Critical Appraisal of Qualitative Research with Particular References to Interviews as a Research Tool

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Abstract: *The interview is regarded as one of the most effective methods of collecting data in qualitative research. It enables the researcher to obtain direct and detailed information about experience, values, personal characteristics, attitudes and behavior. In this paper, evaluative analysis of the three types of interviews, structured, semi-structured and unstructured, will be critically reviewed. Additionally, some of merits and demerits of using focus groups in qualitative research will be discussed as are some significant issues that may affect the quality and the validity of interviews. These issues include interpreters and translators, the influence of the interviewer on the interviewee and the effect of identity in using the interview as an instrument of research.*

Keywords: Research; Interview; Semi-Structured Interview; Unstructured Interview; Focus Groups

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that academic research contributes to the progress and prosperity of nations at all levels. One of the most important requirements for research, especially those involving the human and animal elements, namely, is to obtain ethical clearance in order to conduct such research. However, full adherence to the principles of ethics of academic research may not be possible in some cultural contexts. This paper therefore attempts to highlight the most major requirements for obtaining permission to conduct research, in addition to the ethical challenges that researchers may encounter and preventing them from full complying properly with the ethical norms when carrying out research in developing countries.

2. Structured Interview

This type of interview is considered one of the most controlled forms of interview. It is usually used in large scale survey research. The interview in this context normally looks for exact information by using precise forms of questions. These questions are standardized, which means they are prepared word for word prior to conducting the interview. The questions are presented in a particular order and asked in an identical or similar way in all interviews. The purpose of presenting and questioning the interviewees in this manner is to prevent as much variation and spontaneity as possible (Heigham & Croker, 2009). The questions in this type of interview tend to be closed questions, which will limit the interviewees' choices. For instance, the question: 'Are you student?' offers the interviewee 'yes/no' boxes to tick. If the answer is 'yes', the interviewer may continue to ask about field of study. The expected answers can be pre-coded numerically.

A structured interview has advantages, and some researchers may prefer to utilize it as the main method of collecting data. First, because the questions are unified, it becomes relatively easy for researchers to code the answers and analyze the data quantitatively (Polkinghorne, 2005). Moreover, this type of interview can be useful for novice researchers or researchers with limited communicative skills, as the researcher is directed by prepared guidance and has sufficient time to form his or her thoughts to ensure that questions and definitions are clear enough for interviewees. Furthermore, there are some strengths that interviews of all types have - particularly the structured interview. For instance, the researcher can clarify any unclear areas during the interview. Consequently, the researcher can be certain that interviewees understand the questions.

Precision and comparability are viewed as the most important features of the structured interview. In other words, using precise forms and orders is essential to achieve the aim of the interview, and these will help interviewers have control over the format and the topics discussed in the interview. Moreover, the responses of an interviewee are relatively easy to compare to other respondents. These two features make this kind of interview distinct from unstructured and semi structured interviews. Therefore, the structured interview is considered an effective method of collecting data, especially if well-structured guidance is applied (Dörnyei, 2007).

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages to structured interviews. First, researchers will not be able to investigate further to try to find significant details in interviewees' responses. The reason is that the structured interview closely abides by the interview guide and prevents researchers from probing for relevant information. Moreover, researchers' use of verbal comments and non-verbal cues may led to bias and have some influence on respondents' answers (David & Sutton, 2004).

Another drawback of the structured interview is that respondents may feel the questions are artificial and presented in a formal manner during the interview (Kvale, 2007). Therefore the opportunity for free expression is very limited, and this type of interview may not reflect reality because it differs from the interaction that people usually have in normal conversation (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Consequently, some respondents, myself included, may prefer to have questionnaires instead of this type of interview. Therefore, structured interviews are used in situations where it is impractical to collect data by using a questionnaire method or where the likelihood of an adequate return rate is low.

3. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structure interviews are viewed as one of the most common methods of collecting data in qualitative research. Dörnyei (2007) describes this type of interview as a compromise because it draws, to some extent, on the two other types of interviews, namely structured and unstructured interviews. In the semi-structure interview, researchers tend to have predefined questions, issues and themes to be covered during the interview. However, the order of the question is not fixed and can be changed according to the interview directions. Corbetta (2003) explains the order of semi-structured interview as:

The order in which the various topics are dealt with and the wording of the questions are left to the interviewer's discretion. Within each topic, the interviewer is free to conduct the conversation as he thinks fit, to ask the questions he deems appropriate in the words he considers best, to give explanation and ask for clarification if the answer is not clear, to prompt the respondent to elucidate further r if necessary, and to establish his own style of conversation. (p. 270).

Here, the interview guide is used to identify the topics that need to be covered in the interview (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Additionally, the researcher has the option to ask additional questions and to ask questions that were not anticipated at the beginning of the interview. Therefore, the interviewer has more freedom when conducting semi-structured than in structured interviews. This freedom enables the interviewer to obtain detailed information. In this regard, Patton recommends the interviewer 'explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that gas been predetermined' (2002, p. 343).

Furthermore, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is essential and will help the interviewee to relax and feel comfortable; thus, he or she is more likely to speak freely and frankly, which provides the interviewer with deeper information (Heigham & Croker, 2009).

As with the other types of interviews, semi-structured interviews have some strengths and weakness. One of the strengths is that the researcher can prompt and probe deeper into the topic. Another advantage is that the interviewer can explain any unclear or ambiguous questions to the

interviewee during the interview. Moreover, in this type of interview, the researcher can cover the intended topics at the end of the interview by using the interview guide (Polkinghorne, 2005).

As with other methods of collecting data, it has some drawbacks. First, it is not suitable for the novice researcher who may not be able to prompt; thus some important and relevant information may not be collected (Kvale, 2006). Overall, the analysing of interview data from open questions is considered one of the most obvious challenges in semi-structured interviews (Dörnyei, 2007).

4. Unstructured Interview

The unstructured interview is regarded as one of the most flexible types of interview. It is more conversational than structured and semi-structured interviews. Punch (1998) describes the unstructured interview as a method for collecting detailed information about the behaviour of people without inflicting any categorisation that may limit the quality and the quantity of inquiry. In an unstructured interview, the interviewer does not have to follow a detailed guide, and each respondent usually has a different interview because the questions are based on the respondents' answers. This type of interview does not utilise predefined questions, but that does not mean it is random - if the researcher intend to achieve a deeper insight into people lives, these interviews need adequate preparation (Patton, 2002). Respondents in this type of interview should be encouraged by the interviewer to speak freely and frankly. Therefore, the relationship between interviewers and interviewees is essential in the unstructured interview (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2006). The success of the interview depends to a great extent on the interviewer's communication skills, his or her ability to form questions from respondents' answers, his or her ability to manage the direction of the conversation to achieve its goals.

One of the main advantages of the unstructured interview is its flexibility. In other words, there are no restrictions placed on questions in the interview, and the researcher can investigate reasons underlying particular responses. In addition, it provides interviewers with rich details and 'unravels a deeper or more essential reality' (Silverman, 2001, p. 3).

However, unstructured interviews have some drawbacks and challenges. First, they require a large amount of time in order to collect the required information (Patton, 2002), especially if the researcher does not know much about the field and the context of the topic. This means more time will be spent on developing good relationships with participants and gaining their trust. Arksey & Knight (1999) said the unstructured interview may be longer than other types of interviews because the unstructured interview is highly individualized (as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2006). Another disadvantage is that it can be challenging for interviewer to have the balance needed between controlling the direction, the pace, and the statements proposed in the interview (Dörnyei, 2007). Yet, the most difficult part is analysing the collected data because the questions are different and vary according to the context of interview and the responses of

interviewees. Therefore, concerted efforts need to be made to analyse the data systematically and find the patterns within them (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, this type of interview is more useful when used in conjunction with other methods of data collection.

