

Conducting an Interview in Qualitative Research: The Modus Operandi¹

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Abstract

Qualitative inquiry is an effective way to explore the perceptions of participants and unlock their experiences. In social science research (e.g., applied linguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics), there is a strong tendency among qualitative researchers to collect their required data through interviewing. Interviews are useful tools to glean the related data from the participants, and different types of interviews are commonly used to delve into the participants' perceptions. In this study, we address three types of interviews (structured, semi-structured, and unstructured), and compare them in detail. In addition, we focus on effective ways to form questions, offer a brief review of qualitative sampling, and provide guidelines for conducting an interview in qualitative studies. Finally, two examples of interviews with different structures are put forth to explore the process and to compare them. Having done this, we will juxtapose both the process and content to explore different types of questioning during the process of an interview. This study suggests the potential differences among different types of interviews. It also suggests how to select the best type of interview to collect the required data based on the nature of the study and research questions.

Resumen

La investigación cualitativa es una forma eficaz de explorar las percepciones de los participantes y descubrir sus experiencias. En la investigación de las ciencias sociales (por ejemplo, lingüística aplicada, sociología, sociolingüística, psicología, psicolingüística), existe una fuerte tendencia entre los investigadores cualitativos a recopilar los datos necesarios mediante entrevistas. Las entrevistas son herramientas útiles para recopilar los datos de los participantes, y comúnmente se utilizan diferentes tipos de entrevistas para profundizar en las percepciones de los participantes. En este estudio abordamos tres tipos de entrevistas (estructuradas, semiestructuradas y no estructuradas) y las comparamos en detalle. Además, nos enfocamos en formas efectivas de formular preguntas, ofrecemos una breve revisión del muestreo cualitativo y proporcionamos pautas para realizar una entrevista en estudios cualitativos. Finalmente, se proponen dos ejemplos de entrevistas con diferentes estructuras para explorar el proceso y compararlas. Una vez hecho esto, yuxtaponemos tanto el proceso como el contenido para explorar diferentes tipos de preguntas durante el proceso de una entrevista. Este estudio sugiere las posibles diferencias entre los distintos tipos de entrevistas. También sugiere cómo seleccionar el mejor tipo de entrevista para recopilar los datos requeridos según la naturaleza del estudio y las preguntas de la investigación.

Introduction

Multiple social science scholars have reiterated the importance of interviews as a tool for data collection in qualitative studies (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; De Fina, 2019; De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; 2005b; Fuller, 2000; and Mishler, 1986). To collect rich data, researchers need to choose the best type of interview process. Therefore, we detail different types of interviews for use in qualitative research. Interviews can be categorized as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Neergaard & Leitch, 2015; Nicholls, 2009), and choosing the right type of interview is critical in qualitative research.

Types of interviews

Mason (2002) defines “qualitative interviewing” as “in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing” (p.62). This type of interview requires a number of open-ended questions related to the objectives of the study (Hancock et al., 2007) as well as follow-up questions to clarify the interviewees' speech and the ideas raised during the interview.

Semi-structured interviews are more like natural conversations than written questionnaires (Duranti, 2011). In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer uses open-ended questions “to discuss some topics in more detail” (Hancock et al., 2007, p.16). Open-ended questions empower the interviewer to collect related data from the interviewee(s) in detail (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005) with personal feelings, emotion, ideas, and with less self-censorship. Mason (2002) has convincingly argued that “qualitative interviews require a great deal of planning” (p. 67). A semi-structured interview, as its name implies, needs to be preplanned and well prepared. The interviewer should have general questions related to their research, or topic guide (Hancock et al., 2007). General questions do not delve into the understanding of the interviewee, but instead break

¹ This is a refereed article. Received: 8 February, 2021. Accepted: 25 July, 2021. Published: 1 January, 2022.

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the ice and touch upon the topic briefly to prepare the interviewee for more challenging questions. Additionally, the interviewer develops follow up questions based on the answers or the conversation with the interviewee(s). A semi-structured interview is quite flexible (Neergaard & Leitch, 2015), and most of the questions are crafted during the interview.

The other types of interviews are unstructured and structured interviews. Unstructured interviews, in which the interviewer conducts the interview without any (pre) planning, could be seen as equivalent to unplanned conversations. This type of interview has some disadvantages. For example, it is very difficult to ensure that the conversation will produce data needed for the research, and frequently a second or even third interview will be needed. Researchers need to lead the conversation to a point to extract the required data. Consequently, collecting data through unstructured interviews in qualitative research would be very difficult and may not enable the researcher to gain the desired information.

