PART EIGHT

Qualitative interviewing

INTRODUCTION

Loosely structured interviewing is perhaps the most often used method for gathering qualitative data. It seems to make intuitive sense that if you want to find out about something you should go and ask some people about their experience of it. In this respect, the qualitative interview is rather like the semi-automatic resort to hurriedly put-together fixed-choice questions when inexperienced researchers decide they want to 'do a survey'. One of the messages of this book is that nothing should be done on a semi-automatic basis in social research. In the case of interviews, careful thought needs to be given to the potential of other methods before deciding to use them. Better, and more viable alternatives often exist.

Having said that, interviews are good for some research problems, and social researchers need to know how to use and think about them. The first reading (number 37 by Jones) focuses on how to do 'depth' interviews, contrasting these with the kind of 'formal questionnaire' discussed in readings 9–11. Jones firmly places herself in the Schutzian position (reading 29) of researchers concerned to explore subjectivity. Additionally, she distances herself from the model of the research process outlined by Wallace (reading 4) in which hypotheses are specified at the outset, instead characterizing qualitative research using interviews as exploratory.

The humanist commitment of Jones to understanding people on their own terms is taken a step further by Oakley (reading 38). She argues against both the 'mechanical' approach of structured interviewing and the 'non-directive' approach of some qualitative interviewing, in which nothing is revealed by the researcher for fear of creating 'bias'. Instead, Oakley argues (from a feminist position), researchers ought to tell interviewees about their own experiences so that the encounter becomes a mutually co-operative event. She says that the level of trust and commitment that this is then
likely to generate will result in more authentic information than otherwise, as there is less likelihood of a false front being presented to the researcher. A later commentary by Maliseed is then included, in which Oakley’s characterization of textbook accounts of survey research interviewing is questioned and then responded to by Oakley.

Kitzinger’s account (reading 39) of focus groups explores the potential that this form of group discussion has for adding a dimension that is normally absent in the one-to-one interview: the interaction between participants. Focus groups are “artificial” in the same sense as interviews, so could be said to suffer from some of the problems identified by Becker and Geer (reading 36). But they help a little in providing a more naturalistic environment, since people are influenced in what they can say and do by the presence of others, who they may meet again in their everyday lives. This limits the possibilities for fantasy reports about actions and events, but it can also help the researcher treat the event as an opportunity for semi-naturalistic observation in its own right, rather than simply a resource for gathering reported experience. In fact, this “topicalisation” of interview data is in line with discourse and conversation analytic approaches to interview data (readings 47–48, 52, 55; see also Seale (1998)).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Is Jones’s characterization of quantitative survey research practice accurate? (See readings in earlier parts of the book describing this.)
- How would you do a qualitative interviewing study of a group of people like you (e.g. other students, other researchers) in a study of their experience of things which you have also experienced (e.g. being a student, being a researcher)? Would you adopt the non-directive ‘psycho-analytic’ style in which you do not reveal your own experience? Or would you tell your respondents about your own experience, and get involved in helping them out in problems they may have? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the approach you choose and the approach you reject?
- Imagine you are doing a research project on bullying in schools. What would a focus group reveal about this, as opposed to an observational study of children in school settings?

REFERENCE


FURTHER READING


In characterising what they do, I have heard different researchers use the label ‘depth interview’ to cover many different approaches. These have ranged from the supposedly totally ‘non-directive’ to that where the main difference from the formal questionnaire interview seems to be that the interviewer does not have a typed sheet of paper, varies the exact wording of the questions and perhaps asks more ‘probe’ questions than is usual in a formal questionnaire. Between these two extremes is an abyss of practice and therefore theory about the purpose and nature of the qualitative interview.

There is, of course, a considerable literature on the theoretical bases for qualitative methodology to which justice cannot be done here. To summarise my own theoretical starting point: it comes from a particular ‘model of man’ which sees human beings not as organisms responding, Pavlovian fashion, to some external stimulus, nor inexorably driven by internal needs and instincts, nor as ‘cultural dupes’, but as persons, who construct the meaning and significance of their realities. They do so by bringing to bear upon events a complex personal framework of beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives to categorise, characterise, explain and predict the events in their worlds. It is a framework which, in a social world, is shared in some parts with some others but one in which the points of commonality cannot be assumed as self-evidently, non-problematically, ‘given’. In order to understand why persons act as they do we need to understand the meaning and significance they give to their actions. The depth interview is one way – not the only way and often used most appropriately in conjunction with other ways – of
doing so. For to understand other persons’ constructions of reality we do well to ask them (rather than assume we can know merely by observing their own behaviour) and to ask them in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings (rather than through isolated fragments squeezed onto a few lines of paper).

