Interview studies

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1 Introduction
This supplement expands the introduction to interview studies in Chapter 6. Along with additional details of how to carry out an interview study it offers an overview of the design’s strengths and weaknesses, along with additional references for further study.

Interviews are so much a part of modern life that it has been said that we live in an interview society (Silverman 1993). Not surprisingly interviews are widely employed as a data collection method in research although the word ‘interview’ is used in different ways, including the face-to-face or telephone administration of a quantitative questionnaire as part of a survey study. Here we will use it to refer to the in-depth interviews used in qualitative research. Qualitative interviews typically combine a flexible structure with open-ended questioning techniques designed to cover the desired topics whilst simultaneously allowing emerging issues to be followed up during the interview. In interviews of this kind, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is central to the method because data are created in the interaction between the two (King and Horrocks 2010).

In-depth interviews play an important role in several different qualitative research designs including case study and ethnography but usually alongside other data collection methods such as observation. There are, however, many qualitative research projects in which interviews are the sole data source. Because of this it is legitimate to talk about an interview study as a research design in its own right (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Curiously, despite their popularity and what Silverman (2007: 42) calls an ‘almost Pavlovian tendency to identify [qualitative] research design with interviews’, the idea of an interview study as a
design in its own right is rarely discussed in research textbooks. We include it here because it is such an important approach in practice and its strengths and weaknesses as a research design need to be discussed. First, however, we will look at some of the applications and features of interview studies.

2 Applications of interview study designs

An interview study design is appropriate in situations when a qualitative interview is suitable as the sole data collection method. There are a number of circumstances in which this may apply. Qualitative interviews, and by extension interview studies, offer the possibility of investigating respondents’ points of view and the meaning and understanding they attach to their experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). An interview study may therefore be an appropriate design where your research focus is on the individual, subjective lived experience of your participants (Marshall and Rossman 2006). This interest reflects the emic perspective that is characteristic of the interpretivist orientation of much qualitative research. Researching how people make sense of their world is not simply of academic interest, however. Interviews, particularly focus groups, are widely used in market research, for example, to understand how consumers react to and relate to products and brands.

Participants’ lived experience and perspectives are not the only focus for interview studies. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 150) point out, many interviews focus on eliciting ‘valid factual information’ rather than the meanings and understandings of the interview participants. They illustrate the difference with the following example:

‘[In] professional settings it may be vital for a medical doctor interviewing a child, or the child’s parents, to acquire correct information about the exact bottle of medical pills the child had eaten from’

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 150–1).

In using interviews in this way the aim is to produce knowledge about the world beyond the interview. This reflects a more objectivist orientation to research, more characteristic of positivist or realist orientations. When conducting ‘factual’ interviews of this kind, great care needs to be given to how questions are worded (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). It is also common to compare the testimony given by different individuals, in which case a more structured interview may be used to make comparison easier (King 2004). Alternatively,
some researchers prefer to go for stronger forms of triangulation and use multiple sources of data, thus moving away from interview studies to case study or even mixed-method research designs.

Interviews are a very flexible data collection method and an interview study therefore offers potential for investigating topics in an open-ended way. According to Flick (2009) one of the reasons for the growth in popularity of qualitative interviews is that they allow participants to express their views more openly than would be possible in a standard questionnaire. In-depth interviews offer a means of investigating novel, ill-defined topics where more structured data collection techniques are not feasible and where the ability to follow up emergent issues is likely to be important. Interview studies can also allow you to explore the diversity and heterogeneity within a particular topic, for instance to discover the range of concerns amongst people confronted by a problem or issue. This makes them a valuable component of mixed-method studies where they can be used to identify relevant dimensions of the research topic or to generate propositions for further investigation using a more structured approach such as a survey study.

3 Outline of the design

The term interview study as we use it here refers to a research design that uses qualitative, in-depth interviewing as its chosen data collection method. Although there is no generally accepted, standardised format for an interview study, Figure 1 gives an outline of the key steps that are involved. You will see that this process has a series of feedback loops. These underline the developmental character of this type of research which allows emerging findings to be used to shape the project as it unfolds. In this section we will concentrate on reviewing these higher-level steps and leave discussion of the detailed techniques of qualitative interviewing to Chapter 11.
Perhaps because we are so familiar with interviews, it is tempting to assume that research interviewing is easy and that little or no preparation is needed for an interview study. In reality, a poorly-planned study is unlikely to produce worthwhile findings. Good preparation is therefore essential. Part of that preparation involves what Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 106) call ‘thematising’ the study. Guided by your research questions and knowledge of existing theory, you should develop your understanding of your chosen topic so that you can identify where your own contribution will be made (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The process of thematising your study can also help you to identify issues for initial investigation and to formulate relevant questions. Background knowledge of the topic area can also be important during the interview, especially when talking to subject-matter experts or where the topic is highly technical.