In contrast to an unstructured interview, a structured interview is completely planned, but it is not a questionnaire (Gillham, 2005). When conducting a structured interview, all questions related to the objectives of the study are prepared prior to initiating the interview and asked during the interview. This type has several disadvantages, which are addressed in the following paragraphs.

An interview in a qualitative study needs to have multiple characteristics. Some of the characteristics have already been discussed. However, two other characteristics worth mentioning are having open-ended questions and being conducted in an informal way. Both questions and the way the interview is being conducted can be informal, so the participants feel comfortable answering the questions. Upon closer scrutiny, it turns out that structured interviews cannot meet either of these two characteristics. Structured interviews are formal, since they have some prepared questions that the interviewee should answer. Thus, it cannot be like a normal conversation and interviewees may not feel comfortable expressing their true feelings and opinions. A structured interview prevents the interviewer from creatively developing follow-up questions because it is completely based on a set of pre-decided questions in order to collect data. Therefore, structured interviews cannot be completely open ended. Structured interviews are more like oral questionnaires (Nicholls, 2009) because the interviewer needs to cover all questions based on their objectives.

In addition, in structured interviews, interviewers may interrupt the interviewee due to lack of time. Therefore, interviewees may not expose their true feelings and ideas due to the format of questions, formality of the environment and interruptions. Given the above discussion, structured interview is not a common data collection tool among qualitative researchers (Nicholls, 2009). This interview style is “easy to administer and analyse but may not allow the participant to express themselves fully” (Barrett and Twycross, 2019, p. 63). After all, it “breaks down naturalness and creates restrictive impositions both for the researcher as for their own research subject” (Muylaert et al., 2016, p. 188) which can prevent the researchers from gaining suitable data for their objectives.

So far, we clarified and explained the different types of interviews, another important step in doing qualitative research in selecting participants, which will be discussed briefly in the following section.

Sampling

Purposive sampling, based on the characteristics of the participants, is the most commonly used method among qualitative researchers (Nicholls, 2009), since “the researchers are not interested in being able to generalize at a statistical level” (Hancock et al., 2007, p.21). Purposive sampling can be done based on the judgment of the researcher, enabling them to obtain information from interviewees purposefully and related to the objectives of the study.

Another important point to be considered in all types of interviews is that revealing the identity of the participants may prevent the interviewees from saying the truth. Hence, it is of utmost importance to let the participants know that anonymity of their participation will be maintained, which, often can be done using pseudonyms.

Preparing for the interview

Qualitative interviews need to be natural, like informal conversations. Keeping them natural allows participants to freely talk about their perceptions and experiences. As such, researchers need to follow some guidelines. Firstly, in most qualitative interviews not only the speech of the interviewees, but also many other aspects, such as the participants’ body language are important as well. Since being a good listener is

one of the duties of the interviewer, adding such information as data in the notebook might distract the researcher. Therefore, it is suggested to invite another person as a note taker in the interviews (Neergaard & Leitch, 2015). The note-taker should be knowledgeable about notetaking and interviewing and well-informed about the objectives of the study.

The next suggestion for doing the qualitative interview is to review the objectives of the study before the interview. This will help the research make appropriate follow-up questions (if necessary) during the interview. When the researcher is not well-prepared for the interview, they cannot make on-site follow-up questions and sometimes need to check the objectives of the study and review the answers of the interviewee to ensure that the data is appropriate for the purpose of the study. Hence, preparedness empowers the researcher to have a smooth interview. As Neergaard and Leitch (2015) suggested, "interviewee will notice that you have well prepared" (p.5).

In almost all qualitative studies, a transcription of the conversation for data analysis is needed. However, researchers need to record the voice of the interviewee(s) with their consent. Nowadays a mobile phone can do many things at the same time, including voice recording. However, it is essential to put the mobile phone in flight mode, to avoid interrupting the conversation with notifications and ringtones.

