Research Tips:
Interview Data Collection

By Dale T. Griffee

Interviewing is a popular way of gathering qualitative research data because it is perceived as "talking," and talking is natural. Interviews do not presuppose any statistical knowledge, and persons to interview, called respondents, might be close at hand and willing. On the other hand, Flinders (1997) offers several limitations to interviews: People interviewed may not be able to say what they think, may not have an opinion, or may not be able to state their opinion in a clear way; individuals available for interviews may not have the desired information; and respondents may be unwilling to discuss what they know. In addition, interviewing requires high level questioning skills and an active interpretation.

Issues and Decisions

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) list eight interview types, but this column will discuss only the type most often used in educational evaluation: the semistructured interview. A semistructured interview means questions are predetermined, but the interviewer is free to ask for clarification. When conducting interview evaluation, several issues and decisions need to be made.

1. Decide whom to interview. Spradley (1979) suggests a person with a history of the situation, who is currently in the situation, and who will allow adequate time to interview them. Begin by explaining the interview's purpose, for example, I'm interested in X, and I'd like to know your opinion.
2. Choose when to stop a particular interview, as well as how many interviews are enough. For an individual interview, Wolcott (1995) suggests stopping when the data desired are elicited.
3. Select a place for the interview. The final report should describe the location in enough detail for readers to get an idea of the interview context.
4. Decide which questions to ask. Spend time on question formation, and even write them down beforehand.
5. Consider how the data will be collected: for example, listen only, listen and take notes on the spot, listen and take notes later, or tape record the interview.

Piloting and Feedback

A pilot interview is a practice interview that can serve many purposes: getting started, practicing interview questions, and getting feedback on the topic as well as the interview method. The resulting feedback may be positive or negative. After a pilot interview, for instance, notes can be read to decide if a tape recording is necessary, and locations can be changed if the noise level is too high.

Analyzing Interview Data

The interview data are not only the literal words from a respondent but include evaluator assumptions, biases, and questions. The interview is cocreated between the evaluator and the respondent. It is the job of analysis to give concrete form to the meaning of the interview which is called the interpretation.

The words of the interview constitute raw data, somewhat like the numbers resulting from a test. Raw data does not in itself reveal its meaning; rather it must be interpreted. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) describe two main strategies to analyze interview data. The first strategy is to become very familiar with the data; the second strategy is to create meaning using analytical categories.

In the first strategy, the evaluator becomes familiar with the data—depending on how it was collected—by going over notes many times, listening to tapes repeatedly, or constantly reading and rereading the interview transcripts. The idea is that, as the evaluator becomes familiar with the data, slowly but surely categories "emerge" or become apparent. The data are reviewed, and the evaluator begins to see that the respondent has been talking about theme A, theme B, and so on. Pondering on these themes, the evaluator finally comes to understand (interpret) that the respondent is talking about X. In this way of looking at analytical categories, the categories are "grounded" in the data. Grounded means they emerge from the data and reflect the data. The evaluator does not impose personal will or preconceived ideas on the data but rather lets the data speak for itself.

In the second strategy, the evaluator creates the categories before the interview takes place. In discussing how to do good interviews, Wolcott (1995) says that behind every question should be a hypothesis. Evaluators should have a reason for each question.

Both of these strategies coexist on a continuum. The more exploratory an evaluation is, the more the evaluator will look for grounded categories to emerge from the data. The more one knows what one is looking for, the more one will rely on preselected categories. Following are examples of specific steps of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A challenge of interview analysis is moving from a fairly large amount of raw data (the interview transcripts or notes) to the meaning of what has been said. This is not only a process of data analysis but of data reduction. The evaluator needs to condense pages of words to what is important.

Step one: Listen to the tape and transcribe the interview.

Step two: Read the transcripts several times over a period of time to familiarize yourself with what is being said.

Step three: Code the interview. Coding means reading the transcript until certain themes become apparent. Identify each theme by a short word or phrase; this word or short phrase is the code. After coding, define codes so they are consistent across multiple interviews. For example, in coding multiple teacher interviews, I have used several codes including grammar and block. Grammar is defined as "references by the teacher to grammar and syntax as a goal of the class or object of classroom teaching" and block as "any reference to what is bothering or hindering the teacher." The evaluator can then go through the transcript marking or circling places where the respondent discussed the theme and in the margin write the code. Color markers can be used to easily identify themes.

Step four: Write a summary of the coded data. On a separate piece of paper (or word processing document) write the code, and under each code list what the respondent said. For example, under the code "grammar" I put two comments, one of which was "Grammar is the main context of the course." Under the grammar code block I put seven comments, one of which was "Course grammar book not related to academic writing." I have now reduced several pages of transcribed interview data down to one and a half pages of comments under various codes and know the number of comments made by the teacher under each code.

Step five: Write an interpretation. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest writing a memo which not only summarizes but ties together the themes and forces the evaluator to say what it all means.

Validating Interview Data

Remember the weak points of interviewing mentioned previously will never go away. Validation involves taking those weak points into consideration. Interview validation is called "checks on the data" by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p. 180) who suggest using triangulation and reinterviewing in the validation process.

Triangulation

Triangulation is comparing at least two sources of data. For example, it might be possible to have multiple interviews with the same person, asking at least some of the same questions each time. If the respondent tends to say the same thing, even if in a slightly different form, consistency can be argued. If there is a directional development in the answers, then developmental validity can be argued. If interviews were conducted with multiple respondents, again assuming that there are at least some duplicate questions, then similar answers can be used to strengthen the validity of the interpretation.

Reinterviewing

Three strategies for reinterviewing are considered. After completing a summary and initial interpretation, take the transcript and interpretation back to the person interviewed. Ask respondents if they agree with your interpretation. If the answer is yes, it can be argued that the interpretation is more than just an opinion. If not, discuss why they do not agree. The interviewer must then either decide the respondent is mistaken or reanalyze the data to take the respondent's insights into account.

A second reinterviewing strategy is the search for negative or contradictory evidence (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Suppose, for example, several teachers are interviewed, all of whom favor a certain school innovation. Seek out teachers who disagree with the innovation and oppose it. The search for negative evidence means intentionally seeking opposing parties to see why they did not like the innovation, which obviously they see from a different point of view. Including contradictory points of view strengthens the interpretation.

A third strategy involves consulting an informed, but neutral, or even critical, colleague. Three questions can be asked: First, given the data, coding, summary, and interpretation, can this colleague trace a line from data to interpretation. Second, given that a line of reasoning between data and conclusions can be discerned, are the conclusions plausible? The question is not, are the interpretations correct, only are they plausible? What is being asked is: Do the interpretations make sense? Can they be supported by the evidence at hand? Third, can this colleague reach an alternative interpretation based on the same evidence? If not, the argument is strengthened. If so, an opportunity exists to again examine the interpretation and perhaps reinterview to look for a deeper understanding.

Conclusion

Interviewing is one method by which qualitative data can be gathered. Although it may be less formal than some quantitative methodology, it is important to design a systematic interview technique as well as carefully analyze and validate interview data.

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