A CRITICAL REVIEW OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

T*his paper is a critical assessment of the merits and drawbacks of qualitative interviews as a research method. To do so, a brief review of literature regarding what we mean by interviews and different types of interviews are presented. Then, practical issues that researchers should put into account before conducting interviews is discussed. Afterwards, issues researchers should keep in mind when implementing interviews are provided. An illustration on how to analyse interviews is addressed. Following this, an evaluation of interviews as a common research method with its pros and cons are highlighted. Before concluding this paper, ethical issues that concern researchers and the use of interviews are delivered.*

Keywords: *Interviews, methodology, qualitative methods, social sciences*

Introduction

For qualitative researchers, the most widely employed tool for collecting information is interviews (Cassell, 2005; Nunkoosing, 2005). As individuals, we mostly engage in a form of interview on a daily basis, either as interviewers or interviewees. If you are exploring participant's experiences, beliefs or identities, then you may use qualitative interviews (Mann, 2011).

This paper aims to discuss interviewing as a qualitative method, firstly by reviewing the literature. Then, types of interviews which researchers might choose to employ will be presented. Practical issues that researchers should be aware of are then discussed. Recommendations on how interviews ought to be conducted and analysed are highlighted. After that, an evaluation of this method with its merits and drawbacks is offered. Finally, before concluding this paper, ethical issues that concern researchers conducting interviews are underlined.

Literature review

Generally speaking, when we first encounter the word 'interviewing', our minds come up with the idea of two or more people chatting to one another. In research, it is "…a basic mode of inquiry" with "…an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth" (Seidman, 2012:8-9). Nunkoosing (2005:699) states that "Interviews deal with thinking and talk that are later transformed into texts". Rollnick and Miller (1995:326) defined motivational interviewing as "…a directive, client-centred counselling style for eliciting behaviour change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence".

In the 1970s, there was a reaction against the supremacy of quantitative methods which therefore split researchers into two groups: qualitative and quantitative researchers (Seidman, 2012). Miller and Crabtree (1999, cited in Dörnyei, 2007) described interviewing as involving shared cultural knowledge. Indeed, due to its nature, interviews are the most common communication technique employed among people. Seidman (2012:7) said "I interview because I am interested in other people's stories". When people tell stories, they share part of their personal experience. However, Denzin (2001:24) argues that interviews are "…not a method of gathering information, but a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society". Nunkoosing (2005) claims that the popularity of interviewing in qualitative research does not necessarily indicate that it has to be applied. Moreover, it should be noted that what Nunkoosing (2005) called 'the self' is involved in the construction of the interview, and this happens by allowing reflexivity and talk.

Researchers should take into account that interviewing in the social sciences is completely different from research found in the natural sciences. According to Bertaux (1981, cited in Seidman, 2012), social science researchers deal with subjects that have the ability to talk and think, whereas natural science researchers deal with lifeless subjects.

Types of interview

There are a number of different types of interviews that can be implemented in social research. Each type has its own objective and focus. Research questions and the information needed to provide holistic answers to these questions will determine the most convenient type to be employed. These types are as follows:

- Structured interviews

This type of interview is a controlled way to obtain information from interviewees. In other words, it is a pre-planned interview where the researcher writes down the interview questions before conducting the

interview. Such a format is an effective way to keep the interview tightly focused on the target topic (Bryman, 2008). It also makes the interview comparable among interviewees. However, this type of interview lacks richness and limits the availability of in-depth data. The variation among responses is limited due to the strict interview format that is used. Therefore, the flexibility of the interviewer in terms of being able to interrupt, and the interviewee to elaborate, is restricted. It has been highlighted in the literature that this type of interview is suitable for researchers who know exactly what kind of information they are seeking (Dörnyei, 2007).

- Unstructured interviews

This type of interview is the opposite to the above, in that the flexibility of this type is wide open. Interviewees can elaborate, leading in unpredictable directions. This type is similar to a conversation in which the interviewer might ask a single question and then the interviewee has the choice with regard to the extent to which s/he responds (Bryman, 2008). Interruptions on the part of the interviewer are kept to a minimum. Consequently, this would provide a more relaxed atmosphere for the interviewees, which has made some entitle it an "ethnographic interview" (Dörnyei, 2007). Although this type of interview may end up with a huge amount of data, it is appropriate for researchers who want to focus on a specific phenomenon in depth.

