AN OVERVIEW ON THE METHODS OF INTERVIEWS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Minhat HS
Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine, UPM

*Corresponding author: Halimatus Sakdiah Minhat, Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences UPM halimatus@upm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

A qualitative research offers insights into social, emotional and experimental phenomena. Unlike quantitative study, no structured questionnaire is involved in the data collection. Instead, series of semi-structured or unstructured interviews are conducted. Interview is one of the commonest methods of data collection used in qualitative study. It can be in the form of in-depth interview or focus group discussion (FGD). The moderator plays a crucial role in ensuring the success of the interviews conducted and the quality of information gained. This paper gives an overview on the two most common methods of data collection used in qualitative research: In-depth interviews and focus group discussion.

Keywords: Interviews, Qualitative research, In-depth, Focus Group Discussion

1.0 Introduction

There are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research. These include observations, textual or visual analysis from books or videos and also interviews involving a single respondent or a group of respondents. However, the most commonly used methods are the interviews, either the in-depth interview or focus group discussion. They are two separate methods in qualitative research that involve series of interviews conducted until a saturation point is reached. The selections between these two methods are depending on various factors including the purpose of the study and the target population or respondents. An in-depth interview is more suitable when conducting a qualitative interview among elderly population compared to a group of teenagers. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, are believed to provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods, such as questionnaires (Silverman, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to give an overview on the two stated methods of interviews involved in qualitative research.
2.0 The interview

Interviews can be very useful when it comes to exploring experiences, perceptions, beliefs, insights and any sensitive issues that may not be revealed and portrayed by just answering list of questions in a well-structured questionnaire. It is, therefore, most appropriate where little is already known about the study phenomenon or where detailed insights are required from individual participants and particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics, where participants may not want to talk about such issues in a group environment (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). A clear picture on the facial expression, interest and feelings of the interviewee can also be gained by conducting qualitative approach interviews. There are two types on interviews conducted in qualitative research which are a one-to-one interview which is known as the in-depth interview and also an interview with a group of people or famously known as focus group discussion.

The suitability of either of the methods of data collection is very much depending on the target population and issues being explored. When designing an interview schedule it is imperative to ask questions that are likely to yield as much information about the study phenomenon as possible and also be able to address the aims and objectives of the research (Gill et al. 2008). An open-ended (ie, require more than a yes/no answer), neutral, sensitive and understandable questions should be used throughout the interview session. It is usually best to start with questions that participants can answer easily before proceed to more difficult or sensitive topics. This will make the participants at ease, more comfortable, build up confidence and rapport and will help generate richer and genuine data. The length of each interview varies, depending on the topics and the character of the participant. In general the focus group discussion is often longer than the in-depth interview.

3.0 Conducting an interview

Participants should be given adequate information about the study details, ethical issues related to the study, confidentiality and anonymity before any interview takes place. Interviews for qualitative research should be carried out in accordance to the convenience and comfort of the participant involved. The areas where the interview is conducted must be free from any distractions and at the times and locations that are most suitable for them. Familiarity is also an important aspect to be taken into account. Their own home has become a common and most preferable location for participants for in-depth interview. If not effort has to be made by the researcher to actually rent or find a private room or area in order to conduct the interview and ensure the accuracy and genuineness of the information shares.

Establishing rapport with the participants prior to the conduction of any interview session is also important. Participants will become more comfortable during the discussion and positive feedback is most likely obtained. The moderator or interviewer must also prepare an interview schedule in advance to ensure the process appears more natural and less rehearsed. It is prudent for the interviewer to familiarise themselves with the interview schedule, so that the process appears more natural and less rehearsed (Gill et al. 2008). Researchers must also possess a repertoire of skills and techniques to ensure that all relevant gestures, expressions and movements are recorded during the interview.

All interviews should be tape recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards before the conduction of the next interview session. To ease the data analysis process, it is also advisable...
and very helpful to actually making field notes during the actual interview or immediately after each interview with regard to the environment, expression, flow of thoughts, ideas and emotions of the participants.

In any kind of interview, it may take a while to develop the right questions for getting precisely the kind of data you are interested in (Patton & Cochran, 2000). Here are some guidance proposed by Patton and Cochran (2000):

1. Start with a general question to orientate interview to the topic
2. Gauge the level at which you need to express yourself, the type of language that you should use so the respondents understand you and do not feel intimidated by complex vocabulary or patronised by a simplistic one either
3. Use everyday vocabulary, don’t use technical words or overly complicated ones
4. Put more sensitive questions towards the end
5. Ask open questions, i.e. requiring more than ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in answer
6. Ask neutral questions. For example do not ask: ‘why haven’t you had your children immunized’ but rather ‘how did you decide whether or not to immunise your children’?
7. Use concrete rather than abstract questions. For example ‘think about last time you were pregnant. What did you like about services then?’, rather than ‘what do you think about ante-natal services?’
8. Use concrete events to help people remember – eg ‘After your last child was born’ or ‘the day of the earthquake’ rather than ‘January the 3rd’

4.0 In-depth interview

An in-depth interview is an intensive, open-ended and discovery-oriented method to obtain detailed information from an individual. It main goal is to explore in depth a respondent’s point of view, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. In-depth interviews are often conducted at the beginning of a larger research project when there are questions about how to narrow the focus of the research, or what questions need to be explored through the research. Among topics that can be explored using in-depth interviews are needs assessment, personal experiences, expectations, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, programme refinement and issue identification.

