INTERVIEW AS A TECHNIQUE OF RESEARCH:
SOME OBSERVATIONS

VIDUSHI JASWAL

In a sense, we are all "arm chair psychologists"- everyone has opinions about human behaviour. Psychologists don't just present theories about why people behave as they do, but they also seek to support or to challenge these theories with research- systematic study of a problem- including experiments, interviews, and case studies.

-Eysenck 2005)

1. INTRODUCTION

Interview is a face to face situation between the interviewer and the respondent, which intends to elicit some desired information from the latter. The objective of interview is to collect and exchange the data as well as the experiences. An interview is a method of asking quantitative or qualitative questions orally to the key participants. There are three approaches to qualitative interviews that vary in their level of structure and can be combined. They are informal conversational interviews; semi-structured interviews and standardized open-ended interviews. There are two types of interview - formal and informal. Interviewing is a useful way to follow-up with questions one may have after analyzing data from other evaluation methods such as observation, questionnaires, or record review. Successful interviews start with thorough planning. There is proper mode of conducting interview by building trust and establishing rapport and staying in control of the interview. Interview has descriptive as well as exploratory functions.
Interview depends upon characteristics of the interviewer, interviewee and the nature of the problem. The author has tried to bring forth many advantages that interview method has over other methods of research. Although interview is commonly used as one important method of data collecting device in behavioural sciences, some important sources of errors have been located by psychologists, sociologists and educationists like attitude of the interviewer, duration of the interview and so on. There is no evidence to suggest that in any generic manner interviews as a data elicitation technique yield data which are less valid or reliable than other methods. There are artifacts intrinsic to the interview method which affects the valicity and reliability of the data it produces but these tend to be common to many methods. The problem of interpretation of interview is less acute if one uses fully structured interview schedules. With unstructured or semi-structured interviews, some guidelines need to be followed.

2. MEANING AND PURPOSE

Research may be quantitative or qualitative. It may focus on frequency of behavior, that is, quantitative research or focus on experience that is qualitative research. The methods like observation, case study and content analysis are qualitative methods as the information is provided in qualitative form. The questionnaire method and the schedule are quantitative methods as the information is provided in structured form. The interview method varies from being the most highly qualitative method to the most quantitative one. The less structured it is the more qualitative would be the information; and the more structured it is, the more quantitative would be the information (Thakur, 2005). The interview is perhaps the most ubiquitous method of obtaining information from people. It has been and is still used in all kinds of practical situations: the lawyer obtains information from a client; the physician learns about a patient; the admissions officer or professor determines the suitability of students for schools, departments, and curricula. Interview has also been used systematically for scientific purposes, both in the laboratory and in the field (Kerlinger 2005).
Interview as a Technique of Research: Some Observations

Interview is, in fact, conversation between interviewer and interviewee on some research problem and the objective is to elicit the information out of the experiences of different interviewees. Young (1956) stated, “interview may be regarded as a systematic method by which a person enters more or less imaginatively into the life of a complete stranger”. Kerlinger (2005) the interview is a face-to-face interpersonal role situation in which one person, the interviewer, asks a person being interviewed, the respondent, questions designed to obtain answers pertinent to the research problem. Interviews are useful in that it allows the interviewer the opportunity to get the ‘whole’ story behind the participant’s experience. It also allows for follow up on a particular issue in-depth to gather as much information about a phenomena/situation (Boodhoo and Purmessur, 2009). There are two main objectives of interview.

2.1 Discovery

According to Thakur (2005), discovery indicates gaining new knowledge, new consciousness or new insight of certain unexplored qualitative aspects of the problem which is the primary objective of interview. Interviewing few experienced persons may provide sufficient information. For example, the student leaders can give sufficient information through interview in relation to student problems.

2.2 Measurement

According to Gorden (1969), “The Scheduled Interview, with high topic control, is more efficient and effective in obtaining uniform coverage, precision and reliability of measurement”. According to Thakur (2005), the measurement is likely to be valid if the interview schedule has been constructed on the basis of results from skilful non-scheduled interviews. Usually the research work in which measurement is the predominating objective, scheduled interviews are used. But in several situations non schedule interviews provide more valid measurements. For example, in dealing with topics related to private life and experiences an interviewer may be able to achieve more valid measurement by changing the wordings of his questions and the sequence of probes.
3. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Three kinds of information are included in most schedules: face sheet (identification) information, census-type (or sociological) information, and problem information (Parten, 1950). Two types of schedule items are in common use: fixed-alternative (or closed) and open-end (or open). A third type of item, having fixed alternatives, is also used: scale items (Kerlinger, 2005).