- Semi-structured interviews

It is very common for social science researchers to conduct this type of interview. This type is a mix of the two types mentioned above, where the questions are pre-planned prior to the interview but the interviewer gives the interviewee the chance to elaborate and explain particular issues through the use of open-ended questions. This type is appropriate to researchers who have an overview of their topic so that they can ask questions. However, they do not prefer to use a structured format which may hinder the depth and richness of the responses (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, it has been recommended that these open-ended questions be piloted in advance (Dörnyei, 2007).

- Focus group interviews

This type of interview originated in market research in the early 1990s (Robson, 2011). Dörnyei (2007) argues that the role of the interviewer and the format of this type are different from the above types. However, with regard to this argument, the main characteristics are similar to the above types. It can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. This type involves a brainstorming focus group of usually six to twelve interviewees (Dörnyei, 2007:144). It can generate "high quality data" which is fruitful for the interviewer. Interviewees can challenge, argue and debate with each other, and this technique usually leads to the emergence of in-depth and rich data. Carey (1994) states that focus groups are the best approach for sensitive topics. It is an enjoyable experience for the interviewees, and applicable for illiterate people (Robson, 2011). However, this type of interview needs to be set up in advance. Moreover, it is difficult to transcribe, especially when overlapping occurs (Dörnyei, 2007). The number of questions tends to be fewer than those in the other types of interview. Also, confidentiality is an issue with this approach (Robson, 2011).

Regarding the above types, Nunkoosing (2005) argued that these categories are not accurate. He believes that all interviews are highly structured. However, this argument raises the issue of the interviewer's control of the interview process, and therefore the validity of the outcomes.

Practical issues

Before heading towards the practical stage of the interview, the researcher should be aware of how to select the participants. The most common approach is to choose the participants randomly. However, due to the nature of interviews it means that a large number of interviews is not anticipated. Consequently, it is difficult to employ a random approach. Self-selection is more appropriate than randomness, because the participants must give permission to be interviewed. In other words, Seidman (2012) argues that there is no pure random approach. Another approach to selecting participants for interview is purposeful sampling (Bryman, 2008). Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006:59) stated clearly that "Purposive samples are the most commonly used form of non-probabilistic sampling". Indeed, in qualitative research, we are not looking for generalization. To do so, a sampling technique called 'maximum variation' is best employed. Seidman (2012:56) states that "…the range of people and sites from which the sample is selected should be fair to the larger population". In other words, readers of maximum variation sampling research should be connected to what they are reading in a wide a manner as possible (see Guest et al., 2006).

Furthermore, it has been agreed that no particular number of participants should be interviewed. Seidman (2012) said that two criteria relating to the size of the sample should be kept in mind. The first one is sufficiency which can be felt by the interviewer him/herself. The other criterion is saturation, in which the interviewer begins to hear the same information he/she has already obtained from previous interviewees. These two criteria are more accurate than pre-determining a particular number of participants, especially in terms of interviews. Similarly, according to Guest et al. (2006:59) the size of the sample "…relies on the concept of saturation".

Arvey and Campion (1982) in their review, mentioned that non-verbal cues (visual cues) should be taken into account. The best way to make use of them is by video recording. By doing this, the interviewer will have the chance to analyse these cues more accurately, which may clarify ambiguity or add new information.

Kavanaugh and Ayres (1998:93-95) provide a guideline for researchers who conduct interviews with regard to sensitive topics. The main guidelines are to: 1) assess respondent behaviours during the entire study, 2) recognize and encourage respondent-initiated coping strategies, 3) provide researcher-initiated strategies to minimize harm and 4) evaluate respondent characteristics that influence the responses.

Conducting interviews

Before starting to conduct an interview, the researcher should be ready with his/her essential tool, namely the 'recorder'. It is crucial to record interviews - either audio or video - especially in the case of semi-structured and unstructured ones. Note-taking is not always enough due to the huge amount of data the researcher will receive. Therefore, he/she may forget or be unable to write everything down. However, participants must agree to be recorded, whether it is audio or video.

