
UNIT 6 INTERVIEW METHOD

Structure

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6.0 INTRODUCTION

The interview is one of the most commonly used fundamental research techniques. The interview is a 'focused, purposive conversation' between the researcher and an informant - it involves asking questions, listening to individuals and recording their responses. You would have watched interviews with political leaders, celebrities, sportspeople, and even common people on television channels. Interviews are also conducted for jobs. The broad purpose of any interview is to obtain information. However, when we refer to 'interview as a research technique', its objective and focus are much more systematic and scientific in nature and approach, hence the need to understand the technique. In this Unit, we shall focus on interview techniques, which enable a researcher to obtain information that cannot be gained through other research methods.

6.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this Unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss Interview as a tool of data collection;
- Describe different types of interviews - Informal, Structured, Semi-structured and Unstructured Interviews;
- Examine the strengths, limitations and applications of each type of Interview and

- Apply interview techniques in your research study.

6.2 INTERVIEW: CONCEPT AND TYPES

The term interview draws upon the French term '*entrevue*', which means 'to see one another or meet'. One of the important purposes of research is to get information about people. Many research methods and techniques are used for this purpose. These include methods such as observation. While the observation method involves the study of a phenomenon in natural settings and uncovers the ongoing and present activities of the respondent, it does not explore the past and the opinions, beliefs and motivations of a person. To get that information, it is imperative that the 'right questions' are asked; the interview technique allows us to do so. Interviews aim to explore why people behave in a particular way and what they think about something. It usually involves face-to-face interaction; however, technology allows interviews to be conducted online on social networking sites and telephones. Before proceeding further, let us first look at the different types of interviews.

Interviews have been classified as structured, unstructured, formal, informal, and so on. For the purpose of our discussion, we shall follow the classification given by Berger (2000), as all these types of interviews are extensively used in communication research:

- Informal Interviews
- Structured Interviews
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Unstructured (In-depth) Interviews

The focus of our discussion shall be on qualitative interviews—semi-structured and unstructured interviews—while the remaining two types shall be briefly touched upon to place them in a context.

6.3 INFORMAL INTERVIEWS

Informal interviews, also known as 'informal conversational interviews,' can take place anywhere. As the name suggests, these are not organised systematically or focused on specific questions. The informal nature of the method allows the information to build naturally. Informal interviews are commonly used in field research to gain the subject's confidence. Informal interviews are generally one-on-one and generate highly individualised responses, which may vary from one person to another. Informal interviews have been found helpful in developing a big picture by obtaining and clarifying information. The individualised nature has helped obtain information on sensitive issues and can add depth to data obtained by other methods, such as participant observation. The interaction can be held even after intervals. In such types of interviews, especially those conducted in rural areas, it is possible that the subject may not be fully aware of the information being probed.

The technique is mainly proper at an individual level. It is less applicable to groups as it may not be possible to clearly understand what is being said in a group situation. Like any other data collection tool, it is necessary to establish a good rapport with the respondent to open up; hence, it may take more time than other forms of interviews. It also requires specific skills and care in asking questions, such as avoiding leading questions. The information obtained is random, so it may take a long or more than one session to cover all areas.

Moreover, data from one respondent may not be comparable with other respondents as the nature of questions and the sequence is likely to vary from one person to another. Given the informal nature of the method, subjectivity may also creep in recording responses. According to Bertrand & Hughes (2005), if the primary concern of the research is to obtain individual descriptive responses, for instance, building upon observational data from fieldwork - these problems may not matter. However, if you wish to use your interviewees as a sample of a larger population, you will need to choose a more structured interview.

Activity-2

Conduct an informal interview on a topic of your choice for five to ten minutes. Identify the pros and cons of undertaking such an Interview and list the issues involved.

Check Your Progress: 1

- Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.
 2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. List some strengths of Informal Interviews.

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2. List some limitations of Informal Interviews.

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6.4 STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Structured interviews are helpful in obtaining information about an issue's prevalence and distribution from many people. We discussed that questionnaires or interview schedules are designed in advance so that questions are carefully worded and delivered identically to all the respondents. The resulting data are quantitative and comparable, hence easier

to analyse. Such interviews can be completed quickly in the field and thus are relatively economical in terms of cost and time.