3.1 Fixed-Alternative Items

Fixed-alternative items, as the name indicates, offer the respondent a choice among two or more alternatives. These items are also called closed or poll questions. The commonest kind of fixed-alternative item is dichotomous: it asks for Yes-No, Agree-Disagree, and other two-alternative answers. Often a third alternative, Don't Know or Undecided, is added. (Kerlinger, 2005).

Stouffer (1955) gave example of fixed alternative items there are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people, for instance, somebody who is against all churches and religion. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your city (town, community) against churches and religion, should he be allowed to speak, or not?

Yes □

No □

Don’t know □

3.2 Open-end questions

According to Kerlinger (2005), open-end questions are those that supply a frame of reference for respondents’ answers, but put a minimum of restraint on the answers and their expression. To obtain information on child-rearing practices, Sears et al. (1957) gave the example of open end questions: All babies cry, of course. Some mothers feel that if you pick up a baby every time it cries, you will spoil it. Others think you should never
let a baby cry for very long. How do you feel about this? What did you do about this with X? How about in the middle of the night?

3.3 Scale Items

A scale is a set of verbal items to each of which an individual responds by expressing degrees of agreement or disagreement or some other mode of response. Scale items have fixed alternatives and place the responding individual at some point on the scale. For example, Stouffer (1955) measures the tolerance of nonconformity, by having a scale to measure this variable embedded in the interview schedule.

4. TYPES OF INTERVIEW

There are two types of interview- formal and informal.

4.1 Formal

According to Singh (2006), a formal interview may be defined as one in which already prepared questions are asked in a set order by the interviewer and answers are recorded in a standardized form. The formal interview is also known as a structured or patterned interview. Structured interviews are more likely to be used in survey research or telephone interviews (Hays and Singh, 2012).

According to Guilford (1966), there are two limitations of a formal interview. The procedures of conducting a formal interview are expensive and time-consuming. The validities of the formal interview are usually less than those obtained by some common methods of biodata analysis and standardized psychological test.

4.2 Informal

According to Singh (2006), an informal interview is one where there are no pre-determined questions nor is there any present order of the questions and it is left to the interviewer to ask some questions in a way he likes regarding a number of key points around which the interview is to be built up. As most things depend upon the interviewer, the situation remains
unstructured and, therefore, such an interview is also known as an unstructured interview. An informal interview is more commonly used than the formal interview and is a flexible method of collecting data.

Singh (2006) lays down certain limitations of informal interview. In an informal interview there is greater scope for personal influence and bias of the interviewer as compared to the formal interview. Second, an informal interview requires greater skill on the part of the interviewer than the formal interview. The conduct of an informal interview requires that the interviewers be tactful, intelligent and have a social sense as well as deeper knowledge of the subject matter. Due to these requirements, the scope of the informal interview is limited. Third, the data obtained from the informal interview are difficult to quantify and analyse because of the inherent difficulties.

4.3 Other Classification

Apart from these Coolican (1994) identified the following interview types:

4.3.1 Non-Directive Interviews

These possess the least structure, with the person interviewed (the interviewee) being free to discuss almost anything he/she wants. The interviewer guides the discussion and encourages the interviewee to be more forthcoming. Such interviews are used in treatment of mental disorders, but have little relevance to research.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured or Guided Interviews

These possess a little more structure than informal interviews. The interviewer identifies the issues to be addressed beforehand. During the interview, further decisions are made about how and when to raise these issues. All interviewees are asked precisely the same questions in the same order.

According to Hays and Singh (2012), it typically uses an interview protocol that serves as a guide and starting point for the interview
experience. Even with those that do include a protocol, every interview question does not have to be asked, the sequence and pace of interview questions can change, and additional interview questions can be included to create a unique interview catered to fully describing the interviewee’s experience. Because of this, semi-structured interviews tend to be longer in duration and have many interview segments.

4.3.3 Clinical Interviews

These resemble the guided interviews. All of the interviewees are asked the same questions, but the choice of follow-up questions depends on the answers given. The researcher can be given the flexibility to ask questions in various ways. These are often used by clinical psychologists to assess patients with mental disorders. Clinical interviews give interviewers the flexibility to explore interesting or unexpected answers as they see fit.

4.3.4 Fully Structured Interviews

In this type of interview, a standard set of questions is asked in the same fixed order to all of the interviewees, and they are only allowed to choose their answers from a restricted set of possibilities (e.g. “Yes”, “No”, “Don’t know”). As Coolican (2013) points out, “this approach is hardly an interview worth the name at all. It is a face-to-face data-gathering technique, but could be conducted by telephone or by post.”