The language of interview is another important matter which researchers need to consider. The recommended language is the mother tongue of the interviewees (Jovchelovich & Bauer, 2002). Having participants respond in their mother tongue allows them to be comprehensive, thereby generating quality data. Moreover, referring to interviewing asylum seekers, which are among more vulnerable participants, De Fina (2019) stresses that "ignoring the possibility of speech accommodation or negotiation may result in serious misclassifications of respondents' speech" (p. 3). Therefore, (convergence) speech accommodation (Giles, 1973), which in a more completed way is known as communication accommodation (Giles & Smith, 1979) and is defined as "the way communicators adjust themselves to their interlocutors" (Elhami, 2020, p. 193), plays a crucial role in interviewing participants that can be expanded to the most cases in qualitative interviews. Expressed another way, an interviewer is required to be aligned with the interview, so they reveal more and they both dive into their experiences to unlock them. Accordingly, being aligned and in harmony with the participants diminishes the risk of unwillingness to talk and keeping secrets, if there is any. In this regard, speaking to the participants in their mother language is an example of convergence accommodation.

Example Interviews

To gain further insight into differences between structured and semi-structured interviews and also prepare good conditions for the interviewee to easily express their ideas and feelings, two example interviews are examined here.

The first example is an excerpt from a semi-structured, in-depth, open-ended interview with Sina (pseudonyms), a PhD student in Madrid at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM). Sina came from Shiraz, Iran, and the interview was conducted in Farsi, his mother tongue. Prior to the interview, via a telephone conversation, we asked Sina about his preferred place for the interview. He suggested two places: the first one was university (UAM) and the second one was a park near his home. He also mentioned that he goes to the university from morning to the evening and he has plenty of free time there. Therefore, we decided to do the interview at the university in a quiet room.

The interviewee could not feel this was a formal interview. First, we did not wear formal attire, and before starting the interview we greeted him normally. To make sure that the voice is being recorded and due to technological issues, we used two voice recorders.

The objective of this study was explaining the role of social conditions in learning the Spanish language among Iranian immigrants in Madrid, Spain. To do so, some general questions were prepared, and the researchers made some on the spot questions during the interview.

First excerpt in Farsi:

محقق: از خودت برام بگو

سینا: اسمم سینا هست. دانشجوی دکترای هوش مصنوعی هستم. تو دانشگاه اتونومای مادرید. و مجرد هستم البته مدتی با یکی از همکارام زمانی که تو

ایران بودم رابطه داشتم اما ادامه پیدا نکرد

محقق: چی شد تصمیم گرفت ی بیای اسپانیا؟

سینا: خوب من خیلی دوست داشتم توی دانشگاه تدریس کنم که البته با فوق لیسانس هم میشه اما با مدرک دکترا راحتتره و خوب من لیسانس و فوق لیسانسم رو توی ایران گرفتم و فکر کردم که بهتره اگر بتونم برای ادامه تحصیل به کشور دیگه ای برم.

محقق: چرا کشورهای دیگه نرفت؟

سینا: والا برای نیوزلند و استرالیا و ایتالیا هم اپلای کردم. اینجا زودتر بهم جواب دادن. ولی خوب هدف اصلیم هم اینجا بود بیشتر برای مادری اسپانیا زمان گذاشتم

محقق: چرا؟ چرا بیشتر برای اسپانیا زمان گذاشتی؟

سینا: راستش به خاطر زبان. اون کشورها برای پذیرش نمره زبان بالا میخوان اما اسپانیا نیازی به مدرک زبان نداره و این کارم رو خیلی راحتتر کرد. برای استرالیا یا نیوزیلند باید حداقل آیلتس هفت میگرفتم که خیلی زمان میبرد.

محقق: چند وقته توی اسپانیا هستی؟ و چقدر میخواه بمانی؟ و اینکه برنامت برای آینده چیه

سینا: الان حدودا دو ساله. و برنامم اینه که هر چه زودتر بتونم درسمو تمام کنم که کشورم رو عوض بکنم و برم جایی که بتونم کار پیدا کنم. رشته من هوش مصنوعیه و توی اکثر کشورها فرصت شغلی خوبی دارم. در حقیقت پشیمونم از اینکه اومدم اسپانیا. اون زمان که ایران بودم و میدیدم دوستان و آشنایان برای تحصیل میرین کشورهای دیگه مثل کانادا و استرالیا از همون روزهای اول کار پیدا میکردن و میتونستن خرج زندگیشون رو در بیارن اما من که الان دو ساله اینجا هستم نتونستم کار پیدا کنم و دانشجویایی هم که چهار یا پنج ساله اینجا هستن هم نتونستن کار پیدا کنن. اگر از اول میدونستم که اینجا نمیتونم کار پیدا کنم هیچ وقت نمیامدم و زمان میذاشتمتا نمره بالایی توی آیلتس بگیرم تا هم بتونم برای کشوری پذیرش بگیرم که بتونم توی کار پیدا کنم و همینکه بتونم پایان نامه ام رو بنویسم. الان من و خیلی از دانشجویایی که اومدن زبانشون خوب نیست توی نوشتن پایان نامه مشکل داریم.

