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THE PROCESS OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW: PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FOR NOVICE RESEARCHERS



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Abstract

Qualitative research offers a thorough investigation into a particular phenomenon or an issue. The nature of this approach is considered particularly useful in the study of behavioural issues, personal, and sensitive topics. Moreover, this approach gives researchers the proper tools to understand issues and problems in their natural settings. Data collection tools in qualitative research differ from one approach to another. Nevertheless, interviews remain one of the most crucial tools in extracting rich and genuine insights about the issues being studied. Additionally, it grants the researchers close access to the participants' perspectives and experiences. However, most researchers enter this arena without any prior experience or sound knowledge about the required skills to ensure an effective and dynamic interviewing process. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative data collection tools can be puzzling especially if this was coupled with the lack of experience. Thus, this study presents practical insights pertaining some effective ways to conduct proper interviewing process. The study was conducted relying on both document analysis and field-work experience. These practical insights are geared towards novice researchers. Also, these prerequisite steps are based on fieldwork experience as well as previous academic literature works.

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1. Introduction

The endeavours to sculpture the most effective approach in investigating theoretical and practical problems have been of a constant concern for social science scholars. Qualitative research is one of the fast-growing methods; this approach is designed to explore social interactions and comprehend people's perspective, delves into individuals' experiences, the nature of their behaviours, and what affects their behaviour. According to (Pope & Mays, 1995, pp. 42-45) qualitative research is all about "reaching the parts other methods cannot reach." (Rowan & Huston, 1997). Thus, it involves a systematic process of collecting, organizing, and interpreting the derived data from interviews, observations, documents and other artefacts.

Qualitative methods are utilized mainly in the investigation and the study of meanings pertaining to social phenomena as encountered by individuals themselves, in their day to day life (Malterud, 2001). Recently, Qualitative approaches have developed into a vast and sometimes almost perplexing field of research. However, these approaches have become part of the preparation in empirical research methods in different fields of study and in a wide range of scholarly disciplines. This wide variety of fields extends from psychology to sociology, to educational and economic studies, to cultural and behavioural studies, etc. (Jenner et al., 2004). However, (Creswell, 2007, p. 129) stated that while there are different types of data in qualitative research, all data falls into four primary categories "observations, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials" (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012, p. 1).

One of the primary sources of data in qualitative research is obtained through one-on-one interviews or focus-group interviews. Qualitative interviewing is a powerful and flexible research tool which can be utilized to discover and explore new ranges of research (Britten, 1995). Among the various types of qualitative interviewing; semi-structured is the one widely used in social sciences disciplines. This type of interview is conducted based on flexible structure comprised of open-ended questions that articulate the issue to be explored, at least, to begin with, then the researcher or the participant may diverge and extend his answer in order to follow up an idea in more details (Britten, 1995). Furthermore, the purpose of using semi-structured interviewers is to attempt to be sensitive and interactive to the concepts and words expressed by the interviewee and try to keep the interview guide flexible. Its purpose also is to plunge below the surface of the issue being investigated, examine what interviewees say in great detail, and unveil new insights, ideas, and concepts which were not expected at the beginning of the investigation. Additionally, one crucial aspect of interviewing is that the researcher should grasp interviewees' meanings instead of depending on their presumptions.

Interviewing is a crucial research tool, and it is rapidly becoming a vital instrument in qualitative research. Even though much has been written on how to analyse and interpret qualitative data cultivated from interviews and observations. Nevertheless, far less has been written on how to conduct an effective and robust interviewing process. The primary purpose of this paper is to offer practical techniques on how to prepare and conduct qualitative one-on-one semi-structured interviews. As researchers, we need the stories of people for various purposes. They assist us in uncovering phenomena, allow us to describe people, and offer many improvements in different fields of research. By authentically nurturing the stories of others, not just our different areas of studies but also qualitative research will be improved by what we

learn (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Most importantly, interviews are effective tools by which we can investigate and address real-life problems. .

2. Problem Statement

Qualitative research has gained an important status across the different disciplines of social sciences. However, the application of the various qualitative approaches is less common compared to quantitative approaches. This is mainly due to the lack of resources that provide comprehensive and practical knowledge on the different steps and requirements of conducting proper qualitative research. Moreover, most people, especially students and novice researchers have very limited exposure to qualitative approaches during their education and training. Most academic and professional training focuses more on quantitative approaches while neglecting the importance and uniqueness of qualitative research.