Structure and ambiguity

The above leads naturally to consideration of one central issue in the conduct of depth interviews, that of the degree of structure in the interview. It is an issue I have found to be of recurring concern among those just starting to do qualitative research, reflected in such questions as: How non-directive can I, ought I to be? Do I always ask open-ended questions? Can I never disagree with the respondents? Qualitative research methodologies seek to learn about the social world in ways which do not rigidly structure the direction of enquiry and learning within simplifying, a-contextual, a priori definitions. Thus, interviews in which interviewers have prepared a long list of questions which they are determined to ask, come what may, over a period of say an hour and a half, are not depth interviews. This is so even if the researchers are contingent enough to alter the exact wording and order of their questions and even if the questions all centre around the same broad topic. For in this way the interviewers have already predicted, in detail, what is relevant and meaningful to their respondents about the research topic; and in doing this they have significantly prestructured the direction of enquiry within their own frame of reference in ways that give little time and space for their respondents to elaborate their own. They are additionally likely to be so anxious to cover all their respondents’ questions that even if they hear something they know they ought to follow up, they do not. Often they will not hear such crucial clues anyway.

Yet the issue of structure is not straightforward. There is no such thing as a totally unstructured interview and the term is over-used and often carelessly used.

The crucial point is that there is no such thing as presuppositionless research.

The process of interviewing is one in which researchers are continually making choices, based on their research interests and prior theories, about which data they want to pick up and explore further with respondents and those which they do not.

The making of these choices is the imposition of some structure.

Yet although we are tied to our own frameworks, we are not totally tied up by them. If we ask more questions arising from what we hear at the time than we have predetermined we will ask, if we hold on to, modify, elaborate and sometimes abandon our prior schemes in a contingent response to what our respondents are telling us is significant in the research topic, then we are some way to achieving the complex balance between restricting structure and restricting ambiguity.

The problem of ambiguity is illustrated by the ‘non-directive’ style of interviewing, where researchers encourage interviewees to ramble in any direction they choose and give no indication of what they themselves are interested in. ‘Non-directive’ interviews are anything but non-directive. What one person will say to another depends on what he or she assumes the other is ‘up to’ in the situation. If the respondents have no clear idea of what the researchers’ interests and intentions are, they are less likely to feel unconstrained than constrained by the need to put energy into guessing what these are. Furthermore, the level of ambiguity means not only that the interviewees do not know ‘what questions the researchers are asking’ but also, and therefore, that the researchers do not know what questions the respondents are answering. In short, researchers are more likely to get good data, and know what data they are getting, if the interviewees are told at the outset what the research topic is, even if initially in relatively broad terms, and why the topic is of interest.

Interviewer bias?

The issue of structure is closely related to that of ‘interviewer bias’. Many of those who come to qualitative methods in policy-related research come from a quantitative tradition in which the need to avoid interviewer bias is usually regarded as crucial. It is a concern bound to ideas, for example, of reliability and replication. In qualitative research the notion of some kind of impersonal, machine-like investigator is recognised as a chimera. An interview is a complicated, shifting, social process occurring between two individual human beings, which can never be exactly replicated. We cannot get at some ‘objective truth’ that would be there if only the effects of interpersonal interaction could be removed. . . .

There cannot be definitive rules about the use of open-ended questions, leading and loaded questions, disagreement with respondents, and so on. Such choices must depend on the understanding researchers have of the person they are with and the kind of relationship they have developed in the encounter. Some relationships may allow, without destroying trust and comfort, much more of the to-and-fro of debate and discussion between two human beings than others. What is crucial is that researchers choose their actions with a self-conscious awareness of why they are making them, what the effects are likely to be upon that relationship—and indeed whether their own theories and values are getting in the way of understanding those of the respondents.

A social interaction

. . . If we as researchers want to obtain good data it would be better that the persons we are interviewing trust us enough to believe that we will not use the data against them, or that we will not regard their opinions as foolish; that they are not lying very hard to please; or are not so untouched by us as individuals and the process of being interviewed that they produce a well-rehearsed script that tells very little about what actually concerns and moves them; or that they do not see an opportunity to manipulate us to suit certain personal ends of which we are unaware, and so on. Thus, the stress in much that is said about interviewing is on the need to assure respondents of confidentiality, on using and developing the social skills (verbal and non-verbal) which we have all used at some time or other to
convince others that we want to hear what they have to say, take it seriously, are indeed hearing them.

