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RESEARCH TOOLS: INTERVIEWS & QUESTIONNAIRES

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Introduction

We will start with a few key operational definitions. *Surveying* is the process by which the researcher collects data through a questionnaire (O'Leary, 2014). A *questionnaire* is the instrument for collecting the primary data (Cohen, 2011). *Primary data* by extension is data that would not otherwise exist if it were not for the research process and is collected through both questionnaires or interviews, which we discuss here today (O'Leary, 2014). An *interview* is typically a face-to-face conversation between a researcher and a participant involving a transfer of information to the interviewer (Creswell, 2012). We will investigate such data collection instrument independently, starting with the interview.

Interviews

Interviews are primarily done in qualitative research and occur when researchers ask one or more participants general, open-ended questions and record their answers. Often audiotapes are utilized to allow for more consistent transcription (McNamara, 1999). Unlike a survey questionnaire, which is a tool that is composed file, in order to analyze it after interviewing, Interviews are particularly useful for uncovering the story behind a participant's experiences and pursuing in-depth information around a topic. Interviews may be useful to follow-up with individual respondents after questionnaires, e.g., to further investigate their responses (McNamara, 1999). In qualitative research specifically, interviews are used to pursue the meanings of central themes in the world of their subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (McNamara, 2009). Usually open-ended questions are asked during interviews in hopes of obtaining impartial answers, while closed ended questions may force participants to answer in a particular way (Creswell, 2012; McNamara, 1999). An open-ended question gives participants more options for responding. For example an open-ended question look like, "How do you balance participation in athletics and academics?" (Creswell, 2012). A closed-ended question would provide a present response. For example, "Do you exercise?" where the answers are limited to yes or no (Creswell, 2012).

Must-Knows before the interview

Interviewers must be:

- Knowledgeable – familiar with the topic.
- Structured – outline the procedure of the interview.
- Clear – provide simple, easy and short questions which are spoken distinctly and understandable.
- Gentle – tolerant, sensitive and patient when receiving provocative and uncomfortable opinions.
- Steering – controlling the course of the interview to avoid digressions from the topic.
- Critical – testing the reliability and validity of the information that the interviewee offers.
- Remembering – retaining the information provided by the interviewee.
- Interpreting – offering interpretation of what the interviewee says (Kvales, 1996).

Different Types of Interviews

- One-on-one: More time consuming, costly approach, but most common in educational research. Completed one participant at a time, and suitable for interview participants who are not hesitant to speak.
- Focus Group: Typically in groups of four to six.
- Telephone: Can be easy and fast, but usually only a small number of questions can be asked.
- E-Mail: Easy to complete and allows questions and answers to be well thought out. Ethical issues may need to be addressed. For example, whether the researcher has received written permission from individuals before participating in the interview and the privacy of responses.
- Open-Ended Questions vs Questionnaires (Creswell, 2012): Creswell recommends using only open-ended questions during interviews, since they are primarily qualitative.

Structured Versus Unstructured

- Structured or semi-structured format: involves prepared sheets that allow the interviewee to choose from existing responses, resulting in a set of responses that are easy to analyze.
  - The interviewee might consider a summary column at the end or to the side of your sheet in order to fill in additional information.
  - Most interviews are a combination of structured and unstructured, allowing flexibility (Bell & Waters, 2014).
- Unstructured format: Prompts or probes that remind the interviewer about topics to discuss. Enables the researcher to produce a wealth of valuable data / insight, but requires skill.
  - The interviewer might consider recording the interview or informing the participant that they will be taking notes before starting.
  - One type of unstructured interview is a 'preliminary interview,' where the interviewer is seeking areas or topics of significance for the interviewees (Bell & Waters, 2014).
- Focused interview: Framework is established prior to the interview and recording / analysis are simplified. Flow between topics is uninterrupted or free-flowing. (Bell & Waters, 2014).

Sequence of Questions

- Get the respondents involved in the interview as soon as possible.
- Before asking about controversial matters (such as feelings and conclusions), first ask about some facts.
- Interspersed fact-based questions throughout the interview.
- Ask questions about the present before questions about the past or future.
- The last questions might allow respondents to provide any other information they consider to be relevant, as well as their impressions of the interview (McNamara, 1999).
- Questions must be worded with diligence.
- Questions should be asked one at a time.
- Wording should be open-ended. Respondents should have the opportunity to choose their own descriptive vocabulary while answering questions.
- Questions should be as neutral as possible.
- Questions should be worded clearly.
- Be wary of asking "why" questions. This type of question may encourage a participant to answer unnaturally or feel defensive (McNamara, 1999; Creswell, 2012).

