Semi-structured interviews

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Aim of this session:

- introduce various ways of conducting interviews with qualitative methods;
- outline strength & weaknesses semi-structured interview.
interview
Research

Research interviews in midwifery

This third paper in a series on research emphasises the importance of interviews in both qualitative and quantitative research. It explores the key aspects of conducting effective interviews.

The purpose of interviews

Face-to-face interviewing is a common research technique applied by midwives. They are used by both quantitative and qualitative researchers to gather data. The nature of the interview can produce in your local supermarket such interviews is that they are conduct and analyse, and there

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The analysis of qualitative research data in family planning and reproductive health care

Karen Forrest Keenan, Edwin van Teijlingen, Emma Pitchforth

Introduction

This is the third in a series of four papers on the use of qualitative methods in family planning and reproductive health care research. The first paper outlined the three main methods used in qualitative studies and the second explored how we can assess the ‘quality’ of qualitative research. This paper addresses issues related to the analysis of qualitative data. It begins by discussing the nature of qualitative data and its management, followed by upon what the researcher thinks the respondent is saying or what underlying processes may be inferred. Lastly, codes may be reflexive in that they reflect upon how the researcher played a role in the interview or make suggestions about what they thought was actually going on. In recent years an increasing amount of computer software for qualitative data analysis and management has become available and this may facilitate coding.
Qualitative methods

Addressing the ‘why’ questions. We use qualitative methods to explore:

- Purpose
- Context
- Meaning
Purpose:

- Offer insight into how behaviours, systems & relationships change & are maintained.
- Understanding how organisations function.
Qualitative methods

Context:

- Interpret people’s behaviours, opinions and make interactions in their normal context (social environment)
- Make the link between what people say they do and what they do.
Meaning

- Phenomena have meaning in a context and their meaning differs in different contexts.
- Help to capture the ways in which people interpret events, experiences and relationships.
A qualitative research interview seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level, though it is usually more difficult to interview on a meaning level.

Kvale (1996)
The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say.

Kvale (1996)
Interview Cycle

Planning phase
- Formulating relevant questions
- Designing motivating questions
- Establishing an communicative atmosphere

Doing phase
- Delivering the question
- Listening to the interviewee
- Observing the interviewee’s non-verbal behaviour
- Evaluating the response
- Probing the response
- Recording the information

Reflecting phase
- Identifying information gaps
- Preparing for the next interview

Analysis phase
- Transcribing the interview
- Making interview records
- Analyzing one’s own interviewer behaviour
How to get your data?

Interview data can be collected using:

– Telephone
– Face-to-face
– Internet
Telephone interviews I

Are ‘easy’ to organise.
Allow for some personal contact between interviewer and interviewee.
Telephones may allow people to relax and feel able to disclose sensitive information.
Remember (to reduce bias):

- Some people may not have telephones.
- People often dislike intrusion of a call at home or on their mobile.
- Telephone interviews need to be relatively short or people feel imposed upon.
- Many telephone numbers not publicly listed.
Telephone interviews are sometimes seen as secondary to face-to-face interviewing. The lack of visual cues may result in loss of contextual and nonverbal data and may hinder rapport building, probing, and interpretation of responses.
Types of face-to-face interviews

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

- Structured
- Semi-structured
- Unstructured
Interview types

**Structured interview**: predetermined questions with fixed wording/pre-set order. Open-response questions is often only difference from a questionnaire survey.

**Semi-structured interview**: predetermined questions, but order can be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; inappropriate questions for a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included.

**Unstructured interviews**: Interviewer has a general area of interest, lets the conversation develop within this area. It can be very informal.
Structured Interviews

Quantitative Approach (more clipboard research)

Interviewer has set of *predetermined* questions or “probes” to the interviewees.

Aims to

Measure, seek facts, attitudes, knowledge, behaviours
Finding accurate information without influences from the researcher.
Structured Interviews

Little ‘relationship’ between interviewer and interviewee:

- Minimize interaction
- No distractions

❖ No flexibility
  ❖ strict control over interview
Semi-structured interviews I

- Everyone gets the same key questions asked, but there is flexibility in how they are asked. What follow-up or probing questions to use, etc.
- Particularly useful for exploring the *views of a person towards something*. 
Semi-structured interviews II

Strengths

• Well suited for exploring attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives…. Could be good in sensitive areas.
• Non-verbal indicators assist in evaluating truthfulness/validity and urgency.
• Facilitates getting every question answered
• Ensures the respondent is working on his/her own
• Can potentially increase response rate…
Weaknesses

- ‘Equivalence of meaning’ difficulties may arise
- ‘Preferred social response’
- Non-response/particular groups being unrepresented
- Invasion of privacy
- Unique characteristics of interviewee
- Prejudices, stereotypes, appearances and/or perceptions of researcher may alter response
Semi-structured interviews IV

Training for semi-structured interviews

- Developing competency & understanding of the study.
- Developing an awareness of potential errors or biases.
Unstructured interviews

Also referred to as:

- Non-directive interviewing
- Non-standardized interviewing
- Open-ended interviewing
- In-depth interviewing
Unstructured Interviews

Find out what is...
- Important to interviewees
- What meaning the phenomenon under study has to them
- Their point of view
- Their understanding and experiences

Types of in-depth interviews
- Life history / oral history
- Learn about events/activities that cannot be observed directly
- Get picture of range of settings, situations, or people.
Interviews

- Understanding of thoughts and experiences that led interviewees to having certain opinions and feelings;
- Emic perspective: “how local people think”, what makes sense to people in their particular situations.
Semi-structured interviews: conversations with a purpose

- Establish and maintain rapport with interviewee;
- Allow for long, seemingly rambling answers;
- Allow for pauses, reflections without rushing in with another question;
- Refrain from giving advice or making judgments on what the participant has shared;
- Don’t ‘inserting yourself’ too much into interview, drawing attention away from interviewee.
Iterative process

- Conducting interviews is an iterative process in which data collection, on-going data-analysis, reflections and generating new questions are part of a continuous comparative effort.