Translation of the first excerpt into English

1. Interviewer: Tell me about yourself.
2. Sina: My name is Sina. I am a PhD student in artificial intelligence. At the
3. Autonomous University of Madrid. And I am single. Of course, I had a
4. relationship with one of my colleagues for a while when I was in Iran, but it did
5. not continue.
6. Interviewer: What made you decide to come to Spain?
7. Sina: Well, I would love to teach at the university, which of course can be done
8. with a master's degree, but it is easier with a doctorate, and well, I got my
9. bachelor's and master's degrees in Iran and thought that it would be better if I
10. could go to another country to continue my studies.
11. Interviewer: Why didn't you go to other countries?
12. Sina: I also applied to New Zealand, Australia and Italy and here they
13. answered sooner. But well, my main goal was here. I tried more for Madrid
14. and Spain.
15. Interviewer: Why? Why did you try more for Spain?
16. Sina: To be honest, because of the language. For studying in those countries, a
17. high language score is needed, but Spain does not need a language degree,
18. and that made my goal much easier. For Australia or New Zealand, I had to
19. take at least IELTS 7 band score, which takes a long time to prepare.
20. Interviewer: How long have you been in Spain? And how long do you want to
21. stay? And what's the future for you?
22. Sina: It's been about two years now. And my plan is to finish my studies as
23. soon as I can to change my country and go where I can find a job. My field is
24. artificial intelligence and I have good job opportunities in most countries. In
25. fact, I regret coming to Spain. When I was in Iran, I saw my friends and
26. acquaintances who had been studying in other countries like Canada and
27. Australia from the very first days could find a job and could make a living, but
28. I, who have been here for two years now, could not find a job. And other
29. students who have been here for five years and could not find a job. If I had
30. known from the beginning that I could not find a job here, I would never have
31. come here, and I took the time to get a high IELTS score so that I could be
32. accepted to a country where I could find a job and write my dissertation as
33. soon as I could. Now I and many students here whose English language proficiency is
34. limited, have issues for writing our doctoral dissertations.

In the first part of this excerpt, (line 1, "tell me about yourself"), the focus was on the demographic features (name, education, marital status). Not only did the interviewee talk about himself (name, education, etc.),

he also talked about his relationship with one of his colleagues, lines 4 and 5. Culturally speaking, Iranians do not tend to talk about their relationships before marriage or at least they prefer not to talk about these subjects in an interview. It is thus evident that Sina felt this interview was not formal, and he was open to talk about his relations, feelings, and uncensored ideas.

In the second question, line 6, based on the objectives of the study, the interviewer is trying to focus more on Sina's reasons for coming to Spain. The next follow up questions, lines 12 and 15 "why didn't you go to other countries?" and "why did you try more for Spain?", are related to the previous question to enable the researcher to gain more in-depth data about the participant's reasons for coming to Spain. In the next question, lines 20 and 21, researcher tried to encourage him to talk more. Therefore, the researcher asked him three related questions to get richer data. The reason we could elicit more data was because we established rapport before asking questions, then asked the right questions, and added follow-up questions. As Sina's response shows in lines 23 to 34, he answered the questions completely.

The next example is an excerpt from a structured interview with Hamid, a 21-year-old boy who came to Spain with his family. In this interview, the researcher employed a structured interview with fixed questions that was asked in Farsi since Hamid is originally from Hamid, Iran, and his mother tongue is Farsi. For this interview, like the previous one, the researcher asked Hamid to select a place for the interview and he suggested a park near his house. Parks are usually packed with people, Hamid and the researcher decided to go there at 3 PM when fewer people were in the park.