4.4 Interview Techniques

Interviews used in psychological research may vary from those which are tightly scripted and used in conjunction with other survey methods to free discussion between interviewer and interviewee (Malim and Birch, 1998). Massarik (1984) listed six types of interview:

4.4.1 The Hostile Interview

In this case, the two parties have different goals. It might, for instance, be a police interrogation in which the suspect is trying to limit the amount of information which is elicited, while the interrogator is trying to gain as much information as possible.
4.4.2 The Survey Interview

This might be, for example, the kind of interview which ensues when you are slopped on the street by a market researcher. There is little personal involvement on either side. This very lack of personal involvement leads to objectivity.

4.4.3 The Rapport Interview

This might be, for example, the kind of interview which takes place when a prospective student applies for a place at college. The goals and boundaries are fairly well defined, and the format is usually laid down beforehand (at least in framework). However, within these limits there is a high degree of interaction, and the interviewer will attempt to establish a rapport with the interviewee. Both are cooperating to reach a single goal (perhaps the right choice of course for the prospective student). Lynch (1960) in his study explored the ‘cognitive maps’ which individuals held of their cities, that is to say, the representation they held of them in their minds. Participants were asked to describe a journey from one part of the city to another. Lynch found that individual’s paid special attention to distinctive features and that these were not the same in each case. There were also blank areas of the town which they were not able to describe at all. This approach would be described under Massarik (1984) categorization as ‘rapport interviewing’.

4.4.4 The Asymmetrical Trust Interview

In this kind of interview, there is one party who is more trustful than the other. Very frequently, this is a matter of superior knowledge and skill. In a doctor-patient interview, the patient is likely to have a high level of trust in the doctor, which may or may not be matched by the doctor’s trust in the patient.

4.4.5 The Depth Interview

In this kind of interview, common in psychological research, the intention of the interviewer is to establish the greatest possible trust and
rapport with the interviewee in order to explore views and motivations in some depth. In a study, Kadushin (1976) was interested in parents who had adopted older children (older than five years). He interviewed the parents of 91 such families and derived, from transcripts of the interviews, measures of parental satisfaction. In a large number of cases (between 82 and 87 per cent), there was a high level of satisfaction. Children had developed close relationships with their adoptive parents and showed little sign of the earlier abuse they had suffered. This would be described under Massarik (1981) categorization as ‘depth interviewing’.

4.4.6 The Phenomenological Interview

There are few boundaries or limitations in this kind of interview. It often amounts to an open-ended discussion and depends upon trust and caring.

5. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

According to Polkinghorne (2005), in order to obtain interview data of sufficient quality to produce worthwhile findings, researchers need to engage with participants in more than a one-shot, one hour session; they need to attend to establishing a trusting, open relationship with the participant and to focus on the meaning of the participant’s life experiences rather than on the accuracy of his or her recall.

Seidman (1991) has suggested that a sequence of three interviews with a participant is more likely to produce accounts of sufficient depth and breadth. He has suggested that the focus of the first interview be on getting acquainted, developing rapport, laying out the area that the researcher would like the interviewee to explore, and trying some initial forays into the topic. Between the first and second interview, the participant will have had time to think more deeply about the experience, and, thus, the second interview should be more focused and should allow time to explore the experience in depth. Before the third interview, the researcher reviews the transcript of the first two interviews. In the third interview, the researcher asks follow-up questions to fill in and to clarify
Interview as a Technique of Research: Some Observations

the account, and the participant can add newly remembered information. Quality interview data usually involves multiple sessions with participants, including follow-up interviews to clarify and expand participant descriptions during the analytic process.

5.1 Stages of Research Interviewing

Kvale (1996) gave the following stages of research interviewing (a) Thematizing - The purpose of an investigation is formulated and the concept of the topic is to be investigated before the interview starts. The ‘why’ and the ‘what’ of the investigation should be clarified before the question of ‘how’ is posed. (b) Designing - Designing of the study is to be planned with regard to obtaining knowledge and taking into consideration the moral implications of the study i.e. in each of the seven stages the code of ethics should be employed. (c) Interviewing - Interview is to be conducted based on an interview guide (indicating the topics and their sequence in the interview) with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought and the interpersonal relation of the interview situation. Some areas of concern during an interview are: Body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, questions, briefing and debriefing. (d) Transcribing - When transcribing, considerations should be given to developmental age, disability, culture, style-verbatim. (e) Analyzing - It means to decide on which method of analysis is best for the interviews. (f) Verifying - It is necessary to ascertain the reliability and validity of the findings. (g) Reporting - It means to communicate the findings of the study.