Subsequently, the interviewer should provide a convenient environment for the interview, and make the interviewee feel comfortable and relaxed. It is important to briefly describe the reasons for the study, and the purpose of the interview. Also, it is important to show both interest and appreciation for the interviewee's involvement in the study. Once we feel that the interviewee is comfortable and ready to start, it is better to ask his/her permission to switch on the recorder and start the interview.

According to Dörnyei (2007:140), good interviews should (a) "flow naturally" and (b) "be rich in detail". In practice, the interviewer should minimise his/her interruptions to the minimum and give the interviewee as much time as necessary to elaborate and explain any particular issue. Although it is important for the researcher to be neutral, the skilful interviewer should keep the interview focused on the target topic without interruption.

Robson (2011:282) advised interviewers to "…listen more than to speak" in order to obtain rich data. Another advice is to "…put questions in a straightforward, clear and non-threatening way" which is crucial for the interviewee's accurate answers. Also, there is a need to "…eliminate cues which lead interviewees to respond in a particular way". Finally, he advises the interviewer to "enjoy" the whole situation and to show interest.

On the other hand, Robson (2011) warns interviewers not to ask long questions, as it may decrease the interviewee's understanding of the whole question. Similarly, he advises the interviewer not to employ double- or multi-barrelled questions. These types of question will make it difficult for the interviewee to respond accurately. The use of jargon is also not recommended in interviews. Questions leading the interview in a particular direction should be avoided. Finally, according to Robson (2011), the interviewer should avoid biased questions and be as neutral as possible.

In addition to the above, Robson (2011:284) recommends that the interviewer divide the interview into five phases:

1- Introduction: the interviewer introduces him/herself and describes the aim of the interview.
2- Warm-up: start with easy questions to ease the situation from the beginning.
3- Main body: the interviewer focuses on the main topic of his/her study.
4- Cool-off: again, simple questions which will conclude the interview.
5- Closure: the interviewer thanks the interviewee(s) for his/her (their) valuable contribution.

Analysing interviews

After conducting the interview, the researcher then moves to the analysis phase. The analysis stage is a complex process, especially with regard to focus groups, due to the huge amount of data recorded (Carey, 1994). It begins with transcribing the data obtained from being spoken to being written. Transcription has the merit of "…keeping intact the interviewee's words" (Bryman, 2008:453). There are different types of qualitative analysis. According to Robson (2011), the three most common approaches are: a) a quasi-statistical approach b) a thematic coding approach and c) a grounded theory approach. Among these three approaches, the thematic coding approach is the most heavily employed analytical tool in social research. Due to its popularity, thematic coding approach will be discussed. Robson (2011:476) divided the thematic coding approach into five stages:

1- Familiarizing yourself with your data.
2- Generating the initial codes.
3- Identifying themes.
4- Constructing thematic networks.
5- Integration and interpretation.

In order to interpret interviews, the researcher should highlight the most interest information, label it, and then put it into a particular category (Seidman, 2012).

In addition, Heritage (1984:238, cited in Bryman, 2008:451) recommends that recording and transcribing interviews will:

- Help human limitations;
- Allow a deeper analysis of the interviewee's response;
- Allow the researcher to listen to the interview more than once;
- Allow the researcher to share the data obtained with other researchers who can evaluate the analytical process;
- Reduce the claims of researcher bias;
- Allow the data to be reused for other research purposes.

Seidman (2012) raised a very important point which we should take into consideration when analysing the data. This is that the researcher needs to carefully reflect on what s/he has learned from conducting interviews, transcribing them, and labelling them into themes and categories, and then with regard to what knowledge the interviews and the participants bring with them. This reflection process, for instance, will give the researcher a valuable opportunity to find some insignificant information that could lead to interesting points or further research.

Evaluation of the method

Interviewing is more convenient if the researcher's aim is to "…understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience" (Seidman, 2012:10). Non-verbal cues are of merit for the interviewer as they may help the interviewer understand the message being given (Robson, 2011). It is an excellent way to obtain insight into social issues by exploring the individuals' experience regarding these issues (Seidman, 2012). The interview is "…a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves" (Denzin, 2001:25). Moreover, it is a tool that brings contextual meaningful information to the real world (Denzin, 2001). It "…allows in-depth interviewers to unravel the complexity of other people's worlds" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005:134). Bryman (2008) states that interviews are more flexible than any other qualitative method. This merit makes interviews striking to be employed.