We also discussed that greater skill is required while designing questionnaires or interview schedules, which must be pre-tested. Highly structured questionnaires yield little insight into how people feel about the issues involved, and the interviewer may not be able to respond to a valuable issue/situation that does not appear on the schedule and emerges during an interview. In a larger study, individual differences among interviewers may affect data quality. At times, it may be difficult to find those selected in the sample, while some people may be reluctant to answer some questions due to lack of time, disinterest, language barrier or sensitivity. Structured Interviews are also conducted using telephones and the Internet.

6.4.1 Telephonic Interviews

Telephonic interviews are relatively cheaper and easier to conduct. In such interviews, closed-ended questions are generally included as these are easier to administer to obtain feedback on an issue under study. Telephonic interviews have been found more useful in journalistic research, exploring a few focused questions. However, these have severe limitations as a data collection tool for academic research. Yet another limitation of a telephonic interview is that in the absence of a comprehensive mobile phone database, there is the possibility that some segments of the population may be systematically missed out. About a decade ago, access to telephones was limited to the affluent sections, but the spread of mobile phones has facilitated access to a diverse section of the population. In earlier times, the telephone directory published by the telephone departments in different cities used to provide address details and the location of the person listed, which is not available any more. Thus, it is possible that the sample may not be representative, leading to a skew in findings. Moreover, those contacted over the phone may not be interested in providing feedback, so they discontinue the interview midway or give superficial answers, thus affecting the data quality.

6.4.2 Online Surveys

Interviews are also conducted online by emailing questionnaires and uploading website links. The links take the respondents to different web pages listing the closed-ended questions. The respondent is expected to tick the appropriate response, and when all the questions on a page are responded to, s/he has to proceed to the next pages till all questions have been responded. An example of an online survey from different stakeholders to obtain feedback on the New Education Policy on Open and Distance Learning and Online courses is given below. In this survey, three questionnaires were uploaded on the IGNOU website requesting feedback from practitioners/experts/ learners and employers with a brief introduction and links:

New Education Policy: Survey on Open and Distance Learning and Online Courses

The Ministry of HRD has entrusted the responsibility of developing a Draft Policy on Open and Distance Learning and Online Courses to IGNOU. In this connection, you are requested to provide us with your valuable feedback in the questionnaire relevant to you, available at the below link:

Click here to participate in the **Practitioners and Experts** survey

Click here for the **Learner's** survey

Click here for the **Employer** survey

A similar process is followed while using an email listserv in which the link to the questionnaire is emailed requesting feedback. It needs to be mentioned that in an online survey, the number of questions is generally kept small - not exceeding 25 to 30 as many a time, the respondent may lose interest midway, leading to a high rate of incomplete responses; thus, data loss. Further, using mobile phones and the Internet may reduce the cost of conducting surveys, but technology also introduces its own biases. For example, despite its increased outreach, access to technology is still limited in rural areas and certain sections of society, including women. In addition, linguistic and socio-cultural barriers may also affect data quality. Finally, response rates in online surveys are very low; as a result, data from online surveys can be taken only as indicative and not as definitive in terms of results.

Activity-2

Prepare an Interview Schedule comprising 15-20 questions to study the social media usage patterns of the youth in your area. You may draw upon the do's and do n'ts of designing an Interview schedule.

Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. What are the uses of telephonic surveys?

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2. What are the limitations of online surveys?

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6.5 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews, as the name suggests, are neither structured (such as a field survey) nor freewheeling (like unstructured interviews) but placed somewhere in between. The roots of semi-structured interviews are in Ethnographic Research, and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) comes under this category, which has the inherent strength of collecting qualitative data from several people in the quickest possible time. In recent years, FGDs have been used precisely to find out how people respond in a group and how their feelings and opinions can be shaped by the experience of discussing the subject with others (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005).

FGD is considered a user-friendly and 'non-threatening research method' that participants find stimulating and enjoyable. It has been found useful in assessing people's reactions to new products, services, messages, problems or ideas in a participatory mode. The sample size can be increased without increasing time and costs, which is relatively economical. It invites participants to monitor each other, providing checks and balances that do not operate for individual interviews or surveys (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005). FGDs also help people express themselves openly about sensitive issues and bridge social and cultural differences (Morgan, 1998). FGDs can provide a forum for participants to express themselves. For instance, feminist researchers use FGDs to "provide women with safe space to talk about their own lives and struggles" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis in Brennen, 2013).