Both Creswell and McNamara highlighted very similar points about conducting interviews. McNamara's literature is less descriptive, but more simple and concise. Another author who has come up consistently in the interviewing literature is Kvales; whose literature is much more intensive and broad. These three authors are all very prominent in the interview research literature.

Conducting the Interview

There are the steps that are consistent in the literature on conducting interviews (a muscle (Creswell, 2012; McNamara, 1999):

1. Identify the interviewees.
2. Determine the type of interview you will use.
3. During the interview, understage the questions and responses.
4. Take brief notes during the interview.
5. Locate a quiet, suitable place for the interview.
6. Obtain consent from the interviewee to participate in the study.
7. Have a plan, but be flexible.
8. Use probes to obtain additional information.
9. Be courteous and professional when the interview is over.

Strengths

- Interviews provide useful information when participants cannot be directly observed.
- The interviewee has better control over the types of information that they receive. They can pick their own questions.
- If worded effectively, questions will encourage unbiased and truthful answers.

Weaknesses

- The interviewee may provide biased information or be unreliable if only one interviewee is interpreting the information. The best research requires many different point of views.
- The interview answers may be deceptive because the interviewee tries to respond in a way that will please the interviewer.
- Equipment may be a problem. Equipment may be costly and require a high level of technical competence to use.
- Can be time consuming and inexperienced interviewers may not be able to keep the questions properly focused.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires have many uses, most notably to discover what the masses are thinking. These include market research, political polling, customer service feedback, evaluations, opinion polls, and social science research (O'Leary, 2014).

Formulating a Questionnaire

Starting Out

Bell & Waters (2014) and O'Leary (2014), each offer clear checklists for creating a questionnaire from beginning to end. By comparing the two, we have created a comprehensive list. Bell starts by reminding the researcher to obtain approval prior to administering their questionnaire, then to reflect on what our question is and whether this is the best method to obtain the intended information (Bell & Waters, 2014). O'Leary (2014) suggests that you operationalize concepts in the beginning and define the measurable variables. Prior to writing your own questions, O'Leary (2014) would have you explore existing possibilities in order to adapt previous instruments rather than "reinventing the wheel. At this point, both authors have you write your questions.

Forming questions

Bell & Waters (2014), utilizes Youngman (1982's Question Types:

1. Verbal / Open
2. List
3. Category
4. Ranking
5. Quantity
6. Grid
7. Scale

Bell & Waters (2014), highlight a plethora of potential difficulties in wording your questions, including ambiguity and misperception, assumptions, memory, knowledge, double questions, leading questions, embarrassing questions, hypothetical questions, affirmative questions, and questions covering sensitive issues. It is imperative that you check for jargon within your language and concern to your hypothesis or objectives when to decide which questions are most pertinent (Bell & Waters, 2014).

Bell & Waters (2014) and O'Leary (2014) seem to disagree on the next step, while O'Leary would move onto the response category, Bell would have you look further into the wording of the questions. Following O'Leary (2014's logic, we decide now whether to use open or closed questions, considering how the category will translate to different data types. Closed response answers include yes/no, agree/disagree, fill in the blanks, choosing from a list, ordering options, and interval response scales. Any of the three standard ranking methods, Likert, Guttman, and Thurstone may be used where appropriate (O'Leary, 2014).

Bell & Waters (2014) suggest you check your wording at this point. O'Leary (2014) goes into detail to point out problems with questions such as ambiguity, leading, confounding, embarrassment, assumptions, double-barrelled questions, or presumptuous. Questions to avoid according to O'Leary are those that are:

- Poorly worded
- Biased, leading, or loaded
- Problematic for the respondent, including:
  - Recall-dependent questions
  - Offensive questions
  - Questions with assumed knowledge
  - Questions with unwarranted assumptions
  - Questions with socially desirable responses.

