: interview

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Closed question
- ▶ Communication
- ▶ Interview
- ▶ Perceptions
- ▶ Qualitative

In this paper, we will explore for the first time a research method: namely, interviews. The article will frame the usefulness of interviews and the sorts of questions they use, while the next paper in this series will look at the various forms interviews take and the pros and cons of interviewing as a method of data collection. We should remember that a method is a tool that is used to collect the data for a piece of research.

WHY INTERVIEW?

Interviews are used to discover the understanding, feelings, perceptions and thoughts of the interviewee regarding the issue under research. They can be used as a standalone research method, as might be the case in phenomenological research, or they might be used alongside other means of data collection, such as focus groups, e.g. in action research.

Unlike focus groups, they can be useful to collect data on a topic which might prove embarrassing to talk about in an open forum (Tod, 2015). In common with focus groups, they are the only real way to explore in detail someone's understandings and feelings about a topic.

KEY FEATURES

Interviews are used to collect data for a study and the way in which they are undertaken, by whom and where will require careful consideration by the researcher. Different forms of interviews are used to elicit different forms of responses and so the researcher has to relate the interview style, the questioning technique and the planning for the interview to the nature of the questions asked and the research methodology being employed (Macnee and McCabe, 2008).

For example, interviews with terminally ill people might need to be short, while interviews about mental health issues may need to be long. Some methodologies tend to use certain interviewing styles so, for example, phenomenology tends toward unstructured interviews with open questions, while grounded theory uses a semi-structured approach on the whole. Interviews undertaken alongside a drug trial or those that are seeking opinions on a change in service might use a fully structured questionnaire.

OPEN AND CLOSED QUESTIONS

Open questions are questions that do not suggest any answers; as such, they allow the respondent to explore what the question is in their own way, with no preconception of what it is exactly that the interviewer wants to hear. Open questions may start with phrases such as "tell me what your thoughts are ..." or "describe your experience of ..."

Open questions focus on the what, why and how of the experiences people have had, as well as on their understandings, perceptions, feelings, beliefs and points of view. The interviewee sets the tone and direction of the interview and not the interviewer. In that respect, open questions are useful for exploring issues about which little is known and also when the research approach is one that seeks to find new meanings and understandings.

A good way to understand why open questioning is important is to consider these two related questions: "how are you?" and "alright?" "How are you?" is a truly open question, it neither suggests a specific answer nor suggests how the question should be answered. It suggests the person asking the question is interested in hearing a response. "Alright?" is often used in passing, it is a closed question as it requires at best a one word response — yes or no — and suggests the person asking the question is not really interested in a response.

Closed questions are useful for collecting factual data in an interview setting, e.g. a person's age or place of residence. They are of use in quantitative studies where the researcher is interested in the interviewee's responses to a range of answers that are predetermined — as in an exit poll when people are asked which way they voted in an election.

WHERE TO INTERVIEW AND FOR HOW LONG

Where interviews take place is important and reflects the nature of the questions being asked as well as the nature of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. It is usual to seek somewhere private and quiet to undertake an interview and ensure the interview is not interrupted. Some interviews are best done in a person's home, for example, with people who are very ill or disabled, while interviews with staff

groups, such as nurses, might feel more natural in the work setting.

The length of an interview will depend on the nature of the question asked, the methodology used in the study, the ability of the people involved in the interview to concentrate on the study and the rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. Qualitative interviews last between half an hour and an hour and a half, with occasional ones taking much longer. Short interviews can fail to achieve satisfactory depth as the interviewer has not had the time to probe the interviewee's responses, while long interviews can be tiring and can lead to the people involved straying from the topic.

Qualitative research requires a level of engagement between the interviewer and the interviewee, this promotes closeness, catharsis and allows the interviewer to probe and gain a richness from the responses given, which are not available to the more structured forms of interviewing (Sarantakos, 2012). 'Richness' refers to the level of detail and understanding that is gained in the interview and is the opposite of 'superficial' and 'brief', which are often features of quantitative interviews that seek objective, numerate answers.

Closeness is not a feature of quantitative interviewing since quantitative researchers are concerned to avoid bias (bias being anything in the design or undertaking of a study that causes an untruth to occur in the study, potentially affecting the faith which can be placed in the outcome of the study) (Ellis, 2016). In quantitative interviews, bias is controlled by having a very structured and often closed set of questions to ask.

Parahoo (2006) points out that, in reality, no interview can be entirely unstructured as all interviews require some form of structure in order to take place. This makes some sense as the interview would not take place unless the interviewer had a purpose in mind!

SOME PRACTICAL ISSUES

All interviews should be recorded if possible, this can be just the words or, as is increasingly the case, by video. Recording interviews allows for the totality of the interaction to be captured word for

word (verbatim). This prevents the researcher from forgetting something that was said. Not having to take notes because the interview is being recorded also frees the researcher up to concentrate on what is being said (Whiting, 2008). It is usual practice to transcribe the interviews word for word so that the researcher, or researchers, can read through the transcripts a number of times during the process of analysis.

All interviews need to be conducted within the bounds of some form of ground rules, these prevent misunderstanding and allow both the researcher and interviewee to know exactly where they stand. Examples of such rules, which are important, are those about confidentiality and anonymity being maintained throughout the research process and through to any write up. Confidentiality cannot extend to keeping secret illegal activity or about issues where there is a risk of harm to the interviewee or other people.

As the majority of human communication is non-verbal (Burgoon et al, 1996), it can also be important for the interviewer to make some notes about the setting of the research, the interviewees body language and anything else they communicate non-verbally. These notes add context and depth to the interpretation and analysis of the interview. Of course, where the interview is video recorded, this is captured on the recording, but non-verbal cues will need to be annotated on to any written transcript of the interview later produced.

CONCLUSIONS

Interviews, as a tool of data collection, are usually associated with qualitative research methodologies. Interviews are useful when the research is seeking to understand what people understand and how they feel about the topic under investigation. We saw that there are in essence two main types of questions — open and closed — and that these can be used to gain different types of answers.

We discussed some of the practical issues associated with interviewing and how important it is that the content of interviews is captured word for word in real-time to allow the researchers to analyse the data at the end of the study.

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