Second excerpt in Farsi:

محقق: اسمت چیه؟
حامد: حامد هستم
محقق: چند سالته؟
حامد: بیست و یک سالمه
محقق: تحصیلاتت چیه؟
حامد: من دیپلم دارم از ایران
محقق: ازدواج کردی؟
حامد: نه مجرد هستم
محقق: چند وقته که توی اسپانیا زندگی میکنی؟
حامد: حدود هشت ماه
محقق: با چه کسانی اینجا زندگی میکنی؟
حامد: اینجا با پدر و مادر و برادر و دو نفر ایرانی دیگه
محقق: چند وقت قراره تو اسپانیا بمونی؟
حامد: فکر میکنم حدود شش سال اینجا بمونم تا برم دانشگاه و درسم تموم بشه
محقق: از چه طریق اومدید اسپانیا؟
حامد: از طریق تمکن مالی
محقق: آیا اینجا دوست هم داری؟
حامد: بله سه تا دوست ایرانی که زیاد نمیبینمشون

Translation of the second excerpt into English

1. Interviewer: what is your name?
2. Hamed: I'm Hamed
3. Interviewer: how old are you?
4. Hamed: Twenty-one years old
5. Interviewer: What is your education?
6. Hamed: I have a diploma from Iran
7. Interviewer: are you married?
8. Hamed: No, I'm single
9. Interviewer: How long have you been living in Spain?
10. Hamed: About eight months
11. Interviewer: Who do you live with?
12. Hamed: I live here with my parents, brother and two other Iranians
13. Interviewer: How long are you going to stay in Spain?
14. Hamed: I think I stay here for about six years to go to university and finish my

15. Degree
16. Interviewer: How did you come to Spain?
17. Hamed: Through non-lucrative visa
18. Interviewer: Do you have some friends here?
19. Hamed: Yes, three Iranian friends and I don't see them much.

In this example all the questions and answers are very short, so the interview seems formal and does not have any similarities with a normal conversation. The interviewee might not feel free to talk about his emotions, feelings, and ideas openly. The design of questions does not encourage the interviewee to feel free and to answer in longer sentences and it is more like a questionnaire than an interview. In most questions, the interviewer could have asked some on the spot follow-up questions in order to encourage the interviewee to talk more. In line 11, in the question, "who do you live with?", The interviewee (line 12) mentions living with two other Iranians, and it seems he likes (or does not have any problem) talking about them. In this part, the interviewer could have asked about those two Iranians, for example, "tell me about those two Iranians? Why are they living with you?" Instead, however, he goes to another question without paying attention to the interviewee's response. This happens again in line 14, when Hamed says, "I think I stay for about 6 years..." For this response, some examples of follow-up questions would be, "Why? Do you have a plan for after finishing university? Do you want to go to another country?"

This structured interview, which is very similar to a questionnaire, does not have any of the characteristics of a qualitative interview. It is formal, it does not encourage the interviewee talk about his feelings and ideas. It is completely planned, and most of questions do not need open-ended answers. Structured interviews inherently restrict the participant from speaking freely and giving the researchers more data.

Conclusion

Guided by qualitative approach to research, the current article explored the differences between structured, semi-structures, and unstructured interviews. Because qualitative research is more exploratory in nature and semi structured interview enable researchers to obtain more data, most qualitative researchers tend to choose semi-structured and in-depth interviews (De Fina, 2019). Semi structured interview should be informal, use open-ended questions, let the interviewee(s) talk and without interrupting them, and allow for on the spot follow-up questions. The transcriptions of two different interviews illustrated in this paper indicated that the type of questions in qualitative interviews are fundamental to ensure a conversation-like interview. It can be helpful to form questions with "tell me," for instance, "tell me about people who are living with you." Another method is to ask the interviewee about his/her ideas. For example, "what is your idea about learning the second language?" These open-ended questions are much better than questions such as "who do you live with?" Or "what languages do you speak?" Barrett and Twycross (2018) argue that "a well-designed semi-structured interview should ensure data is captured in key areas while allowing flexibility for participants to bring their own personality and perspectives to the discussion" (p. 63). It seems that questions with "tell me about" and "what is your idea about" can lead the interviewee(s) to talk in a story-like format, and also provoke interest in interviewee(s) to talk about their experiences openly. The interviewee(s) should feel safe to talk without self-censorship. Interviewees may speak more openly if the interview is anonymous. The place of the interview is another important point to take into consideration. The place of interview is suggested to be selected by the interviewee, because they should feel safe and comfortable during the interview. Interviewers are recommended to avoid crowded places for two reasons. Firstly, it minimizes concentration of both interviewer and interviewee. Secondly, since transcription is necessary in most interviews (Barrett & Twycross, 2018), transcribing the interviews, which were conducted in crowded places, would be more difficult than the ones in quieter places.

This article presented the main characteristics of the three common types of interviews and explained their strengths and weaknesses in detail. We showed which type of interview allows researchers to collect richer data. We also demonstrated the differences between structured and semi-structured interviews through real examples. We recommend further research to differentiate kinds of transcriptions and data analysis appropriate for each type of interview.

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