Qualitative research provides researchers with the tools that allow them to delve deeply into meanings, social and organizational issues, and closely engage with phenomenon in their natural settings. Worldwide, qualitative researchers investigate the tapestries of daily existences, people's understandings, memories and imaginations, the ways in which social structures, organisations, discourses, or relationships operate, and the importance of the interpretations they create (Chowdhury, 2015). Yet, most research students and novice researchers are less inclined and prepared to adopt qualitative research in their research. Furthermore, despite the abundant school of thoughts, philosophies, and theories on qualitative research approaches. Practical guides on the different phases of qualitative research are far behind other research approaches, especially within the disciplines of social sciences. Thus, it is important for qualitative researchers and scholars to generate practice-based insights for novice researchers and students in order to help them enter and thrive within the field of qualitative research. In line with this, the current study focused on providing insights on conducting effective qualitative data collection using semi-structured interviews.

3. Research Questions

The study was guided by one main research question - what are the necessary skills and/or steps in conducting effective qualitative data collection using semi-structured interviews?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the best skills and/or steps in conducting qualitative data collection using semi-structured interview. The following parts of this study discuss the skills and steps by which researchers can improve the quality of their data collection process through semi-structured interviews. The following four tips are recommended for beginner researchers in the fields of social sciences who seek to establish robust knowledge and practice in qualitative research interviewing. However, this paper does not claim to offer one-fits-all techniques; these suggested insights are the result of field-work experience in semi-structured qualitative interviewing backed by previous academic works. Hence, it is not holistic nor above criticism as it reflects a personal research experience. The ultimate

purpose of this paper is to improve the experience of qualitative data collection through interviewing and interacting with respondents. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that there are various schools of thoughts regarding the nature as well as the procedures of qualitative research. Nevertheless, taken together, the steps presented in this study offer a practical guide to a better data collection process using semi-structured interviews.

5. Research Methods

The study was conducted relying on both document analysis and field-work experience to collect and analyse the data. Document analysis is a qualitative research approach where documents and previous scholarly works are evaluated and reviewed in a systematic manner to answer the research question. This approach can assist researchers in uncovering meanings, discovering insights, and developing an understanding about the relevant research issue (Bowen, 2009). The findings of this study are the results of a mixture of previous scholarly work and field-based experiences of the researchers.

6. Findings

The following sections present the key steps and techniques in conducting effective qualitative data collection using semi-structured interviews.

6.1. Preparation for the Interview Process

The various qualitative research designs are focused on gaining a deep and detailed understanding of a particular phenomenon or are concerned with meanings that are embedded in the why and how of a specific process, issue, scene, situation, a subculture or a group of social interactions (Dworkin, 2012). For this reason, an essential step in the process of qualitative research is to carefully locate potential people or places to study. Also, researchers should plan for, and anticipate, in advance for any possible obstacles in gain access to organizations or individuals. Another important aspect in the initial stages of data collection is to be aware of the most research tools that can be applied to create rapport with respondents so that they will be willing to give valuable information. A strongly interrelated phase in qualitative research includes identifying a method for the purposeful sampling of sites or individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

When we interview, we ask people to share their stories, their personal experiences, and perspectives (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Hence, gaining proper knowledge about the respondents of the study is crucial if the researcher wants to build trust with the interviewees. Doing background research on the respondents, their field of work, level of education, their organizational and cultural context is essential to the process of interviewing. Approaching the respondents without prior knowledge of their background can lead to several issues that can influence the effectiveness of the interviewing process and might result in mistrust or misunderstanding especially if the issue being investigated of relative sensitivity. This is most relevant in cross cultural studies. Additionally, the data collection process is a series of interrelated activities which aim at collecting robust information to address emerging questions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A significant part of this interconnected process of qualitative data collection is

getting familiar with the subjects of the study before starting the interview process. There must be a consistency between the different stages of qualitative research.

