Qualitative Interview Design:
A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators

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Qualitative research design can be complicated depending upon the level of experience a researcher may have with a particular type of methodology. As researchers, many aspire to grow and expand their knowledge and experiences with qualitative design in order to better utilize diversified research paradigms for future investigations. One of the more popular areas of interest in qualitative research design is that of the interview protocol. Interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic. Often times, interviews are coupled with other forms of data collection in order to provide the researcher with a well-rounded collection of information for analyses. This paper explores the effective ways to conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews for novice investigators by employing a step-by-step process for implementation. Key Words: Informal Conversational Interview, General Interview Guide, and Open-Ended Interviews

Qualitative research design can be complicated depending upon the level of experience a researcher may have with a particular type of methodology. As researchers, many aspire to grow and expand their knowledge and experiences with qualitative design in order to better utilize a variety of research paradigms. One of the more popular areas of interest in qualitative research design is that of the interview protocol. Interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic. Often times, interviews are coupled with other forms of data collection in order to provide the researcher with a well-rounded collection of information for analyses. This paper explores the effective ways to conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews for novice investigators by expanding upon the practical components of each interview design.

Categories of Qualitative Interview Design

As common with quantitative analyses, there are various forms of interview design that can be developed to obtain thick, rich data utilizing a qualitative investigational perspective (Creswell, 2007). For the purpose of this examination, there are three formats for interview design that will be explored which are summarized by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003): (a) informal conversational interview, (b) general interview guide approach, and (c) standardized open-ended interview. In addition, I will expand on some suggestions for conducting qualitative interviews which includes the construction of research questions as well as the analysis of interview data. These suggestions come from both my personal experiences with interviewing as well as the recommendations from the literature to assist novice interviewers.

Informal Conversational Interview

The informal conversational interview is outlined by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) for the purpose of relying "…entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in a natural interaction, typically one that occurs as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork" (p. 239). I am curious when it comes to other cultures or religions and I enjoy immersing myself in these environments as an active participant. I ask questions in order to learn more about these social settings without having a predetermined set of structured questions. Primarily the questions come from "in the moment experiences" as a means for further understanding or clarification of what I am witnessing or experiencing at a particular moment. With the informal conversational approach, the researcher does not ask any specific types of questions, but rather relies on the interaction with the participants to guide the interview process (McNamara, 2008). Think of this type of interview as an "off the top of your head" style of interview where you really construct questions as you move forward. Many consider this type of interview beneficial because of the lack of structure, which allows for flexibility in the nature of the interview. However, many researchers view this type of interview as unstable or unreliable because of the inconsistency in the interview questions, thus making it difficult to code data (Creswell, 2007). If you choose to conduct an informal conversational interview, it is critical to understand the need for flexibility and originality in the questioning as a key for success.

General Interview Guide Approach

The general interview guide approach is more structured than the informal conversational interview although there is still quite a bit of flexibility in its composition (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The ways that questions are potentially worded depend upon the researcher who is conducting the interview. Therefore, one of the obvious issues with this type of interview is the lack of consistency in the way research questions are posed because researchers can interchange the way he or she poses them. With that in mind, the respondents may not consistently answer the same question(s) based on how they were posed by the interviewer (McNamara, 2008). During research for my doctoral dissertation, I was able to interact with alumni participants in a relaxed and informal manner where I had the opportunity to learn more about the in-depth experiences of the participants through structured interviews. This informal environment allowed me the opportunity to develop rapport with the participants so that I was able to ask follow-up or probing questions based on their responses to pre-constructed questions. I found this quite useful in my interviews because I could ask questions or change questions based on participant responses to previous questions. The questions were structured, but adapting them allowed me to explore a more personal approach to each alumni interview.

According to McNamara (2009), the strength of the general interview guide approach is the ability of the researcher "…to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee" (Types of Interviews section, para. 1). The researcher remains in the driver's seat with this type of interview approach, but flexibility takes

precedence based on perceived prompts from the participants. You might ask, "What does this mean anyway?" The easiest way to answer that question is to think about your own personal experiences at a job interview. When you were invited to a job interview in the past, you might have prepared for all sorts of curve ball-style questions to come your way. You desired an answer for every potential question. If the interviewer were asking you questions using a general interview guide approach, he or she would ask questions using their own unique style, which might differ from the way the questions were originally created. You as the interviewee would then respond to those questions in the manner in which the interviewer asked which would dictate how the interview continued. Based on how the interviewer asked the question(s), you might have been able to answer more information or less information than that of other job candidates. Therefore, it is easy to see how this could positively or negatively influence a job candidate if the interviewer were using a general interview guide approach.