On the other hand, it is agreed that interviews are time consuming, as the researcher needs to go through a long process, starting from establishing access to making contact with participants, conducting the interview followed by transcribing the data and making use of it (Robson, 2011; Seidman, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007). The interviewee is a passive responder and the interviewer is a rapport promoter (Oakley & Cracknell, 1981).

In addition, it is a co-construction method. In other words, the interviewer and the interviewee(s) are both contributing participants. This dilemma is widely disputed among researchers (Mann, 2011). They are doing what Cassell (2005) calls "identity work". This action is an important feature in terms of the objectives of the interview. Therefore, the interviewer's role here is to "…decrease the ambiguity of the interview situation" (Cassell, 2005:176).

Nunkoosing (2005) raised the issue of the power of either the interviewer or the interviewee that has been widely disputed as a shortcoming of interviews. The authority of the interviewer as "…a seeker of knowledge and methodological expertise" (p.699) is a critical issue that cannot be excluded from interviews, as it might have an impact of the interview outcome. For instance, it is crucial to clarify the risks which might affect the interviewee before getting the consent form. The interviewer has power regarding his/her research. Therefore, his/her interpretation of the interview should fulfil the validity requirements of the research community, which may affect the agreement with the interviewee of interpreting the interview. Likewise, the interviewee has power as a "privileged knower" (p.699).

Another issue is that the construction of the written transcript is the researcher's responsibility. The researcher might therefore miss-convey what the interviewee meant. An additional factor which might influence the interview outcome is the ideology and theoretical standpoint of the researcher. Interviews need to be carefully prepared and appointments conveniently scheduled (Robson, 2011). Also, it has been claimed that recognising the race and gender of the interviewee might influence the interview outcome; however, due to insufficient knowledge this issue may not significantly change the interview outcome (Arvey and Campion, 1982).

To conclude, although interviewing has some limitations, its merits make it tempting to use this approach. Therefore, a combination of two methods can be used to collect data. This is an approach which I will implement in my study, thereby overcoming the interview's limitations by reinforcement data collection using another method (i.e. questionnaire or observation).

Ethical issues

In 1911, when one of the first published papers explored the use of interviews, it was found that the reliability of interview-based assessment was low. The evaluation of the data collected by three interviewers from the same five interviewees was not the same (Arvey and Campion, 1982). Wagner (1949, cited in Arvey and Campion, 1982) claimed that the integration of data collected in interviews is better being done statistically, rather than clinically. Moreover, it has been argued that the researcher's identity may influence the data obtained, which might therefore affect the validity and reliability of the interview (Gunasekara, 2007). Indeed, according to Scheurich (1997), the researcher, intentionally or unintentionally, carries unseen baggage to the interview which may alter the way s/he would interpret and analyse the data. It is impossible to make a fixed identity for the researcher and neglect the potential impact of the context and place of the interview. For instance, Gunasekara (2007:465) states that the researcher's identity is 'fluid and changing'.

Arvey and Campion (1982) state that structured interviews are more reliable than unstructured ones. The point has been raised that the way questions are delivered may affect the answers given. Moreover, the interviewer's attitude may have an impact on the interpretation of the interviewee's responses (Arvey and Campion, 1982). One of the serious issues which may affect the outcome of interviews is when it is risky for participants to share their personal experiences on a sensitive topic. The researcher's behaviour in responding to this data might be an issue, which therefore may raise validity and reliability concerns (Kavanaugh and Ayres, 1998).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed one of the most frequently employed qualitative methods, namely the interview. A review of the literature reveales that although the data obtained cannot be generalised, it can be rich and deep. Interviewing is a very common qualitative method. The different types of interviewing presented give researchers a range of choices that may perfectly fit their needs. Practical issues that should be considered, together with an awareness of the merits and shortcomings of interviews, have been highlighted. The acknowledgement of limitations is the best way to evade them. There are some ethical concerns related to interviews that need to be acknowledged, and therefore can be avoided by employing a combination of interviews with other research methods. This combination will, hopefully, remedy the limitations of interviews.

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