More so, according to Creswell & Creswell (2017), the current discussion on qualitative interviewing stresses on the significance of reflecting upon the relationship between the researcher and the participants of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). collecting and analysing information related to the interview's issues and subjects is a crucial initial step in the preparation of the interview. This information offers ideas and concepts for potential questions and assists in understanding the interviewees' cultural context and the environment where they live (Dilley, 2000). One way to make sure that the interview process will be conducted smoothly is to start with a pilot testing with few respondents or experts in the field of study. The pre-testing of the interview structure can guarantee that the interview structure is well-suited for the study, and most importantly, to assure a positive engagement from the part of the respondents. Knowing the respondents in terms of their educational, cultural, and organizational backgrounds helps in improving interviewer-interviewees relationship and mentally prepare the researcher for issues that might raise during the field work.

6.2. Timeframe and Funding

Very often, researchers neglect the issue of time and finding out of enthusiasm and eagerness to explore and investigate an issue of interest. Yet, without securing enough funding for the data collection phase, the process can be of a great challenge. Depending on personal resources can be financially exhausting. Collecting qualitative data using interviews is undoubtedly a taxing process, this is particularly relevant for novice researchers involved in research projects that require an extensive interviewing process such as grounded theory, case study research, and phenomenology. For example, Equipment issues are one of the concerns in conducting interviews; recording tools and transcribing equipments are required to be well-organized prior to the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The ambition of conducting a robust data collection process should also coincide with the amount of time the researcher can have. Some research projects require a long period of time and in some cases a team of collaborators and research associates. Thus, having enough funding or proper financial sources is very crucial to the success of any research project. Novice researchers using qualitative approaches are usually challenged by the volume of time required to gather qualitative data and also by the richness of the collected data. Thus, novice researchers could ease this process by engaging in a limited data collection phase and start with a pilot study to acquire initial experience (Doody & Doody, 2015). The limited data collection phase may include one or two observations or interviews for the purpose of estimating the needed time to collect sufficient data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

6.3. Developing the Interview Questions

One of the most important elements of the interview design is creating effective and coherent research questions (Turner III, 2010). Preparing the interview guide or the interview questions is vital to the effectiveness of the data collection. Interview questions work as roadmap for the journey we want our interviewees to take. These questions serve as a map we suggest for our respondents to guide them to markers and landmarks that we believe are crucial to our study and to the understanding of the issue being

studied. Likewise, an interview is a communication act and the researcher are one of its main actors. The interview questions work as a script for us to refer to, but similar to every good actor, the interviewer should know his lines well before the curtain rises (Dilley, 2000). The process of qualitative research is highly connected, this means that to develop clear and effective interview questions requires a clear and focused research question which implies that the purpose of the study must not be ambiguous and be clearly articulated.

Crafting the proper interview questions requires careful attention to the objective of the research and the nature of the study. Some sensitive topics require the involvement of experts in the field in order to avoid offending the respondents or ending up with superficial and/or insincere answers. Before even drafting the first interview question, the researcher should know what the research literature says about the respondents that might be involved in the study. A rigorous understanding of the key purpose of the research leads to a better structuring of interview questions that are grounded on the previous literature as well as the peculiarity of the issue being investigated. Also, the researcher needs to be aware of what differs from what previous research says, and which still need to be answered. It also helps in focusing or narrowing the interview questions in a way that will generate meaningful information (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). It is recommended that each research question to have a maximum of three interview questions. Moreover, some research questions require two or three interview questions in order to address different aspects of the issue being investigated. However, the researcher should be flexible and committed according to the nature of the study. This means that some broad research questions require more than three interview questions in order to fully cover the objective of the research.

After creating the main interview questions, the researcher moves to the next step which is drafting the probing questions or follow up questions. Probing questions are also a very useful tool in persuading the respondents in giving more information on the issue being investigated. Also, very often, some researchers try to strictly adhere to the interview guide, which may restrain them from getting valuable information. Having a well-structured interview guide is a necessity. However, the researcher needs to be resilient and steer the questions depending on the willingness of respondents to open up for more insights. With all that mentioned, As stated by Patton, good questions in qualitative interviews should be open-ended, neutral, sensitive, and clear to the interviewee (Britten, 1995). It is important to mention that, follow-up questions should be based on the respondents' responses to pre-constructed questions. One way to keep the interviewer on track is by creating prompts or probes for each question. These probing questions assist in reminding the interviewer of his questions while at the same time give opportunity to unexpected information to emerge (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