We do need to pay attention to the crucial non-verbal data – of posture, gesture, voice intonation, facial expression, eye contact, and so on – by which we communicate, for example, interest, encouragement, warmth and caring, on the one hand, or boredom, disapproval, coldness and indifference on the other. We need not only to ask questions in such a way that the others are encouraged to answer and elaborate further, in their terms, but also to give them enough time and space to do so. We also of course do need to listen – to hear what seems to be significant to the respondents in the research topic and explore this further, to be aware of the data that tell us we have misread significance and should change the line of probing. We need to know how to judge when we are getting data that are off the track of what we are interested in, be very sure that we are not just making this judgement on the basis of our own preconceptions and missing data that are relevant to the research topic as construed by the respondents; and then how to bring them back gently. We need to check meaning when we are not sure that we have understood, and not assume too quickly that we have understood. And just as we need to think very carefully about the types of people we are going to interview, the likely range of their experiences and possible responses, and adapt our approach and self-presentation appropriately, so we need to adapt our style to the particular person we are with (that is, the individual, not the ‘type’) and to the shifts and developments during the interaction.

These are essential skills that have to be thought about and practised, and if researchers do not develop such skills the likelihood of overcoming some of the problems outlined earlier is significantly reduced.

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Ann Oakley (and a subsequent exchange with Joanna Malseed)

INTERVIEWING WOMEN
A contradiction in terms


...I shall argue in this chapter that social science researchers’ awareness of those aspects of interviewing which are ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ from the viewpoint of inclusion in research reports reflect their embeddedness in a particular research protocol. This protocol assumes a predominantly masculine model of sociology and society. The relative undervaluation of women’s models has led to an unreal theoretical characterisation of the interview as a means of gathering sociological data which cannot and does not work in practice. This lack of fit between the theory and practice of interviewing is especially likely to come to the fore when a feminist interviewer is interviewing women (who may or may not be feminists).

Interviewing: a masculine paradigm?

...The paradigm of the social research interview prompted in the methodology textbooks emphasise[s] (a) its status as a mechanical instrument of data-collection; (b) its function as a specialised form of conversation in which one person asks the questions and another gives the answers; (c) its characterisation of interviewees as essentially passive individuals, and (d) its reduction of interviewers to a question asking and rapport-promoting role. Actually, two separate typifications of the interviewer are prominent in the literature, though the disjunction between the two is
which influence individuals to change their minds and document how facts and stories operate in practice—what ideological work they do.

- analyse how particular forms of speech facilitate or inhibit peer communication, clarify or confuse the issue (in ways directly relevant to improving communication).

We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks. Our personal behaviour is not cut off from public discourses and our actions do not happen in a cultural vacuum whether that is negotiating safer sex, sharing needles, attending for a smear test or going ‘queer bashing’. We learn about the ‘meaning’ of AIDS, (or sex, or health or food or cigarettes) through talking with and observing other people, through conversations at home or at work; and we act (or fail to act) on that knowledge in a social context. When researchers want to explore people’s understandings, or to influence them, it makes sense to employ methods which actively encourage the examination of these social processes in action.

References


PART NINE

Other sources of qualitative data

INTRODUCTION

One of the more pleasant discoveries of my career as a researcher has been that almost anything can be thought of as data. For example, the other day I was advising a student who wanted to do a study of ‘mixed race’ marriages. She was going to interview some participants in such marriages but was worried about whether this would tell her very much. She was particularly interested in asking them how they negotiated food preferences if different cultural traditions were involved. I suggested that she do a survey of the objects in the kitchens in these homes (the contents of cupboards, the fridge, etc.). I supposed she could combine this with asking them about where an item came from, who used it and for what, so that the original plan of interviewing them was not lost, but the data on what objects were there could reveal something. This is what anthropologists do when they study ‘material culture’.

The readings in this section consider the uses of some other forms of research data. The first, reading 40 by Collier and Collier, explores the potential for photographs and film. Interestingly, these researchers also take family meals as an example where photographs can reveal a great deal about the cultural patterning of family life, though here it is pictures of family meals rather than the contents of cupboards that are the key resource. Reading 41 concerns the uses of a variety of documents. Plummer notes the research uses of many, including diaries, letters, photograph albums, documentary films, tombstones and suicide notes. Clearly, there are more that he does not mention (websites, advertisements, minutes of meetings, newspaper reports, medical records, press releases—the list is endless). All of these can be, and have been, used by researchers studying particular social and cultural processes.

Archives of statistical data have been available to social researchers for some time now for secondary analysis (see readings 16 and 17). Increasingly, qualitative
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