6. FACTORS AFFECTING THE USEFULNESS OF INTERVIEWS

Social scientists have recognized various factors that influence the usefulness of interviews. These can be grouped into three major factors:

6.1 Characteristics of Interviewer

According to Singh (2006), both the subjective and objective characteristics of the interviewers do influence the usefulness of the interview. The major function of the research is exploratory or the effectiveness of the interview, it is essential that the interviewers must
Interview as a Technique of Research: Some Observations

have inquisitive minds so that they are capable of readily attuning themselves to the newly emerging facets of a problem. Interviewer must have the ability for drawing together the scattered pieces of information into a uniform and integrated whole, which helps him conduct the interview in a smooth way. The major objective characteristics of the interviewers such as sex, age, race, manners, clothing, culture, education social class, speech, etc., are important in determining the effectiveness of the interview because they interfere with, rather than influence the verbal dialogue that takes place between the interviewers and the interviewees (Gorden, 1969).

6.2 Characteristics of the Interviewees

According to Singh (2006), the characteristics possessed by the interviewees can also affect the effectiveness of the interview. There are two basic characteristics of the interviewees that tend to influence the effectiveness of the interview. The first characteristic is the capacity of the interviewees to verbalize. Therefore, the very young and the mentally retarded or ill and others with extremely limited communication skills are not suitable as effective interviewees. The second characteristic is the willingness of the interviewees, i.e., the interviewees must be willing to verbalize their viewpoints regarding the research problems. Lane (1962) suggested that for increasing the willingness of the interviewees to be interviewed, they should be paid money for participating in the interview and it should be conducted on the interviewee's terms.

6.3 Nature of the Problem

The nature of the research problem or topic also influences the effectiveness of interviewing. In general it is believed that when the research problems are such that touch the segments of the persons' private lives and/or when the problems are such that they create special difficulties in verbalization, they tend to have an impact upon the scientific quality of interviewing (Sutherland & Cressey, 1966). For example, people don't want to reveal how much money they earn from their work, as well as they don't want to verbalize the peculiarities or incidents of their sex lives. As
such, interviewing about these research topics is bound to have an impact upon its scientific qualities (Singh, 2006).

7. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF INTERVIEWS

According to Gorden (1969), its major advantages are as follows:

An interview allows greater flexibility in the process of questioning. As such many types of probe questions can be put and analyzed. It facilitates the investigator in obtaining the desired information readily and quickly. It facilitates the investigator in being sure that interviewees have themselves interpreted and answered the questions. This increases the validity of the conclusion arrived. In an interview, a desired level of control can be exercised over the situation or context within which questions are asked and answers are given. The validity of the verbal information given by the interviewees can easily be checked on the basis of their non-verbal cues.

According to Best and Kahn (2003) there are some advantages of interview method. With a skillful interviewer, the interview is often superior to other data-gathering devices. One reason is that people are usually more willing to talk than to write. After the interviewer gains rapport or establishes a friendly, secure relationship with the subject, certain types of confidential information may be obtained that an individual might be reluctant to put into writing. Another advantage of interviewing is that the interviewer can explain more explicitly the investigation's purpose and just what information he or she wants. If the subject misinterprets the question the interviewer may follow it with a clarifying question. At the same time he or she may evaluate the sincerity and insight of the interviewee. It is also possible to seek the same information in several ways at various stages of the interview, thus checking the truthfulness of the responses. The interview is also particularly appropriate when dealing with young children.

According to Singh (2006), the interview is not without limitations. At times the interviewer views similar responses differently and records
them differently from interview to interview. Inter-interviewer variability is one of the major problems with interviewing, when several interviewers are used in a study and the nature of interview is unstructured, the interviewers vary considerably among themselves in their respective abilities to elicit the exact kind of information needed. Scientists doubt that verbal responses can't be relied upon with a considerable degree of validity and dependability. The interview takes much time in its completion because each respondent or interviewee is interviewed individually and the record of the verbal interaction of each respondent is kept individually. No foolproof system of recording has yet been worked out to everybody's satisfaction.

Cicourel (1964) have shown that the interviewing context does not ordinarily remain constant as interviewers move from one interview to another. In such a situation the investigator remains unable to depend upon the facts obtained from interviewing.