Standardized Open-Ended Interviews

The standardized open-ended interview is extremely structured in terms of the wording of the questions. Participants are always asked identical questions, but the questions are worded so that responses are open-ended (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). This open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up. Standardized open-ended interviews are likely the most popular form of interviewing utilized in research studies because of the nature of the open-ended questions, allowing the participants to fully express their viewpoints and experiences. If one were to identify weaknesses with open-ended interviewing, they would likely identify the difficulty with coding the data (Creswell, 2007). Since open-ended interviews in composition call for participants to fully express their responses in as much detail as desired, it can be quite difficult for researchers to extract similar themes or codes from the interview transcripts as they would with less open-ended responses. Although the data provided by participants are rich and thick with qualitative data, it can be a more cumbersome process for the researcher to sift through the narrative responses in order to fully and accurately reflect an overall perspective of all interview responses through the coding process. However, according to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), this reduces researcher biases within the study, particularly when the interviewing process involves many participants.

Suggestions for Conducting Qualitative Interviews

Now that we know a few of the more popular interview designs that are available to qualitative researchers, we can more closely examine various suggestions for conducting qualitative interviews based on the available research. These suggestions are designed to provide the researcher with the tools needed to conduct a well constructed, professional interview with their participants. Some of the most common information found within the literature relating to interviews, according to Creswell (2003; 2007) includes (a) the preparation for the interview, (b) the constructing effective research questions, and (c) the actual implementation of the interview(s).

Preparation for the Interview

Probably the most helpful tip with the interview process is that of interview preparation. This process can help make or break the process and can either alleviate or exacerbate the problematic circumstances that could potentially occur once the research is implemented. McNamara (2009) suggests the importance of the preparation stage in order to maintain an unambiguous focus as to how the interviews will be erected in order to provide maximum benefit to the proposed research study. Along these lines Chenail (2009) provides a number of pre-interview exercises researchers can use to improve their instrumentality and address potential biases. McNamara (2009) applies eight principles to the preparation stage of interviewing which includes the following ingredients: (1) choose a setting with little distraction; (2) explain the purpose of the interview; (3) address terms of confidentiality; (4) explain the format of the interview; (5) indicate how long the interview usually takes; (6) tell them how to get in touch with you later if they want to; (7) ask them if they have any questions before you both get started with the interview; and (8) don't count on your memory to recall their answers (Preparation for Interview section, para. 1).

Selecting participants.

Creswell (2007) discusses the importance of selecting the appropriate candidates for interviews. He asserts that the researcher should utilize one of the various types of sampling strategies such as criterion based sampling or critical case sampling (among many others) in order to obtain qualified candidates that will provide the most credible information to the study. Creswell also suggests the importance of acquiring participants who will be willing to openly and honestly share information or "their story" (p. 133). It might be easier to conduct the interviews with participants in a comfortable environment where the participants do not feel restricted or uncomfortable to share information.

Pilot testing.

Another important element to the interview preparation is the implementation of a pilot test. The pilot test will assist the research in determining if there are flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design and will allow him or her to make necessary revisions prior to the implementation of the study (Kvale, 2007). A pilot test should be conducted with participants that have similar interests as those that will participate in the implemented study. The pilot test will also assist the researchers with the refinement of research questions, which will be discussed in the next section.

Constructing Effective Research Questions

Creating effective research questions for the interview process is one of the most crucial components to interview design. Researchers desiring to conduct such an investigation should be careful that each of the questions will allow the examiner to dig dip into the experiences and/or knowledge of the participants in order to gain maximum data from the interviews. McNamara (2009) suggests several recommendations for

creating effective research questions for interviews which includes the following elements: (a) wording should be open-ended (respondents should be able to choose their own terms when answering questions); (b) questions should be as neutral as possible (avoid wording that might influence answers, e.g., evocative, judgmental wording); (c) questions should be asked one at a time; (d) questions should be worded clearly (this includes knowing any terms particular to the program or the respondents' culture); and (e) be careful asking "why" questions (Wording of Questions section, para.1).

