

Forum Notes

Interviewing in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes important features of qualitative interviewing as a research method in the qualitative paradigm. Significant to this description is the examination of the philosophy underpinning qualitative research, the advantages of qualitative interviews, constructing the interview questions, conducting the interview and confronting challenges that are part of the research method. Particularly, an example from the field of literacy education is provided as an illustration of how the qualitative interview can be understood. It is critical that qualitative researchers, especially novice ones, correctly navigate their way into understanding and conducting meaningful social research.

Keywords: Qualitative interviewing, qualitative research, underpinning philosophy

Background

The description in this paper is drawn from a training workshop which was carried out with beginning qualitative researchers entitled “Interviewing in Qualitative Research”. The aim of carrying out this workshop was two-fold. First, I, as the trainer, intended to share with beginning researchers about the advantage of utilising qualitative interviewing when attempting to understand any social phenomenon. Second, I was aware that there has been and continues to be much misunderstanding in terms of how the philosophical paradigm underpins qualitative interviews and therefore, determines whether an interview is considered to be postured within the qualitative paradigm or not.

The philosophy underpinning Qualitative Research

What’s the difference between a qualitative interview and an interview? Having an interview in research does not necessarily make it qualitative. The following explains a simple difference between a quantitative interview and a qualitative interview. In quantitative research, questions are usually asked to measure responses like opinions, human behaviour or other questions that the researcher wants to discover using the Likert scale. Thus, the methodology in quantitative research is the survey whilst the questionnaires are the tools to measure whatever the researcher is interested in measuring. In quantitative research, the interview questions are very strict, very sharp, and very precise constant questions. The interview protocol is the same for all the research participants. Sometimes in the questionnaire, there is an open-ended question for the participants to answer. The responses from the participants are usually to confirm or deny the hypothesis that the researcher has set. This type of interview is usually brief and very short. The responses to these interview questions will not be included in the final analysis of quantitative research. In fact, if there are responses that do not fall into the pattern expected, these outliers will be left out or ignored.

In contrast, qualitative research involves social actors. Thus, to the question of whether all human experiences can be objective, measurable, logical, or mathematical, the probable answer would be negative. This is because human perception and experience would be unpredictable, complex and highly subjective. The qualitative researcher is curious to find out the why’s of the phenomenon. The qualitative researcher is fascinated and wants to delve

deeper into the complexity of the particular phenomenon. More importantly, the researcher is unafraid of how subjective that phenomenon is.

The qualitative paradigm and the researcher’s ability to conduct qualitative research fieldwork require a very specific kind of thinking. Those who can embrace the unpredictability, the unexpected and the unknown that will surface from the qualitative research findings are those likely to optimize from this type of research. Although qualitative research is said to be very subjective, it does not mean that there is no theoretical grounding to its rationalization. Subjectivity in qualitative research means that the researcher is using his or her intelligence, instinct and experience that comes from one’s reading related to the research and theory at hand, to form the connection and make them make sense. Once the theoretical argument is convincing, then the research is considered to be effectively carried out.

The strength of the qualitative interview

In general, qualitative interviews provide the platform for qualitative researchers to explore in more depth, the complexities of a social phenomenon. As such, a qualitative interview should have some or all the following features:

1. It can uncover the phenomenon under investigation.
2. It can allow the researcher to discover something new, something that surveys and questionnaires cannot discover.
3. It is able to explore and see a situated response, meaning to know more about the how’s and the why’s. The interviews can help provide knowledge about the actual context that the research participants are in.
4. The interview questions are open-ended, complex and particular at the same time.

The researcher should be open-minded and ready to expect different responses and points of view from all the research participants. The more diverse and different the responses are, the better the findings will be. The qualitative paradigm allows the researcher to apprehend the human experience through multiple facets and multiple realities. The qualitative interviewer should have the ability to see different perspectives, through multiple lenses, be open to different perspectives and be able to make sense of those perspectives. To be impartial during the data analysis, it is better that the interviewer is not on close terms with the interviewees as this could cloud the former’s judgement and biasness. In addition, the interviewer has to have a certain distance from the interviewee to ensure that the lens can be more neutral.

Constructing the Interview Questions

The interview questions that are constructed need to be linked to the research questions. In other words, the research questions should guide the interview questions. This means that some form of constructive alignment can be helpful to guide the shape of the questions. For phenomenological interview questions, Seidman (2006) suggests that the interview should be conducted three times for each participant. During the first round, the interview session is usually to break the ice and get to know the participants better and explain in detail the research to them. During the second and third interviews, the researcher can start to ask questions that would answer the research questions of the study.