5. Focus Groups

The focus group interview is a technique in which participants are selected to focus on a particular topic. Participants in this type of interview tend to be selected based on the criteria that they have something to say about certain topic (Rabiee, 2004). Focus interviews help the researcher to obtain detailed information about a wide array of concepts, ideas and feelings that people have on particular issue. It is also used to discover the different perspectives members of the group have. According to (Dörnyei, 2007) the focus interview is an economical tool through which researchers can collect large amount of data and in a relatively short time span. Additionally, in the focus group interview, the role of the researchers is quite different from their role in the one to one interview; therefore, the interviewer in a focus group is called a mediator. Here, the role is to facilitate the discussion between the members of the group (Dörnyei, 2007). The number of members participating in focus group interview usually ranges from 7–10 members (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). As mentioned, the focus group has many advantages. First, it is inexpensive tool for collecting qualitative data (Dörnyei, 2007). Furthermore, participants in this type of interview tend to provide candid answers (Heigham & Croker, 2009).In addition, the flexible format of focus groups helps participants to be comfortable in the interview; thus, researchers can obtain rich data. Litosseliti (2003) pointed out that a focus group facilitates 'gaining insights into the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in group situations which could not be easily explored in individual interviews' (p. 13). Additionally, since the focus group is commonly used in mixed methods research, the researchers have the ability to look beyond the numbers and facts that gained through questionnaire or survey (Rabiee, 2004).

However, focus groups have limitations. Kitizing (1999) indicated that focus groups may be unnatural because the discussions are usually controlled by the researcher (as cited in Ho, 2009). Furthermore, the quality of the interview and the discussion may depend to a great extent on the skills of the mediator (Ho, 2011). Like semi-structured and unstructured interviews, analysing the qualitative data is relatively difficult. Another drawback concerns the way participants are selected and can affect the validity of the research and the generalisability of the sample (Ho, 2011).

There has been considerable debate about the way participants are selected in focus group interviews. Some researchers recommend that participants should not know each other because this will promote honest and spontaneous expression of views (Li & Bamard, 2009). This will also prevent some behaviour that is related to the pre-existing relationship (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Other researchers advocate the use of pre-existing groups, as acquaintances have common knowledge of some issues but may have different opinions. Thus, they can serve not only as a means of data collection but also as a mean of clarifying meanings

to each other (Rabiee, 2004). Therefore, the topic of the interview determines whether the interviewer selects homogenous or heterogeneous participations. In this regard, (Rabiee, 2004) suggested that if the researchers are planning to explore sensitive issues, using pre-existing groups are more useful and effective.

6. Involving Translators and Interpreters in Interview

There are many qualitative studies that include interviews in two or more languages. In other words, there are some interviews during which researchers use one language and then present the transcription, results and findings in another language. Although it is important for the researcher to unify the language used throughout research process, there are some cases in which the researchers are obliged to involve interpreters or translators (Zeni, 2001). By using interpreters or translators, the researcher will rely on the skills and the professional qualifications that translators and translators have. Therefore, the involvement of translators and interpreters will have direct impact on the research findings (Brämberg, 2013). In this respect, Block (1996) pointed out that the researchers' inability to speak the language of the interviewee will put them at mercy of interpreters. He added that researchers in that case cannot confirm whether the information presented by the interpreters is accurate.

There are some considerations that must be taken into account before interpreters and/or translators are included in the research process. The researcher should be certain that the translators and interpreters have the ability, competence and required material needed to help him or her accomplish their tasks successfully. Brämberg (2013) pointed out that the importance of the translators and interpreters should be highlighted and their credentials should be described in the research process. He added the researcher in general and interviewer in particular should pilot test the interpreter's translation of the interview from the participants' language (Ibid). In some Arabic countries, it is quite difficult to find competent translators and interpreters, particularly in areas like medicine and law. In addition, there are no strict rules and regulations for the translation profession. Any individual who can speak two languages can practice translation in an official way. Therefore, finding professional translators and interpreters can be more practical in some areas more than others.

