INTERVIEWING AS DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Conversational interviewing and Survey Research

Conversational interviewing is only one of many data collection options. We use conversational interviewing when a researcher wants to capture the respondent's perspective, the respondent's voice, reports of experiences, and interpretations of those experiences.

It also allows the researcher to collect whatever information the subject offers with his little prior assumptions about what is important or central.

The researcher will be discovering what is important to the subject not to the researcher.

In survey research, these choices about what information to collect are built into the survey design from the beginning. Typically based on theories and sometimes actual questions already validated from previous scholarship. The same questions are asked in the same sequence to every respondent. Individual variations in the answers become the focus of the statistical analysis. But no information is collected that was not anticipated and planned for in the survey design. The research subject is offered questions, and most often asked to choose among possible answers.

Although sometimes surveys permit this kind of open-ended answer, often it does not. The data is organized in a format that can be easily quantified and analyzed with statistical methods. Survey research is not designed to explore unfamiliar ground to discover what is important to the research subject about one or another topic or phenomena.

Rather, survey research is often very efficient at collecting a large quantity of data often from a large number of people about a familiar territory that can be used to explain the phenomena about which we already have some hypotheses or predictable outcomes.

In contrast, with conversational interviewing, the researcher has identified general topics for discussion. But the range of information collected can and often does lead in directions that are not prescribed and for which the range of answers has not been limited as on a survey. The researcher is more like an explorer in new terrain.

The researcher has a general idea of where she is going but is open to going someplace completely unexpected if it seems fruitful or interesting with regard to the topic of research. This is the key strength of the interview method to explore an experience of the world or in the world where not enough is already known.

This also represents conversational interviews' main weakness. That is time consuming to conduct and to analyze in comparison to a survey or some other methods.

Although the interview is an open exploratory and iterative research method, the interviewer must start the process with as much knowledge about the phenomena as he can, familiarizing himself with existing theories and scholarly work on the subject, and an explicit set of questions to answer, and possibly even hypotheses to explore.

The interviewer has lines of inquiry she wants to pursue. But she is open to the informant's roots through the topics, and will pursue lines of inquiry that may not have been identified

beforehand. The actual words of the questions and the sequences will vary in response to the subject's contributions to the conversation.

The text of the conversation will be analyzed to identify patterns, and themes, often generating hypotheses for additional analysis, and possibly additional data collection.

In survey research, the actual data collection, the interaction with the research subject is standardized. Much of the work goes into the design and the analysis.

In conversational interviewing, we put thought into the design, but considerably less than in a survey, and a great deal of time and effort in the actual data collection, which varies with the research subject's responses.

Like survey research, the analysis of the data is intense. But it ends up generating rather than testing hypotheses.

Interviewing as a Research Method

We should consider the limitations as well as the virtues of interviewing as a research method.

At its core, it is crucial to understand that when we interview people we are not collecting data about events, experiences, or relationships per se. We are collecting people's accounts of experiences, relationships, and events.

It is therefore important to be clear about what can and cannot be substantiated with interview data. The interview is less about collecting information that can be considered factual than it is about collecting signs and meanings about events and social transactions, what we might call the stuff of cultural participation.

The interview is an opportunity to gain access to the person's understandings of events. The stories interviews tell us can reveal people's interpretations of and ways of making sense of their world. But interviews cannot by themselves provide historically or empirically accurate versions of events or situations.

If a researcher is conducting interviews to write a history of a particular situation, an organization, or a series of events, those interviews must be supported by other forms of data to substantiate factual claims the subject or the researcher might make.

Alone an interview is insufficient as a record of anything other than an interviewee's account and interpretation. What those interpretations can provide, however, is evidence of the terminology, the language, metaphors, tropes, jokes, categories, and meanings that circulate in social life, the tool kit of cultural symbols and materials with which people perform as competent social actors.

Coupled with other forms of data, including data that can provide a solid foundation for factual descriptions, qualitative researchers can produce vivid portraits of particular social worlds and from which we can build theories of social behaviour.

As you are designing your research project, it is important to consider whether and how interviewing is the right tool to gather your data and what information you will use to supplement your interviews.

The Structure of an Interview

To begin, the researcher designs a set of questions and prompts that will invite the respondent to engage in a conversation that will provide the data that will be analyzed to address the research question.

We call this set of questions and prompts the **interview protocol**.

Once again, it's important to keep in mind that the conversation with each respondent will develop differently depending on the particular person's answers and stories. The information being offered to the respondent may not have been anticipated beforehand.

And if interesting trends arise in the course of interviews early in the research process, the interview questions can be adapted for subsequent interviews. But most interviews will be adaptations of the basic protocol.

It's very important, however, to distinguish single or two author studies and a large-scale project with multiple interviewers.

If you're running a study with many interviewers, it's essential to make sure the basic protocols are consistent, even if not engaged in strictly the same sequence for each interviewee.

Drafting an Interview Protocol

In our study, we designed an interview protocol consisting of four parts, which are distinguished from one another by their focus and structure.

