

Interviews Nick Campion Notes

A central feature of qualitative research is the in-depth interview, through which the researcher can encourage individuals to tell their own stories. The assumption is that each of us is an individual, born of a unique set of circumstances, whether psychological, biological, environmental or social. Useful though quantitative research may be in indicating general social trends, it may fail to reveal other patterns which prompt individual behaviour. This week introduces the practical issues involved in conducting and interpreting interviews, and the use of anecdote and story telling.

Interviews are used by both anthropologists and historians, who prefer the term 'oral history', to describe their research process. Oral historians are less concerned with reflexivity, the insider-outsider debate and the researcher's own internal process than are some anthropologists.

In terms of style interviews can be broadly divided into three:

1. Structured, in which the questions are preset. A familiar example is the type of interviewee that is featured in magazines in which a (often celebrity) interviewee is asked about their favourite things, or memories. Such interviews can work well in questionnaire form but face-to-face interviews are unlikely to yield much of interest under such restraints.
2. Unstructured, in which the interview follows a free-flowing conversation. This style often requires discipline from the interviewer who may have to listen to long sections of material which may, at least at first sight, not appear to be relevant or interesting.
3. Semi-structured, in which the interviewer has certain questions they wish to ask, but usually has to allow the conversation to develop at its own pace.

The dangers and benefits of interview technique were pointed out by Bernstein in 1989:

Conflict and disagreement are unavoidable in our pluralistic situation...What matters is how we respond to conflict...[rather than an] "adversarial" or "confrontational" style of argumentation,...[where] the other is viewed as an opponent...[in a dialogical encounter] one begins with the assumption that the other has something to...contribute to our understanding. The initial task is to grasp the other's position in the strongest possible light...in which we can understand our differences. The other is not an adversary or opponent, but a conversational partner...One does not seek to score a point by exploiting the other's weaknesses; rather, one seeks to strengthen the other's argument as much as possible so as to render it plausible,...[a dialogical encounter where we reasonably explore our differences and conflicts].¹

Size of Sample

In a project of this, size four interviews are sufficient.

1 Bernstein, R.J, Pragmatism, pluralism and the healing of wounds', Presidential address delivered before the eighty-fourth annual eastern division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Washington, D.C., 1988, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 63 (3 November, pp. 5-18 (pp. 16-17), cited in Headland, Thomas N, 'Introduction' in ; Headland, Thomas N, Pike, Kenneth L. and Harris, Marvin, *Emics and Erics: the Insider/Outsider Debate*, London: Sage Publications, 1990, pp. 13-27.

Technical Considerations

You are expected to record and transcribe your interviews and make them available with your essay.

What to transcribe?

Do not edit your interviews, but report the speech as it is spoken. If an interview says 'yes, well, um, like, I'm not sure', that tells us a great deal more than the simple 'I'm not sure'. If there is a long pause, or the interviewee laughs, you may include this as <PAUSE> or <LAUGHS>.

What can you ask?

Your questions should be based around your approved research project. Obviously, do not ask anything offensive or pry into matters which are none of your concern and of no relevance to the project.

Preparation

You will obviously know the area of inquiry before the interview. It is useful to write a few questions down, and make a note of anything you wish to ask about, but it is often best to remain flexible. There's often a sort of improvisation in which you wish to extract certain information from the interviewee, but you also have to listen to them and try and hear what they are saying.

Location

What location should you choose: their space? Yours? Neutral? Public? Private? What is most comfortable for you? Or the interviewee?

Length of interview

From my experience, interviews have a natural length of around 50-60 minutes. Some extend to 90 minutes, a few finish after 30 minutes, in which case you may find you don't have enough material.

Sometimes a preliminary conversation is important to relax the interviewee (and you). Remember to start the recorder though, if you slowly drift into the interview topic.

Be prepared to restart your recorder after you have finished: often interviewees start talking more animatedly once the recorder has been stopped.

Approach

You should, obviously, be considerate, courteous and respectful with your interviewees.

Bullet Points

Have you read the Ethics guidelines?

Do you have an interview release form?

Is your interviewing equipment in good order.

Judge when to let interviewees talk on .. and on.

Let the situation unfold: be 'value neutral'.

Try to be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which the interviewees words can imprint themselves.

Be sensitive about when to ask direct questions?

Generally avoid leading questions ('when did you last beat your wife?')

Remember, you are not prosecuting a case but eliciting information and enhancing understanding

Observe wider issues -note the environment and setting. If you are interviewing a professional astrologer, is their working environment office-like and clinical – or decorated with drapes and candles?

And remember to work with different individuals in different ways.