In-depth interviews may be preferable over focus groups under these situations:

1. When the topics you wish to explore is highly sensitive in nature, and people may be uncomfortable sharing their honest feelings in a group setting such as gender issue.
2. It would be the first choice method in any situation when it would be logistically difficult to gather a group of people in one room at one time such as geographic distance.
3. When you wish to distinguish individual as opposed to group opinions about an issue.
4. When the potential participants may not be comfortable talking openly in a group.
5. Involve rare group of people/ hardly accessible category of population (directors of big company etc)
There are also no scales involved in the interviews and respondents answer in their own words. On the other hand, the interviewer can adjust the order and flow of the questions and ask additional questions as needed. However, having an interview schedule may help the moderator to conduct the interview smoothly. There is no specific length of the interviews conducted and very much depending on the response given by the interviewee. However, in general it can be as short as 15 minutes and as long as 1 hour for each interview.

Among the advantages of conducting an in-depth interview is it can uncover valuable insights, and enable the researcher to find out “the real story” related to the topic of interest. On top of that, compare to focus group discussion participants are most likely to open up on a one-on-one basis and more adequate and genuine information is most likely gained. The data can also be collected faster because less effort is needed to actually gather the participants because it is a one-to-one interview session which can be done at any time convenient to the participant. However, the data analysis may be very challenging and time consuming. Qualitative data can be very ambiguous and may result in a more difficult analysis, particularly for less experienced analysts. Using less skilled interviewers increases the possibility of bias. Therefore, it is important to have well-trained, highly-skilled interviewers conducting this type of interview.

5.0 Focus group discussion

A focus group is a small group of six to ten people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator and should also be recorded. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that some participants are left out. The participants involve in the focus group usually have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the research question. The moderator’s goal is to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions until a saturated point is reached. The ideal amount of time is anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. Beyond that most groups are no longer productive and it becomes an imposition on participant time.

The discussion is free-flowing but is structured around a set of predetermines questions. Ideally, the comments from a participant will stimulate and influence others to actually share their opinion and ideas. It takes more than one focus group (usually three or four) on any one topic to produce valid results. As a moderator, you will know that you have conducted adequate sessions of focus group discussion when you are not hearing any new information. In this case you have actually reached the saturation point. The selection of venue and time to conduct the focus group is also important. Ideally the venue should easily accessible, comfortable, private and quiet and also free from distractions. Places such as school and workplace may encourage attendance; however it may affect participants’ behaviour.

6.0 Role of a moderator

A moderator is the person who is conducting and leading the focus group discussion. In many cases a rapporteur will present to assist the moderator and help to record the content of the discussion. Moderating a focus group looks easy when it is conducted properly and successfully, but requires a complex set of skills. One of the most important skills is the ability to listen attentively to what is being said. By being a good listener, participants are able to recount their experiences as fully as possible, without unnecessary interruptions.
Other than that a moderator should also be able to act naturally, either emotionally or physically, shows some interest by nodding or even making encouraging noises such as ‘mmmm….’ and ‘ok…’ during the interview. At times it would also be better for a moderator to remain silent and just being a listener, because this may trigger the participants to talk more. However, when nobody is interested to talk, a moderator should throw some probing question to keep the discussion alive. There are three types of probes commonly used by the interviewer which are the detailed-oriented probe, elaboration probe and clarification probe. Example of detailed-oriented probes are “When did it happen to you?” and “Who was with you?”. Meanwhile, an elaboration probe may sounds like this, “Tell me more about the incident”. Whereas, a clarification probe will be something like this, “Can you elaborate or explain further?”

A moderator must also be well prepared for views that may be unpalatably critical of a topic which may be important to you. It is also to just be yourself and feels comfortable with the discussion, because it will make participants feel relaxed. One thing to remember is that no one person will always be suitable to moderate any kind of group. Therefore anybody can become a moderator as long as the required skills can be developed.

7.0 Conclusion and recommendation

There are two types of unstructured interviews conducted in qualitative research which are in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. The selection of either of these methods very much depending on the topics intended to explore and also the types of participants involved. The interviewer for an in-depth interview and also the moderator for a focus group must acquire certain skills in order to ensure the successful of the interviews conducted and richness and genuinely of information obtain.

References