Ordering Questions / Appearance and layout

Both authors emphasize thoughtfulness about the order of questions, considering logic and ease for respondents. O'Leary (2014) goes into further detail regarding issues with organization and length, too lengthy and respondents are less likely to complete the questionnaire. He also suggests researchers avoid asking threatening, awkward, insulting, or difficult questions, especially in the beginning of the questionnaire (O'Leary, 2014). Bell & Waters (2014) suggest the appearance of the questionnaire, having spaces for legibility, limiting the overall numbers of pages, and considering the impression the document leaves, to highlight a few examples.

Write Instructions

Clear and unambiguous instructions for respondents are emphasized by both authors (O'Leary, 2014; Bell & Waters, 2014). This step is followed by a 'lacuna', or rearranging of questions, in both descriptions, likely because this is the best time to review once the questions and other writing is complete. O'Leary (2014) warns researchers to use professional and aesthetically pleasing formatting, as well as be organized in order to attract respondents and to lower the probability of making your own mistakes (In reporting questions, for example). O'Leary (2014) offers. Bind instructions to include a cover letter that describes who you are, the aim of the project, assurances of confidentiality, etc. Bell & Waters (2014), however, offers further steps.

SIMPLE PILOT TESTING

Bell & Waters (2014) provide further detail regarding response rates and ensuring you have the data you need for particularly sample, which we believe is irrelevant to this article. Most pertinent steps would be to plan test your questionnaire with preliminary respondents (some family and friends) and follow-through on preliminary data analysis in order to ensure your methods are effective, making adjustments accordingly (Bell & Waters, 2014). O'Leary (2014) lists six steps in a typical pilot test.

1. Have a run through
2. Reflect
3. Seek feedback
4. Trial your statistic package
5. Make modifications
6. Back to the start!

Distribution

Bell & Waters (2014) briefly consider distribution methods, they emphasize the need to ensure confidentiality, to include a return date, to formulate a plan for 'lacuna' backs' via email, and to record data as soon as it arrives. O'Leary (2014) lists 10 methods, which we will not detail here, but suffice to say that O'Leary (2014) highlights the advantage to administering your questionnaire personally, as it enables the researcher to explain the purpose of the study and increases the probability of receiving completed questionnaires in return. The authors go on to emphasize the value of online methods. In particular, they mention 'Survey Monkey' as the most popular and versatile survey tool available (Bell & Waters, 2014). O'Leary (2014) suggests sending our reminder letters or E-mails in order to increase response rate and the speed of response.

Analysis

Bell & Waters (2014) and O'Leary (2014) disagree once again with respect to the analysis. O'Leary (2014) suggests collecting the data as soon as possible, whereas Bell (2014) suggests the researcher merely glance through the responses prior to coding and recording, if raise above. Both methods have merit, as the researcher must consider the time their have available as well as the amount of data they are working with in order to make a logical decision.

Weaknesses

O'Leary (2014) offers some concerns in using questionnaires as a research tool, as they are time consuming, expensive, and sampling is difficult. O'Leary (2014) asserts that questionnaires are 'notoriously difficult to get right' and they often do not go as planned.

Strengths

O'Leary (2014) suggests some obvious strengths for this research method, as administering a questionnaire allows the researcher to provide specific to their own research and offers insights that might otherwise be unavailable. In listing the additional benefits of questionnaires, O'Leary (2014) suggests that they can:

- Reach a large number of respondents
- Represent an even larger population
- Allow for comparisons
- Generate standardized, quantifiable, empirical data
- Generate qualitative data through the use of open-ended questions
- Be confidential and even anonymous

Considerations for the Method

Cohen et al. (2011, p.394) offer special considerations for administering questionnaires within an educational setting:

1. Gaining access to schools and teachers
2. Gaining permissions to conduct the research
3. Resentment by principals
4. People setting what could be used
5. Finding enough willing participants for your sample
6. Schools suffering from too much research by outsiders and insiders
7. Schools/people not willing to disclose information about themselves
8. Schools not wishing to be identifiable, even with pretentious guaranteed

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9. Local political factors that impinge on the school
10. Teachers' fear of being identified/traceable, even with protections guaranteed
11. Fear of participation by teachers (lose their contracts)
12. Unwillingness of teachers to be involved because of their workload
13. The principal deciding on whether to involve staff, without consultation with the staff
14. Schools/institutions fears of criticism/loss of face
15. The sensitivity of the research, the issues being investigate

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