**9. Collecting primary data using semi-structured and in-depth Interviews**

**What is an interview?**

It is a purposeful discussion between two or more people.

The use of interviews can help you to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to your research question(s) and objectives. If you have not established a research question(s) and objectives, an interview can help you to achieve this.

**Types of Interview**

1. Structured interviews - where questionnaires are used and they are based on a predetermined and standardised or identical set of questions. You read out the question

and record the response on a standardised schedule.

1. Semi-structured interviews - the researcher has a list of themes and questions to be covered during the interview, although these may vary from interview to interview. This means you may decide to omit some questions in particular interviews depending on the circumstances of the situation.
2. Unstructured interviews - are informal interviews. You may use these interviews to explore the depth of a general area in which you are interested. These are referred to as ***in-depth interviews***. There is no predetermined list of questions to work through in this situation. It is subject to what you would like to explore in the area related to your research study. The interviewee is allowed the opportunity to talk freely about events, behaviour and beliefs in relation to the topic area. This type of interview is sometimes called ***non-directive*** or ***informal interview***. This is different from ***respondent interview*** where the interviewer directs the interview and the interviewee responds to the questions of the researcher.

Interviews can be conducted on a face-to-face with the participant or with more than one person or a group. It could also be done by telephone.

**Links to the purpose of research and research strategy**

Each type of interview has a different purpose. Each type is used to gather data which will then be the subject of quantitative analysis.

In qualitative research, interviews are used to conduct discussions not only to reveal and understand the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ but also to place more emphasis on exploring the ‘why’.

Research can be classified into: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. Interviews are specifically used in each of these three research categories:

1. In an exploratory study, in-depth interviews can be very helpful to ‘find out what is happening and to seek new insights’. Semi-structured interviews may also be used in relation to an exploratory study.
2. In descriptive studies, structured interviews can be used as a means to identify general patterns.
3. In an explanatory study, semi-structured interviews can be used in order to understand the relationships between variables, such as those revealed from a descriptive study. Structured interviews may also be used in relation to an explanatory study.

These are summarised as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Exploratory | Descriptive | Explanatory |
| Structured |  | \*\* | \* |
| Semi-structured | \* |  | \*\* |
| In depth | \*\* |  |  |

\* = less frequent \*\* = more frequent

In a quantitative research more than one type of interview may be used moving from structured to unstructured (in-depth) interviews. Interviews can be linked up with the questionnaires they can act as a means to validate findings from the use of questionnaires. The key point to consider is the need for consistency between the research question and objectives, the strategy to be employed and the methods of data collection used - their fitness for purpose.

**Situations favouring Qualitative Research Interviews**

1. The nature of the approach to research.

Where it is necessary to understand the reasons for the decisions that the research participants taken or to understand the reasons for their attitudes and opinions, it will be necessary to conduct a qualitative interview. Semi-structured or in-depth interviews will be used in order to get the interviewees to explain, or build on, their responses. Such interviews may lead to opportunities to new areas not previously considered but which are significant for better understanding and to address the research questions and objectives. The result is that you are able to collect a rich and detailed set of data.

1. The significance of establishing personal contact.

Participants are more agreeable to interview than to complete a questionnaire. An interview provides the opportunity to reflect on events without needing to write anything down. It also provides the opportunity for interviewees to receive feedback and personal assurance about the way in which information will be used. Interviews provide great response rate compared to questionnaires. Furthermore interviewers have better control over who answers the questions.

1. The nature of the data collection questions.

An interview will be the most advantageous to attempt to obtain data in the following circumstances:

* where there are a large number of questions to be answered;
* where the questions are either complex or open-ended;
* where the order and logic of questioning may need to be varied.

Semi-interview or in-depth interview will be most appropriate for the latter two types of

situations.

1. Length of time required and completeness of the process.

It is a wise move to discuss with the participants of the time required to complete the interview. Once they accepted the time requirement, they will agree to be interviewed. It is also appropriate to arrange a time suitable with the participants for the interview to take place.

The aim of an interviewer is to obtain answers to all the questions asked in the interview. However you have to allow the right of the participant not to answer any of the questions and consideration to modify the question to get a response. This must take into consideration the ethical aspect as well.

**Data quality issues and how to overcome them**

There are a number of issues associated with qualitative research interviews:

1. Reliability

2. Forms of bias

3. Validity and generalizability

Reliability **-** whether alternative researchers would reveal similar information. It is also related to the issues of bias. The interviewer bias - where the comments, tone or non-verbal behaviour of the interviewer create bias in the way that interviewees respond to the questions being asked. Another aspect of bias is the interviewee or response bias - this may due to the perceptions the interviewee has on the interviewer. The interviewee chooses not to reveal the real thing. However there can be other factors that can cause this interviewee bias such as the sensitive information, the sample chosen and timing factor.

