The language of research (part 11) — research methodologies: interview types

In the last paper in this series we explored interviews as a tool of date collection. Interviews are useful when the research is seeking to uncover people's understandings and feelings about a particular topic or event. There are two main types of question: open and closed and these are used to gain different types of answers to different types of question. We also discussed some of the practical issues with interviews and how important it is to record word for word in real-time the interview to allow for data analysis.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW

Understanding the nature and pros and cons of some of the major groups of interview method will allow you to see where a paper has used the best methods possible to answer any question posed. While we will discuss in this paper two distinct categories of qualitative interview, the level of structure within any given study will lie somewhere on a continuum from totally unstructured to completely structured (Tod, 2015).

When reading a paper that contains interviews, the justification the authors place on their choice of interview method is important to read and understand; although in some papers it is missing either because the methodology used is associated with one interview methodology (e.g. grounded theory and semi-structured interviews) or because the need for a justification has been overlooked.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

In semi-structured interviews, the key questions have been decided prior to the interview commencing. On the whole, the interviewer asks broadly the same questions but they do have freedom within the interview protocol to explore some of the answers given. This means the interviewer might probe some of the answers the respondent gives to gain more information or more depth from the process. In semi-structured interviews, the sequence of delivery of the questions can vary between interviewees as it is guided by the responses given (Dearnley, 2005).

In nursing research, semi-structured interviews are the mostly widely used interview method regardless of methodology because they are easy to undertake, having some structure, but they also allow for in-depth probing of the responses given.

Having most of the questions already written down when starting the interview help allay some the fear some interviewers have about 'drying up'.

Semi-structured interviews can be used with almost all qualitative research methodologies but they cannot be regarded as being as exploratory as unstructured interviews, thus limiting the interpretation of their findings. Because the interview guide is not as detailed as in structured interviews (used mostly in quantitative research and opinion polls), semi-structured interviews can still challenge the novice researcher.

UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Unstructured interviews are a challenge for any researcher given that the direction the interview might take is not known at the start. Unstructured interviews often use topic guides, rather than questions so the exact nature of the questions, how the question will posed and when is not known before the interview starts. Topic guides, rather than a list of questions, enable the researcher to allow the interviewee to discuss their feelings, thoughts and perceptions in an order and a way in which they want to.

Unstructured interviews are much more exploratory than semi-structured interviews and as such and allow the researcher to gain insight into a topic without having formed any prior conceptions. The purpose of the unstructured interview is to gain an in-depth view/understanding/feeling about a topic from the point of view of the interviewee using probing questioning.

One fundamental technique used in unstructured interviews is to mirror back what the individual has said in order to ensure it has been fully understood. Other methods include probing responses to gain more depth by asking questions such as 'What did you mean by?' and 'How does that make you feel?'. Such questions are designed to gain deeper and more meaningful responses from the interviewee without being leading (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014).

Unstructured interviews, as we said, are exploratory in nature; they are therefore very useful in studying topics about which there is little existing literature. Often the data from these exploratory studies are used to design

PETER ELLIS
Nursing Director,
Hospice in the Weald,
Pembury, Tunbridge Wells

REFERENCES

Brinkmann S, Kvale, S (2014) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing (3rd edn).* Sage, London

Dearnley C (2005) A reflection on the use of semi-structured interviews. *Nurse Researcher* 13 (1): 19–28.

Powney J, Watts, M (1987) *Interviewing in Educational Research.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London:

Sarantakos S (2012) Social Research (4th ed) Palgrave Macmillan, London

Tod A (2015) Interviewing. In: Gerish, K and Lathlean, J (eds) *The research Process in Nursing* (7th edn). Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford

studies which are more structured. Perhaps the most common methodology associated with unstructured interview us is phenomenology.

ADVANTAGES OF INTERVIEWS

The key advantage of interviews is that they have the potential to create deep, rich data because they explore topics in considerable detail as opposed to surveys and questionnaires which are generally superficial. Interviews unlike surveys and set questionnaires allow the interviewer to respond to and probe responses tailoring the interview to what they hear (Sarantakos, 2012).

Face-to-face, as opposed to telephone, interviews allow the interviewer to both respond to and note participants' body language during the questioning process. Data on body language is helpful in establishing if the subjects are happy, whether they appear to be answering truthfully or if they appear to be hiding something (Tod, 2015). As body language accounts for much of the interaction between people this is an important advantage when interviewing about subjects which are perhaps sensitive.

All forms of interview allow for the question to be explained or rephrased if needed. This is a real strength over a self-completion questionnaire where the respondent either may not understand a question or may feel that the options available for answering do not represent their feelings or thoughts. Because of the ability to talk to the respondent and explain the meaning of questions while probing and watching body language, interviews provide an excellent method of data collection where the respondent in not literate or has other disabilities such as poor sight (Tod, 2015).

DISADVANTAGES

The lack of prior interviewing experience can be a major obstacle to high-quality data collection using interviews. Seemingly small issues such as the phrasing of questions or the tone of voice can have an enormous impact on how the interviewees respond.

Interviews can be prone to a form of bias, where the person being interviewed answers questions in a way in which they think the questioner wants them answered (sometimes called the Hawthorne effect). A bias is anything in the design or execution of a study that may impact on the truthfulness of the findings. So for example if the researcher is not maintaining eye contact the respondent may not fully engage.

Bias is common in evaluation surveys undertaken by researchers who are also part of the team delivering the service being evaluated; for example when the nurse running a study is also the nurse who runs the wound care clinic being evaluated.

A further disadvantage of the interview process is that it is easy to deviate from the role of interviewer and to become the giver of information. In this instance, researchers stop being researchers and may present their own ideas and thoughts or engage in counselling activities. This common pitfall catches many novice nurse researchers as they struggle to move from their clinical nursing role to that of a non-clinical researcher (Tod, 2015).

Powney and Watts (1987) make the fundamental observation about the disadvantages of interviews; that they are only a way of collecting talk, and because talking is dynamic interaction and its dynamic quality is lost when attempts are made to capture it — as in an interview. This gets to the heart of the problem with interviews and the data they produce: it is very much bound up with, and to, the time in which it was recorded.

There is no doubt that the same question when asked in a different way, on a different day or by a different person will elicit a different response — this is a well-known phenomenon in opinion polling. Talk, which is what interviews essentially are, belongs to the people involved, and it is hard to translate understanding and feeling from that moment into something that other people can fully understand.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the nature of and differences between structured and semi-structured interviews. It has examined some of the pros and cons of interviewing as a data collection method in research. We have seen that interviews are a means of collecting rich and deep data about topics about which nothing, or little, is known. **Wuk**