According to Breakwell et al. (2000), there are some categories of people who are particularly difficult to interview effectively. These include children and the very elderly. Young children are often unwilling to assert themselves or to contradict an adult. They will, therefore, answer questions in a way they think you want them answered. Of course, teenagers may relish contradicting adults, which results in a totally opposite bias in information derived from interviews. Either way, it is important to guard against giving them clues about what you expect them to say. They have to be encouraged to disclose their own opinion. This can be achieved by reassuring them that you are really only interested in what they think and that there are no right or wrong answers. Any approach which looks like a test should be avoided. There is a strong acquiescence response bias in children. The children tend to say 'yes', irrespective of the question or what they think about it. Questions should be posed so that they are not open to a yes-no response.

Besides the acquiescence bias which is most marked when they are eager to please, children exhibit a preference for 'don't know' responses. Children say 'don't know' for a variety of reasons: they aren't interested in
answering: they don’t understand the question either conceptually or in its vocabulary; they think you expect them not to know; they do not wish to admit what they know; they are too shy to say more; they don’t know how to explain what they know; and they really do not know. Consequently, ‘don’t know’ is a response which need cautious treatment. It is sensible never to base a conclusion on ‘don’t knows’, especially the conclusion that children ‘don’t know’.

Children, like elderly people, are relatively easily distracted. They pay attention to unpredictable aspects of the interview situation or the questions. They can become fascinated by the lorry loading outside the window or an itch in their nose. This can result in time-wasting and irrelevant information. Young children, like any novice to a linguistic community, tend to interpret questions literally. Metaphors, similes and analogies should all be excluded from questioning.

8. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF INTERVIEW DATA

According to Breakwell et al. (2000), there is no evidence to suggest that in any generic manner interviews as a data elicitation technique yield data which are less valid or reliable than other methods. They are of the opinion that like any self-report method, the interview approach relies upon respondents being able and willing to give accurate and complete answers to questions posed no matter what their format. Yet respondents may be motivated to lie. They may dislike or distrust the researcher. They may wish to sabotage the research. They may be too embarrassed to tell the truth. Even if they wish to co-operate, they may be unable to answer accurately because they cannot remember the details requested or because they do not understand the question. According to Gorden (1969), when the interviewers don’t exhibit an affectionate and warm relationship with the interviewees and, instead, exhibit an unfriendly and curt behaviour, the interviewees naturally don’t co-operate with the interviewers.

According to Singh (2006), when the interviewees or respondents don’t possess proper motivation to answer the questions asked during the interview, it constitutes a major source of error in interviewing. Sometimes
the duration of the interview is unnecessarily long causing the interviewees to feel nervous and monotonous.

Breakwell et al. (2000) further stressed that some of these difficulties can be overcome by constructing a systematic set of questions. They also suggested another way to establish the validity of interview data is by complementing it with other types of data like observation, diary techniques, or experimental procedures. In an interview the characteristics of the researcher (e.g. demeanour, accent, dress, gender, age, and so on) will influence the respondents’ willingness to participate and to answer accurately. Various effects have been catalogued: people engage in more self-disclosure to an interviewer who they think is similar to themselves; people of both sexes and of all ages are more likely to be willing to talk to a middle aged woman rather than a man, irrespective of his age, about sexual matters; people are more likely to comply with requests for information from someone who speaks with a received pronunciation accent than a regional accent; and so on.

Breakwell et al. (2000) viewed that such interviewer effects cannot be eliminated but steps can be taken to control them. One way to do this is to let the same interviewer conduct all interviews. But, using a single interviewer may be impractical in any large scale study. Another way to tackle the problem is to use many interviewers and randomly allocate them to respondents. This way allows you to eradicate any strong effects of any one interviewer. Sometimes interviewer effects are countered in a different way which uses matching procedures. For instance, if interviewer gender is thought to be the biggest potential bias, the research director might use a pool of interviewers who were all females or all males. According to Singh (2006), sometimes the interviewers carry a definite attitude and bias toward the favourability or unfavourability of the respondents or interviewees.

9. ANALYSING INTERVIEW DATA

Breakwell et al. (2000) while dealing with the problem of interpreting the information collected through interview method made some suggestions. According to them, the problem will be less acute if fully
structured interview schedules are used. Content analysis can be used to reduce the data to manageable proportions. Content analysis can be supplemented with systematic quotations from the interviews to illustrate conclusions. Analysis should be open to verification as far as possible. Where interviews are recorded (audio or video) it is possible to transcribe the tapes and use these transcriptions as the basis for analysis.

10. CONCLUSION

Thus, interview method is a very important and flexible tool of social and psychological research. Every method of research displays strengths and weaknesses and same is true about the interview method but it can encompass other techniques also in psychological research. Positive results can be there if errors are visualized and removed.

REFERENCES


Interview as a Technique of Research: Some Observations