- Every interview is informed by the previous one, i.e. by the information and patterns discovered within earlier interviews.
Design interview schedule I

- Start with overall ‘research question’
- What do you know about the question?
- What are your assumptions about the questions and possible answers?
- What is the purpose of interview?
- What issues (or sub-questions) do you want to explore?
Design interview schedule II

• Opening question
• Order and types of questions
  1. Factual questions
  2. Emotional
  3. Perspectives
  4. Follow-up questions
  5. etc.
• Closing question
Controlling Your Biases

- List ways in which your characteristics might bias you in your efforts at research interviewing.

- Then write how you might counteract these biases.

- And then write how these efforts to counteract your biases might themselves lead to other biases.
Types of questions

1. Providing context to interviewee
2. Wording of the question
3. Is the question meant to be:
   - broad or narrow
   - factual or opinion/perspective
   - open or closed
   - direct or in-direct
   - neutral or loaded
Closed questions

• Useful for checking factual information.
• Otherwise avoid in semi-structured interviews.
‘Why’ questions not without their problems

- Implication: there is a reason for everything & this is ‘knowable’ to interviewee;
- Analytical competence of interviewee;
- Motive is often a complex of factors;
- Many answers have complex of dimensions;
- Interviewee might get feeling you do not believe her (Patton 1990)
Know your research objectives/questions
Get to know your interviewee
Pay attention right from the start, even prior to the commencement of interview;
Control your urge of self presentation
Listen actively
Listen emphatically
Be patient

Listening is a skill!
Listening is a skill!

Don’t be afraid of silence!
Why probe?

• To let interviewee know which additional information is needed.

• To motivate interviewee to give more additional information.
• Untrained interviewer has tendency to think ahead, to think of next question in the guide, hurrying to move on.

• Trained interviewer listens attentively to each answer, to evaluate if answer is adequate. If not, interviewer thinks, a few seconds, about the possible cause and asks a good question to get more precise/complete information.
Examples of probing questions I

Clarification

When interviewee uses **vague** or **unclear** language, or you just need more detail, ask for clarification.

- **What exactly did you mean by 'XXX'?**
- **What, specifically, will you do next week?**
- **Could you tell me more about this?**
Examples of probing questions II

Purpose

When interviewee says things but you don’t see why they said it. Ask for justification of statement or dig for underlying causes.

• That’s interesting, why did you say that?
• What were you thinking about when you said XX?
Examples of probing questions III

Relevance
If interviewee seems to be go off-topic, you can check whether what they are saying is relevant or salient to your interview topic.

• *Is that relevant to XX (=your key question)?*
• *How is what you are saying related to what I asked?*
Completeness and accuracy

Probe for more detail and check against information you have. People make genuine errors (sometimes deliberate).

- Is that all? Is there anything you have missed out?
- How do you know that is true?
- How does that compare with what you said before?
Examples of probing questions V

Repetition

Ask question again, maybe rephrase it (perhaps they did not fully understand it first time).

• *Where did you go?*

...  
*What places did you visit?*

• Or use 'echo’ question', perhaps with *emphasis* on the area where you want more detail.

• *He asked you to hit him??*
Examples of probing questions VI

Examples

• When they talk about something vaguely, ask for specific examples. Perhaps to test both truthfulness and/or insight.

• Sorry, I don't understand. Could you help by giving an example?

• Could you give an example of when you did XXX?

• Tell me about a time when you went to XXX?
Examples of probing questions VII

Extension

When you do not have enough information about something, ask them to tell you more.

- *Could you tell me more about that, please?*
- *And what happened after that?*
- *Then ...?*
Evaluation

• To discover both how judgmental an interviewee is, use ‘value’ question:

  • How bad would you say it is?
  • How do you know it is priceless?
  • What are the pros and cons of this situation?
Emotional

When interviewee talks in the third person/unemotionally, you can ask:

• *And how did you feel about that?*

But be careful: you might be opening an emotional can of worms!
Probing: Common mistakes

- Failure to recognise when to probe;
- Probing too much or too early (interrupting interviewee’s train of thought);
- Using too much topic control;
- Using leading question
  - Non-verbally loading the probe;
  - Verbally loading the probe.
Non-verbal communication from interviewee AND interviewer. Consider:

• Spatial arrangements of interview
• Pacing of speech, length of pauses, how you speak to people
• Movement of body and posture
• Paralinguistic communication: tone, pitch, quality of voice.
Recording & Transcribing

• Recording only with permission
• Audio, video or making extensive notes
• Tape recorded interviews need to be transcribed.
• Transcribing takes four to five hours per hour recording!!
Interviewer is key

The qualitative interviewer should:

• be trained/experienced in doing interviews
• give detailed account of data collection;
• describe process by which the findings are derived from the data;
• reflect upon the way in which data have been shaped by the research process itself.
Maintaining Control of the Interview

- Know what it is you want to find out
- Ask the right questions to get the information you need
- Give appropriate verbal and non-verbal feedback
- Good feedback vs. bad feedback
- Avoid bias whenever possible
Try to get interviewees to talk openly. Your behaviour influences their willingness to do this.
Thus:

- *Listen more than you speak.* Most interviewers talk too much.
- *Put questions in a straightforward, clear and non-threatening way* If people are confused or defensive, you will not get the information you seek.
- *Eliminate cues.* Many interviewees will seek to please the interviewer by giving 'correct' responses.
- *Enjoy it (or pretend)* Don't show that you’re bored or scared. Vary your voice, posture & facial expression.