It is commonly known that the principles of openness are of crucial importance in research in general and in interviews in particular. In other words, when the interviewee feels comfortable, he or she can speak freely and produce important and detailed information. Consequently, in order to maintain openness and good relations between the interviewer and the interviewee, the researcher has to present the situation clearly and communicate with the interviewee directly (Temple, 1997). However, the presence of an interpreter may make the desired openness difficult and challenging.

Moreover, the identity, the age and the gender of the interpreter can have a deep effect on the quality and the quantity of the information provided in the interview. For

instance, if the researcher wants to study a sensitive topic regarding young adults, and if the researcher belongs to an older age group, the information obtained will not be as detailed as it is when the interview is conducted by a young interviewer. In this regard, (Brämberg, 2013) indicated that matching the interviewee with the interpreter in term of age, gender, ethnicity and other characteristics is crucial to all parties involved in the interview as well as for the research and findings. In addition, gender plays a significant role in interviews. There are some cases where a female interviewee may not disclose the needed information due to the fact that the interpreter or even the researcher is of the opposite sex. This had happened in the medical field where some Arabic women who don't speak English cannot tell the physician the whole truth because of the presence of a male interpreter. The reverse is also true.

It is also important that the interviewer or the researcher inform the interpreters in advance about the details of the study and its designs (Brämberg, 2013). In other words, where interpreters or translators are informed about the details of the study, their performances and the quality of their tasks will usually be better. The reason is that the interpreters and translators will be able to anticipate the challenges they may encounter and determine what they may need before, during and after translating or interpreting the interview. According to the code of ethics of the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) (2012), it is the responsibility of the translator and interpreter to ask for more details if he or she needs to do so to improve the quality of the translation and interpreting service.

The interviewer's lack of command of a participant's language might prevent him or her from having enough control over the interview. In other words, the role of the interviewer may be minimized because of the involvement of the interpreters in the research. For example, interpreters and interviewees may talk and discuss some issues that are not related to the topic of the study, while the interviewer can only listen (Temple, 1997). This indicates that the interviewer's has less control in cases where interpreters are involved compared with situations in which there is direct communication between the interviewer and the interviewee. Therefore, discussing the role of the interpreter before conducting the interview is very important to avoid losing control. According to AUSIT (2012), it is crucial that interpreters and translators stick to their role, which is to convey meaning as accurately as possible without any addition or omission. We can infer from the codes that the problems that arise from involving translators and interpreters result from a lack of competence and the intentional disregard of the professional standards of translating and interpreting services.

7. Conclusion

There are some issues that may have a direct impact on the quality and the validity of qualitative interviews. The identity of the interviewer can encourage the interviewee to speak freely and disclose detailed information. For example, if the interviewer belongs to the community of the interviewee, the richness of the information and the validity of the interview would be greater (Ho, 2011). However, identity can be a

hindrance to interviewee discussion. Another factor that has significant influence on the interviewees' responses is the position of the interviewer. Junior community members may not express their opinion freely if this is likely to affect their personal life or their professional career (Sarantakos, as cited in Li & Bamard, 2009). In addition, age, religion and the gender can have a considerable effect on the interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). For example, young adults in some cultures may not speak the truth and express their opinions freely if the researcher belongs to an elderly or religious group. Therefore, these factors have a profound influence on the quality and the validity of the interviews.

In conclusion, interviewing as a method of data collection lies at the heart of qualitative research. As with other methods of data collection, interviews have their merits and demerits. The purpose and the topic of a study must influence which method the researcher should use. In addition, it is clear from this discussion that interviews are sometimes used independently of other methods, but, more often, they are used in conjunction with other data collection methods.

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