A proper interview guide should include an introductory section which contains an opening statement about the role and the position of the interviewer, an overview on the issue of the interview, and objective of the study. The introductory section should also include a brief explanation on guidelines and rules during the interview session which will help in making the process smooth and transparent. The second section of the interview guide should include the opening questions, key questions, probing questions, and ending questions (Krueger, 2014). A well-structured interview guide is very crucial to the success of any interview session; it works as road map for the researcher towards the attainment of relevant data. Furthermore, the interview questions should involve the respondents and make them

positively engaged in a fruitful discussion which will bring to light their perspectives and views (Krueger, 2014).

Another significant aspect is that the interviewer should be aware of his communication skills. People skills are very decisive in increasing the reliability of the collected information, and the most vital communication skills is to show an interest in the respondent views and experiences to create a more friendly environment for the interviewee. As stated by Dilley “We must be inquisitive, intrusive perhaps but always in a polite and questioning manner” (Dilley, 2000, p. 136). In addition, after a proper structuring of the interview questions, a pilot test is necessary as mentioned earlier to assist the interviewer in detecting possible weaknesses, flaws, or other limitations related to the design of the interview and give him/her the opportunity to make necessary modification before embarking in the data collection process (Turner III, 2010).

6.4. Planning the Nature of the Interview Session

In deciding on the nature of the interview sessions, several factors should be considered prior to the process of interviewing. The interviewer should be aware of the roles and the positions of respondents of the study and their work schedule. This is important because some respondents might be more comfortable with phone interviews instead of face-to-face interviewing due to their hectic schedule. Others, on the other hand, prefer to meet and get to know the interviewer. These two forms of interviewing raise the question of the quality of recording devices; in some cases, the researcher needs to supplement the recording process with notes to fully capture the answers and perspectives of respondents.

Another important decision to make about the interview session is the location, the place where the interviewing process will be taking place is crucial to the attainment of sound data. Friendly, peaceful and less destructive location is best suitable for an effective interview session. Thus, the respondents should be included in making the decision about the location of the interview. These factors greatly affect the effectiveness of the respondents' willingness to participate positively in the study and avoid rejection. To create a perfect environment for the interview session, the choice of location and the timing are two major factors. Moreover, listening skills are a factor of great importance in the process of qualitative data collection and it is perhaps one of the most difficult to learn (Dilley, 2000). The researcher wants to build trust with the interviewee as he or she collects important background data. This can be achieved by looking at the literature to help you decide what background data is important to collect (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

In addition, the interview guide should offer wording that will help the researcher to ease any concerns the participant might have about confidentiality of information. This can be attained by giving participants plenty of time to read through the form and ask as many questions as she or he needs to ask. Also, the researcher should ensure that the interviewees understand that the interviewer will hold their confidence and that they may withdraw from the study at any time is an important aspect of gaining their trust. Building trust with the participants of the study will grant the researcher access to their authentic experiences which will help the trustworthiness of the study and the quality of the collected data. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017) given the complex skills required for conducting an effective

interview, it is no surprise that the interview process is often referred to as a “craft” which can be developed by practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Finally, the interviewees are the key source of information in qualitative research across a wide field of studies. Therefore, the researcher should provide a clear map to the purpose of the study and simplify the terms and key concepts of the interview questions. Participants should find no difficulties understanding its intended meaning, especially if the issue being investigated requires a thorough probing. According to Dilley (2000), interviewees need to be comfortable during the interview session, especially if a study addresses deep and complex issues. They also need to feel confident of their ability to respond to the interview’s questions and to have a clear idea on how their experiences fit in the study. This will often make interviewees reflect on their responses and sometimes provide multiple or extensive answers (Dilley, 2000).

7. Conclusion

The main purpose of the current paper is to offer practical insights on the process of qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews for novice researchers. The paper has presented four important steps for an effective interview process based on both practical experience and previous scholarly work. Although this study focuses on one-on-one interviews in data collection, the presented steps may well be useful for other forms of interviews. This paper contributes to the existing knowledge of qualitative research by providing practical tools and insights that can yield a better data collection process. The previous steps if put into practice by researchers, it will ease and boost the effectiveness and the realization of a robust interviewing process.

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