7 Gathering Qualitative Data

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In this chapter ...

Qualitative techniques can yield valuable, revelatory, rich data. They can be used on their own, or in conjunction with other research tools depending on the nature of the research project. For example, interviews can be used to explain and interpret the results of quantitative research, or conversely, to provide exploratory data that are later developed by quantitative research. In a slightly humorous fashion, MacIntosh and Bonnet (2007 p. 321) note "Qualitative research is sometimes styled as the poor cousin of 'real science'…"This position can represent an added challenge to researchers. This chapter discusses some common approaches to qualitative research methods and the issues that must be considered with their application in order for them not to be viewed as somehow inferior to 'real science'.

Interviews

A long established research method, interviews involve a conversation between the researcher and the subject towards developing understanding of central themes and research questions. Interviewing is now examined in three stages; pre-interview, interview and post-interview, explaining some useful techniques for conducting successful interview research.

■ Pre-interview considerations: Design and access

You will remember in Chapter 2 that being realistic and ensuring your objectives are achievable was important when formulating your ideas. The same caution must be applied to considering your approach in interviews.

First and foremost, trust your instincts and your 'gut feeling' to guide you. Why? Because you should not forget that an interview is simply a dialogue between two people. You are familiar with this dynamic and you already possess the basic skills that will ensure a successful outcome.

Table 7.1: Strengths, weaknesses and applications of interview approaches

Strengths	Weaknesses	Applicability
Unstructured		
Provides rich information. Explores previously unknown themes that arise from the interview. Creates relationships which may lead to more information. Uses natural language.	Very time consuming. Resource intensive Lacking in generalizability Can generate lots of often irrelevant data. Susceptible to interviewer bias.	Exploratory research investigating past events when subjective views and experiences are sought in conjunction with other research methods.
Semi-Structured		
Questions prepared in advance to cover critical points, useful when the researcher is inexperienced. Interviewees still retain freedom and flexibility to express their own views. Increased reliability and scope for comparability. Interviewee is able to respond in language natural to them	Time consuming. Resource intensive. Needs good interview skills to keep on topic. Interview questions are open to researcher bias May lack in generalizability.	Multiple interviewers. Only one chance to conduct the interview. Researcher has some knowledge of the topic, In conjunction with other research methods.
Structured		
Can produce consistent generalizable data. Minimal risk of bias. Large sample size. Can be conducted quickly. Sophisticated interviewing skills not required.	Little opportunity for feedback. Question responses are limited and restrictive. Little scope to cater for the unforeseen. Real-time changes to the interviews cannot be made.	Clear focus and a question to be answered. High level of knowledge on a topic to allow for appropriate question formulation. A well-developed literature.

Interviews range from unstructured (open-ended) to structured, with semi-structured occupying a middle-ground. Selecting the most appropriate type often determines project success. For example, unstructured interviews in a resource constrained, narrowly focused project may prove ineffective, whereas highly focused structured interviews are unlikely to capture the depth of insight required in some exploratory studies. The type of project you are undertaking, the nature of your research participants and the time and cost limitations you face must be incorporated into your decision-making. It may be difficult to get the approval to conduct unstructured in-depth interviews with prisoners; it may also not be the best use of the opportunity to ask sterile and prescriptive structured questions if you are lucky enough to interview the CEO of a global company. Table 7.1 illustrates some characteristics of these approaches and suggests suitable applications; the boundaries are not fixed between them.

How to conduct the interview is another challenge with approaches including: video, telephone, or face to face interviews. Unstructured interviews elicit more information in a face to face format, whereas telephone-based formats may prove more suitable for structured interviews when a larger sample is required to strengthen validity, and the practicalities of meeting each respondent face to face are diminished. Ultimately, the most efficient way should be selected considering the resources available, appropriateness to the context, and the added value of two-way interaction to the research.

Access to appropriate participants is vital and must be realistic and achievable within any project timeframe. Interviewers must be able to brief gatekeepers and participants on the purpose of the project, as the initial exchanges can affect the rest of the interview. The briefing should include the following elements:

- What the data generated from the study will be used for
- Reassurances of confidentiality (see Chapter 11)
- How data will be recorded
- Length of the proposed interviews
- How many interviews the participant is committing to undertake
- Reassurance that the researcher's role is non-judgemental but evaluative.

■ Interview

The interviewer has to be able to listen, prompt appropriately, and interact with the interviewee effectively. Good interviewers are personable, fostering trust and rapport with the interviewee. Gaining valuable data from an interviewee who is relaxed and enjoying the process is far easier than one who is on edge and suspicious. Table 7.2 illustrates interview stage techniques that can enhance interview quality

Table 7.2: Interview techniques

Activity	Description	Benefits
Pilot study	Ensures the study is designed correctly, but does not contribute towards data. Should resemble the actual study closely.	Improves the robustness of the study. Allows early remediation of project design flaws. Settles the researcher into a routine and process they can execute confidently.
Selecting the setting	Where the interview takes place influences the interview itself.	The interviewee may find hosting the interview more convenient, a neutral setting may elicit more data, some settings may jeopardise interviewee anonymity.
The interview guide	A pre-prepared set of topics/questions, produced with the aim of providing a form of direction for interviews. Lines of enquiry should correspond to the critical themes underpinning the study.	Aides the researcher, helping to ensure coverage of pertinent themes. Briefs the interviewee (but should not lead them).
Recording	Discretely, but with permission, record interviews for later transcribing and analysis, improving accuracy.	Can review the interview innumerable times. Records with minimal intrusion.
Non-verbal communications	Interviews include the verbal conversation, and a range of body language. Hand gestures, eye movements and head movements can all add meaning to an interviewee's words. Note taking can record these.	Interviewee body language is an important part of the data, confirming, contradicting or emphasising what the participant is saying.