In the following section, I show how interview questions were formed for a PhD study that set out to understand the phenomenon of reading among multilingual Malaysian undergraduates at a British University (Chong, 2014). It is important to note that the interview protocol in Table 1 serves as an example of how interview questions can begin to be shaped.

Table 1: Interview protocol to match with research questions and design

No	Interview questions	BG/ HIS	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
FIRST INTERVIEW					
1	Tell me about yourself.				
2	Tell me about your family.				

No	Interview questions	BG/ HIS	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
3	Tell me about your education.				
4	Tell me about your friends and social circle.				
5	What are some of your earliest memories of reading?				
6	What was the reading experience to you when you were growing up?				
7	What are the titles of things you read when you were growing up?				
8	Can you recount some of the things you read when you were growing up?				
9	Was there anyone who influenced or dissuaded you?				
10	What was your home environment like in terms of reading? Can you describe a picture of that environment?				
11	What were your family members' attitudes in terms of reading?				
12	Are you currently reading anything?				
13	What are the titles?				
14	Can you tell me about what you are currently or have most recently read?				
SECOND INTERVIEW					
1	Tell me about your academic reading experience when you were in school and now in the university.				
2	Tell me about your non-academic reading experience when you were in school and now in the university.				
3	When did you read or truncate academic reading? Non-academic reading?				
4	Why did you read or truncate academic reading? Non-academic reading?				
5	How did you read or truncate reading?				
6	What were your preparations before you started academic reading? Non-academic reading?				
7	Did you discuss your reading with anyone? If so, with whom?				
8	With whom did you read academic texts? Non-academic texts?				
9	Tell me about the text you have chosen.				
10	What was your response to this reading?				
11	Why did you respond this way?				
12	Where did you read this?				
13	When did you read this?				
14	How do you associate this text with yourself?				
15	What kinds of modes did you read through?				

No	Interview questions	BG/ HIS	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
16	Is there a preference? Why?				
17	Was there a change in the forms of reading from the time you were a child until the present time?				
18	How if at all, has the change affected you?				
19	How much time do you spend on reading in modes other than paper print?				
20	Tell me about the modes you read in for academic purposes.				
21	Tell me about the modes you read in for non-academic purposes.				
22	Tell me about your reading experience if you engage in social networking.				
23	What languages can you read in?				
24	What has been your experience with regard to reading in these languages?				
25	What language did you read in the most before you came to the university?				
26	What language do you read in the most now that you are in the university?				
27	Is there a difference between academic and non-academic reading in terms of the language you use?				
28	How has your multilingual ability affected your reading experience?				
29	What is your experience of reading in a largely monolingual context?				

(BG/HIS – Background/History; RQ1 – Research question 1; RQ2 – Research question 2; RQ3 – Research question 3) (Chong, 2014)

It is imperative for the researcher to remain focussed on the research design, the methodology and the research questions while performing the interviews. However, this does not mean that the researcher must be inflexible about the interview questions. The interview questions in Table 1 were only the first stage of the planning. From Table 1, the interview questions were condensed into interview prompts which can be seen in Table 2 (Chong, 2014).

Table 2: Interview prompts (condensed from interview protocol)

MAIN THEMES	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS / PROMPTS
<i>Interview 1</i> Background/history	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Tell me about yourself in terms of your interests, schooling, family and friends. 2) What did reading mean to you when you were growing up (feelings, influences, and titles)?

<p><i>Interview 2</i> Reading in academic and non-academic domains (RQ1)</p>	<p>Tell me about your experience when reading: a) academic texts (feelings, influences and titles) b) non-academic texts (feelings, influences and titles).</p>
<p>Reading in multimodal contexts (RQ2)</p>	<p>Tell me about your experiences when reading through different modes (preference for print-based or electronic, social networking, duration and challenges).</p>
<p>Reading in monolingual context (RQ3)</p>	<p>Tell me about your experiences as a multilingual reader reading in a largely monolingual context (languages, preferences and challenges).</p>

With the prompts, the qualitative researcher can be guided to ask open-ended questions that are broad enough to capture unexpected features of the phenomenon but without losing sight of the research design and research questions. Qualitative researchers can also apply the use of Analytic Guiding Frame (AGF) and Overall Guiding Frame (OGF) as a scaffold to guide the methodological choices (Chong, 2019a, 2019b)

Conducting the qualitative interview

Before starting the interview, it is good to prepare and list down the interview questions prior to meeting the participants. However, additional questions can be asked depending on the responses given by the participants to further elucidate and clarify what they mean. The researcher needs to be ready and be on their toes to follow up on any of the participants’ responses. This is because each participant will most likely have different viewpoints, narratives, ontology and perspectives on the same question the researcher is asking. It is also important to look out for any surprising discovery from the interviews, expect the unexpected and look forward to the twist and turns from the participants. During the interview, the researcher is advised to have multiple dialogues at the back of the mind and be able to multi-task and multi-think.