Validity may not be such an issue. Validity refers to the extent to which the researcher gains access to the participants’ knowledge and experience, and is able to infer a meaning that the participant intended from the language that was used by this person. The high level of validity that is possible in relation to qualitative interviews is made clear by the following quotation:

The main reason for the potential superiority of qualitative approaches for obtaining

information is that the flexible and responsive interaction which is possible between

interviewer and respondent(s) allows meanings to be probed, topics to be covered

from a variety of angles and questions made clear to respondents.

(Sykes, 1991:8, cited by Healey and Rawlinson, 1994:132)

However qualitative research using semi-structured or in-depth interviews will not be able to be used to make generalisations about the entire population where this is based on a small and unrepresentative member of cases. This will be the situation in a case study approach (Yin, 1994).

Overcoming data quality issues

Reliability - the findings derived from using non-standardized research methods are not necessarily intended to be repeatable since they reflect reality at the time they were collected, in a situation which may be subject to change. Besides the circumstances to be explored are complex and dynamic. The situation demands flexibility to explore the complexity of the research question(s) and objectives. Therefore any attempt to ensure that qualitative non-standardised research could be replicated by other researchers would not be realistic or feasible without understanding the strength of this type of research.

**How to overcome bias in qualitative interviews**

1. The interviewer must be well prepared for the interview. This means that he must have

the level of knowledge of his research topic in order to establish his credibility in the view

of his research participant. This knowledge may be acquired through a review of the

literature.

2. Credibility may also be promoted through the supply of relevant information to the

participants before the interview.

3. The appearance of the researcher may affect the perception of the interviewee. Dressing

must be acceptable to the setting within which the interview is to occur.

4. Where the interviewee has not met you before, the first few minutes of conversation may

have a significant impact on the outcome of the interview - again related to the issue of

credibility and the level of the interviewee’s confidence.

5. When conducted appropriately, your approach to questioning should reduce the scope for

bias during the interview and increase the reliability of the information obtained.

Questions should avoid too many theoretical concepts or jargon since your understanding

of such terms may vary from that of the interviewees.

6. Appropriate behaviour by the researcher should reduce the scope for bias during the

interview. Comments or non-verbal behaviour such as gestures, which indicate any bias

in your thinking should be avoided.

7. You must demonstrate paying attention and listening skills to the participants to avoid

bias.

8. Able to summarise your understanding of the information provided by the interviewee. It

is then repeated to the interviewee to ensure correctness as well as to avoid biasness.

9. A full record of the interview should be compiled as soon as possible to avoid any bias.

10. You must be able to recognise cultural differences and to overcome issues of bias.

**The Researcher’s interviewing competence**

It involves in areas like:

* opening the interview
* using appropriate language
* questioning - open questions; probing questions (why, how & what); specific and closed questions (a yes/no answer type).
* listening
* testing and summarising understanding
* behavioural cues
* recording data

**Recording information**

The need to create a full record of the interview soon after its occurrence was identified as a means to control bias and to produce reliable data for analysis. It is an easy job. It demand is more than just to take notes of what has been said but to be able to comprehend the meaning of what is being said as well. It needs time to complete the notes and to be with the time the information is being revealed by the interviewee. One option is to tape-record the interview. You may meet an interviewee who prefers you to take down the notes. If the interview is being recorded, you still have to make a transcript of it as soon as possible and to complete the record of the interview you have made earlier.

**Group interview**

The researcher acts as a facilitator in a group interview. You will explain the theme of the discussion to the group, make the members relax and then initiate the discussion. .A question is posted to the group. The group members are allowed to discuss and present their information freely. You have then to manage the group carefully. Group interaction may lead to a highly productive discussion as interviewees respond to the question and may reveal data that provide you with important insights. You must be careful not to allow a few to dominate the discussion and ensure that everyone has a chance to present his idea on the question.

Questions

1. What type of interview would you use in each of the following situations?

a. a market research project?

b. a research project seeking to understand whether trade union attitudes have changed?

c. following the analysis of a questionnaire?

2. What are the advantages of using semi-structured and in-depth interviews?

3. During a presentation of your proposal to undertake a research project, which will be qualitatively based using semi-structured and in-depth interviews, you feel that you have dealt well with the relationship between the purpose of the research and the proposed methodology when one of the panel leans forward and asks you to discuss the trustworthiness and usefulness of your work for other researchers. This is clearly a challenge to see whether you can defend such a qualitative approach. How do you respond?