Examples of useful and not so useful research questions.

To assist the novice interviewer with the preparation of research questions, I will propose a useful research question and a not so useful research question. Based on McNamara's (2009) suggestion, it is important to ask an open-ended question. So for the useful question, I will propose the following: "How have your experiences as a kindergarten teacher influenced or not influenced you in the decisions that you have made in raising your children"? As you can see, the question allows the respondent to discuss how his or her experiences as a kindergarten teacher have or have not affected their decision-making with their own children without making the assumption that the experience has influenced their decision-making. On the other hand, if you were to ask a similar question, but from a less than useful perspective, you might construct the same question in this manner: "How has your experiences as a kindergarten teacher affected you as a parent"? As you can see, the question is still open-ended, but it makes the assumption that the experiences have indeed affected them as a parent. We as the researcher cannot make this assumption in the wording of our questions.

Follow-up questions.

Creswell (2007) also makes the suggestion of being flexible with research questions being constructed. He makes the assertion that respondents in an interview will not necessarily answer the question being asked by the researcher and, in fact, may answer a question that is asked in another question later in the interview. Creswell believes that the researcher must construct questions in such a manner to keep participants on focus with their responses to the questions. In addition, the researcher must be prepared with follow-up questions or prompts in order to ensure that they obtain optimal responses from participants.   When I was an Assistant Director for a large division at my University a couple of years ago, I was tasked with the responsibility of hiring student affairs coordinators at our off-campus educational centers. Throughout the interviewing process, I found that interviewees did indeed get off topic with certain questions because they either misunderstood the question(s) being asked or did not wish to answer the question(s) directly. I was able to utilize Creswell's (2007) suggestion by reconstructing questions so that they were clearly assembled in a manner to reduce misunderstanding and was able to erect effective follow-up prompts to further understanding. This alleviated many of the problems I had and assisted me in extracting the information I needed from the interview through my follow-up questioning.

Implementation of Interviews

As with other sections of interview design, McNamara (2009) makes some excellent recommendations for the implementation stage of the interview process. He includes the following tips for interview implementation: (a) occasionally verify the tape recorder (if used) is working; (b) ask one question at a time; (c) attempt to remain as neutral as possible (that is, don't show strong emotional reactions to their responses; (d) encourage responses with occasional nods of the head, "uh huh"s, etc.; (e) be careful about the appearance when note taking (that is, if you jump to take a note, it may appear as if you're surprised or very pleased about an answer, which may influence answers to future questions); (f) provide transition between major topics, e.g., "we've been talking about (some topic) and now I'd like to move on to (another topic);" (g) don't lose control of the interview (this can occur when respondents stray to another topic, take so long to answer a question that times begins to run out, or even begin asking questions to the interviewer) (Conducting Interview section, para 1).

Interpreting Data

The final constituent in the interview design process is that of interpreting the data that was gathered during the interview process. During this phase, the researcher must make "sense" out of what was just uncovered and compile the data into sections or groups of information, also known as themes or codes (Creswell, 2003, 2007). These themes or codes are consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that were common among research participants (Kvale, 2007). How the researcher formulates themes or codes vary. Many researchers suggest the need to employ a third party consultant who can review codes or themes in order to determine the quality and effectiveness based on their evaluation of the interview transcripts (Creswell, 2007). This helps alleviate researcher biases or potentially eliminate where over-analyzing of data has occurred. Many researchers may choose to employ an iterative review process where a committee of non-participating researchers can provide constructive feedback and suggestions to the researcher(s) primarily involved with the study.

Conclusion

From choosing the appropriate type of interview design process through the interpretation of interview data, this guide for conducting qualitative research interviews proposes a practical way to perform an investigation based on the recommendations and experiences of qualified researchers in the field and through my own personal experiences. Although qualitative investigation provides a myriad of opportunities for conducting investigational research, interview design has remained one of the more popular forms of analyses. As the variety of qualitative research methods become more widely utilized across research institutions, we will continue to see more practical guides for protocol implementation outlined in peer reviewed journals across the world.

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