Before embarking on the interview protocol, the researcher needs to think of who the participants in the study will be, how many will be considered enough, obtain their consent, think of the logistics of where the interviews can be held and ensure that the ethics of the research has been addressed. Qualitative interviews are usually quite long and this would obviously require commitment from the participants to partake in the study the researcher is doing. Thus, it is important for the researcher to build trust with the participants. Participants should feel comfortable with the researcher so that they can express their thoughts freely. Participants should not be exposed to any prior definition or conception that could influence whatever the researcher wants to find out. Sometimes during the initial interview, the participants feel that they need to unload their insecurities to the researcher, bypassing the interview protocol. In order to build that trust, the researcher has the choice to attend to these issues and then decide whether to continue with this particular participant.

However, despite these how do novice qualitative researchers gain confidence in conducting a qualitative interview? The simple answer is the more one does an interview, the better one becomes. Before embarking on the interview, it is advisable to do a pilot study on different individuals or groups and ask them the same questions one will ask the actual participants of the study.

During the interview, the researcher needs to take note of the way the participants answer the questions, notably the pauses, the emotions expressed, the possible difficulty of articulating themselves and be sensitive to the participants’ general body language. The researcher needs to constantly remember that the participants are not an informant but another human being with their own insecurities, internal problems and emotional baggage that they carry.

When conducting an interview, the researcher needs to be careful not to allow personal judgement and personal feelings to be conveyed to the participants through facial expressions, body language or intonation. The researcher not only needs to always put on a neutral front to allow the participant to express freely what they are thinking or whatever their viewpoints are, but to remember not to impose his or her own values and biases on the participant, or say anything that can demean or devalue the participant. The researcher needs to be in control of his or her own emotions as well as pre-conceived notions on an issue and keep them in check, lest it affects the participants’ responses during the interview.

A good qualitative researcher is sensitive to the way the participant answers the interview questions. Sometimes, they may seem hesitant, or laugh nervously or pause for a period of time. The researcher needs to be able to draw gently whatever the participant is reluctant to say at that point in time. All interviews need to be recorded, unless the participants are not comfortable with it, then the researcher needs to respect that and take field notes instead.

After the interview has been concluded, the researcher needs to do some self-reflection. This is done by relating the data obtained with intellectual arguments and findings from previous studies. During analysis of the data, it is advisable to think about how many non-verbal cues (e.g., eye-shifting) to include in the analysis; There are several types of analysis that can be used including discourse analysis, i.e., verbal and non-verbal, and conversational analysis will be more detailed on the way the participants respond during the interview.

Challenges in conducting qualitative interviews

1. Face-to-face or online?

The best way to conduct an interview would always be face-to-face interviews as we could observe any behavioural changes that occur during the interaction. During the recent pandemic, many researchers had to resort to online meetings, either using Zoom application, or Google Meet. Obviously, the human connection will be missing, thus the researcher needs to utilise other multi-method ways to validate the online interviews conducted. An example of multi-method approach would be for the participant to capture a daily video diary of themselves addressing the phenomenon in order to document and capture their lived experience.

2. Sustaining participants' interest

As qualitative approach to data collection necessitates an extended time in the field, qualitative researchers have to confront the challenge of sustaining the participants' interest to continue contributing their time to the study. In order to sustain the participants' interest, suitable compensations for cost incurred (in terms of time, travel expense, internet connection) during the interview should be given. This can be planned for prior to the fieldwork, particularly if the research project is provided with research funding.

3. Language of interviews

Qualitative researchers must be aware that while much of our research is written and presented in the English language, we often carry out real research in non-English speaking contexts. This means that many of our interviews are carried out in languages other than English. This entails a number of considerations. First, it would be ideal for the researcher to be multilingual so that he or she is competent enough to conduct the interview in the language that the participants are most comfortable in. This also means that the researcher should expect the phenomenon of code-switching where a mixture of local languages and dialects can be used. The more comfortable the participants are with the language use, the better the quality of the interview. From there, relevant data from the original interview transcripts will need to be translated into the language of writing or presentation. In translation, the issue of loss of meaning will occur. Researchers will need to declare their proficiency levels so as to verify that the translation is accurate. More than that however, the researcher must be able to navigate the languages in order to spot the nuances, connotations and denotations from the participants' expressions.

Concluding remarks

Qualitative interviewing is an endeavour that is more than posing questions to a group of selected research participants. As this paper and the training has attempted to show, effective qualitative interviewing will require in-depth navigation of research philosophy, research design, sensitively conducted fieldwork and critical analysis in order for ground-breaking data and findings to emerge.

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