The outputs of this stage inform what is known variously as the interview guide, interview schedule or interview protocol which details the topics to be discussed and the questions to be asked in the interview itself. Requirements vary between projects but it is common to take a semi-structured approach, in which the broad topics/questions to be covered are identified in advance, whilst leaving scope for probing and follow up questions as we discuss in Chapter 11. Careful thought needs to be given to the selection of interview participants through the
development of an appropriate sampling plan. In an interview study the aim is to select participants that are related in some systematic way to the phenomenon under investigation. As shown by the dotted lines in Figure 1, both the interview guide and the sampling plan may be modified in response to emerging findings during the actual data collection. Whilst radical changes are perhaps unlikely since they can hamper the accumulation of relevant data, this flexibility is a valuable feature of many qualitative research designs including the interview study.

In an interview study, interviewing is by definition the data collection method used but interviews vary in format. One choice is between individual and group interviews. Another is how structured the questions and discussions topics will be. A third is whether the interviews will be conducted face-to-face or remotely via telephone, web conferencing or even email. An interview study may use exclusively one format of interview or employ them in combination. We discuss the different options in more detail in Chapter 11. Subject to explicit agreement by the participants, it is standard practice to record the session where possible. This recording can then be transcribed to provide the main data source for analysis.

You can begin preliminary data analysis as soon as data are available rather than waiting until data collection has finished and the emergent findings can inform further data collection efforts. Different analysis techniques are available, although some type of coding is common and, in general, statistical methods are not used. Appropriate analysis techniques are introduced in Chapter 14.

Research in practice 1 gives an example of an interview study.

Research in practice 1 – Example interview study

**Characteristics of successful employer brands**

Moroko and Uncles undertook an interview study in order to ‘examine the perceptions of industry experts of the characteristics of employer branding success as a starting point to bridge the gap in our understanding and to add to the body of theory in this area’ (Moroko and Uncles 2008: 162). The study consisted of 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 senior industry experts from the fields of internal marketing, human resources, communications, branding and recruitment. According to the authors, ‘expert informants were seen as appropriate participants for the study as they offered an efficient way to gather perspectives on employer branding success based on experience across a number of companies, industry sectors and countries’ (Moroko and Uncles 2008: 162). Interviewees
were identified using theoretical, purposive sampling. Interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis to identify principal themes and develop the final conceptual framework. The findings were validated with four of the original respondents. The analysis identifies two key dimensions of success for an employer brand: attractiveness and accuracy allowing a four-factor typology to be proposed in the form of a 2x2 matrix. The authors discuss the practical and theoretical implications of the findings.

4 Strengths and weaknesses of interview study designs

One of the main strengths of the interview study design is its flexibility: it can be used in many different situations either as a standalone design or as part of a mixed-methods study. Interview studies can also be used when other research methods are not possible, for example due to the non-literacy of participants. The familiarity of interviewing in general is undoubtedly another attraction of the method, although care needs to be taken to distinguish qualitative research interviewing from other types of interview, such as recruitment or performance appraisals, with which you may be more familiar but which require different techniques (King and Horrocks 2010). In some situations, an interview study may offer a more efficient way of investigating a topic than other research designs. This can make an interview study particularly attractive for exploring a topic where time is limited or where the study plays a subordinate role in the overall project, for example to help development of a quantitative questionnaire as part of a mixed-methods study. Convenience alone, however, is not adequate grounds for choosing a particular research design and the key issue is whether or not an interview study is actually adequate to answer the research question.

You should therefore recognise situations where other research designs might be more appropriate. If you are interested in measuring the aggregate characteristics of a large population, in other words quantitative forms of description, then a survey study is likely to be more suitable. Alternatively, if you are interested in the culture, behaviours and interactions of a particular group an ethnography (which may, of course, include interviews), is likely to be a more relevant design. This rests on the assumption that observational methods are more likely to give valid knowledge about people’s behaviours than simply asking them (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interview studies may also be less suitable for investigating causal questions. Whilst explanations in the form of peoples’ motives and reasoning in a particular situation can be explored, it may be very difficult for an interview
study to research the topic in sufficient depth if investigating other causal mechanisms. Consequently, you may prefer to use an alternative research design such as grounded theory or case study if your focus is on causal explanation.

Questions can also be raised regarding the nature of data generated by interviews and therefore by interview studies. Interview data are generated in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee; the data are in that sense constructed. For some commentators this calls into question the possibility that interviews can really offer us access to a reality beyond the interview whether we are wanting to find out about the external world or the meanings and lived experiences of interviewees. Instead, interview data allow us to learn about how meaning is actively constructed during the interview process. By no means all researchers agree with this view of interview data but it should make us careful in how we use interview data. In some cases it may be appropriate to avoid relying solely on interviews and instead adopt some form of triangulation by employing a research design (such as case study) that uses multiple sources of data or by adopting a fully-fledged mixed-method design. We discuss these issues further in Chapter 11.

This discussion has highlighted some of the debate around interviewing to help you decide whether an interview study is appropriate for your own research. There are many situations in which an interview study is entirely appropriate, but there are also situations where alternative designs are likely to be more suitable. Above all, we urge you to stop and think carefully rather than automatically choosing an interview study as the default option for your qualitative research project.

5 References