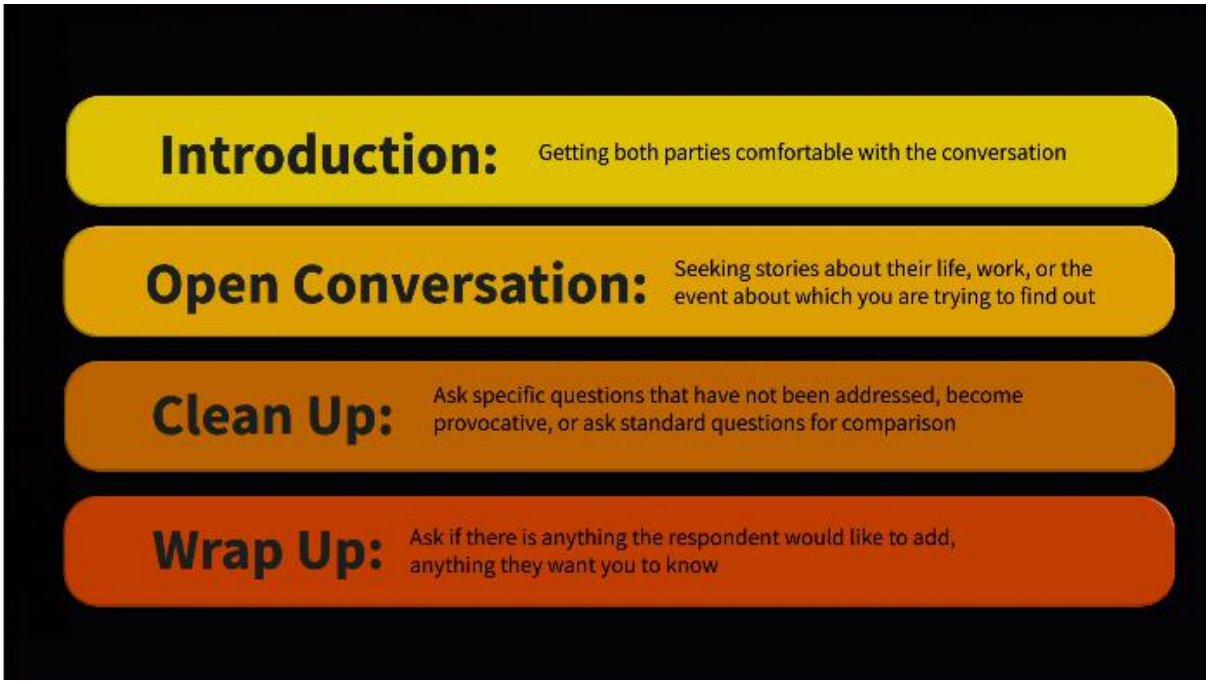
The first part of the interview is just **introductory**.

Getting both parties comfortable with the conversation. It can, however, provide very useful information.

The second part is the heart of the interview. Seeking stories from the respondent about their life, their work, the organization, or the event about which you're trying to collect information. But without pointing to the research topic explicitly.

The third part of the interview might be where you ask specific questions that may not have been addressed in the conversational portion. Where you might become, perhaps, provocative. Or ask standard questions for comparison across respondents.

There should also always be a final closing set of questions where you ask the respondent if there's anything else you'd like to add that we haven't discussed? Or is this something that you think I'd like to know?



Interview protocols should seek information that will be analyzed in terms of existing theories. Each interview can be regarded as an effort to document or challenge one or more theories about the topic.

Getting started drafting your protocol

Here are some guiding questions to help you get started developing your interview protocol.

Step 1. List your conceptual baggage.

Make a list of every relevant question you could ask, or topic you could touch on. You can ask these questions to help brainstorm new questions to ask: What do I know about the topic? What do I want to find out? What theoretical issues guide this topic?

For instances, let's say you were interested in finding out the various paths people take in their lives to become a scientist. What kinds of questions would you ask? You could ask what kind of education they had - what type of elementary, middle and high school they went too? What kind of student were they? What activities did they participate in high school? How good was the science program? What classes did they take? What college did they go to, and why? Did they have any strong relationships with advisors or professors who encouraged them?

Get started by writing down all of these questions, as many as you can think of that would be pertinent.

Step 2. Pare it down!

You certainly won't have time to cover every question or topic that you have put on your list. You will need to pare the list down to the most essential pieces of information. You can ask these questions to help this process: Why am I asking this question? How important is this to my research? What answers am I likely to get to this question, and how useful or interesting

will they be? Everything you ask should be relevant to your research design or the method of collecting data.

Step 3. Refine the list.

It's always a good idea to test out your interview protocol on a few friends or colleagues before taking it out into the wild. This will help you get a sense for which questions help develop free flowing conversations, which elucidate interesting stories or anecdotes, and which questions fall flat or respondents have trouble answering or understanding. You can continue to revise your protocol as you are conducting interviews as well, as you begin to gain a sharper understanding of how the interviews will go, and how people will respond to questions or topics.

Storytelling as Data Collection Method

Stories are often the richest forms of data the qualitative researcher can obtain. This data collection technique allows interviewees to freely explore a topic they've been asked to discuss and to suggest connections and related themes that neither the researcher nor the interviewee identifies in advance.

Stories are the vehicles for people to express a wide range of ideas and interpretations. Stories contain an account of an event, an explanation of the event, perhaps its background, and the respondent's interpretation of its significance as well as possible causes and effects of the event.

The best way to elicit stories and interviews is by asking open ended questions that ask the participant to recall an experience, to give an example of an event that happened to them.

The interviewer wants to avoid, at all times, confining the subject's responses. The interviewer should allow the interview to follow the contours of the respondents answers, rather than a rigid protocol.

No two interviews unfold in the same way. And when interviewees do tell their stories, these stories often raise surprising and unpredictable new questions. When the researcher can follow up on the interviewee's stories during an interview, it allows for more dynamic interaction, which can produce very rich data.

Though simply asking open ended questions does not guarantee that the subject will tell a story. Sometimes a question will lead nowhere, and the interviewer has to be prepared to alter their approach to suit the respondent.

Simply asking, tell me a story can be all that's needed. Other times, the interviewer may need to probe more to elicit an account of an event with a beginning, a struggle, and a conflict of some sort, and an outcome. These are elements of stories, which offer rich data about motives and meanings. So I often use this technique, and I say to people, please, tell me a story about one of the times when x, y, and z happened.