6.5.1 Planning Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions need to be carefully planned and executed. The researcher outlines a basic checklist of the areas/topics to be covered and who will attend the discussions. A group comprising 6-9 members is selected purposively to elicit data on opinions, beliefs, and experiences. FGDs are free-form discussions by a group of people, led by a moderator, designed to obtain information about some topic. To the greatest extent possible, the researcher tries to maintain the quality of the casual interviews found in unstructured interviews (Berger, 2000). Focus groups can be exploratory, and exercising less control over the groups can lead to wide-ranging discussions. The participants respond to the moderator and one another, and the conversations and reactions closely approximate normal conditions. It also gives freedom to the researcher to respond to any situation that emerges during the interview.

However, FGD should not be considered as a simple way to get a lot of interviews in a hurry - they are 'focused efforts at gathering data'. Merely gathering people together does not guarantee a meaningful discussion, and there must be an effort to gather research data through such focused discussions. Some scholars argue that, like any other research method, conducting FGD in combination with other qualitative or quantitative research methods is useful. Often, focus groups are used as an exploratory technique and followed up with surveys to generalise results for larger populations. Morgan (1998), however, argues that for many purposes, the strengths of focus groups will be entirely sufficient and can be used for

varied purposes such as problem identification, planning, implementation and assessment.

6.5.2 Process of Focus Group Discussions

To conduct the FGD, you may start by introducing yourself and team members to establish rapport and explain the purpose of the session. You should share the need for audio/video recording or note-taking, mention the need for a checklist and explain its purpose. You must also obtain the group's informed consent for any such recording and ensure their participation is voluntary. Start the discussion with a focus question and invite responses; if you do not get any, address someone and keep the conversation going. Monitor the discussion and keep track of what needs to be covered. As a researcher, it is important for you to listen carefully - this will enable you to respond to new ideas and encourage those with something interesting to say. You should remain flexible if a useful debate is happening, but if the discussion goes off track, interrupt politely but firmly. You should refrain from giving your opinions or trying to reach a consensus, as that is not the purpose of the FGD. You must also make eye contact to involve everyone and stay in charge without being obtrusive. The discussion should keep moving and on track in light of research objectives. Time needs to be carefully monitored to elicit desired information.

Limitations: FGDs are time-consuming and expensive. Selecting a representative sample is difficult, as people may refuse for various reasons. They are not easy to conduct effectively without proper training. The discussion has to be kept moving, and it should not falter at any stage. The data obtained from FGDs is not comparable, and complex analytical and interpretative techniques are required.

Activity-3

Prepare a list of areas you wish to explore using FGD as a tool for data collection. Sequence them logically and frame them in the form of open-ended questions. As discussed above, administer these questions to a group of 6-8 participants and record the experience.

Check Your Progress: 3

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. List some limitations of FGD.

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2. Describe the role of a moderator for the success of FGD.

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6.6 UNSTRUCTURED (IN-DEPTH) INTERVIEWS

An unstructured interview is an 'open-ended conversational exploration of an individual's worldview and gives an insider's perspective'. In-depth interviews, also known as "intensive interviews", fall in this category. It is a key ethnographic data collection technique that is useful for a holistic inductive approach. The method is useful for collecting complex information on the respondents' opinions, beliefs, attitudes and personal experiences. In-depth Interviews collect qualitative data and are generally used to supplement the information collected through survey methods or participant observation. It does not follow a rigidly set structure - some basic questions are outlined, and the discussion is largely free-ranging. In-depth interviews elicit verbal responses, which are richer than written ones. These provide useful inputs/feedback for gaining a meaningful understanding of what might be a very different perspective.

The sample size of an in-depth interview is generally kept small as a select few purposively selected people are subjected to a detailed interview, which can be scheduled at a mutually convenient time and place. Compared to the survey method, in-depth interviews allow the researcher flexibility to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification on an issue. The topics of in-depth interviews are generally in the form of tentative questions that allow the researcher to cover all the topics and probe further.

In studies involving a large number of field investigators for data collection using in-depth interviews, you will have to orient and train the interviewers to create a common understanding and approach to the study. In such studies, it is useful to exchange notes with other interviewers at the end of the day/week to make necessary changes in approach based on their experience.

Limitations: In-depth interviews, like any other form of data collection, also have inherent limitations. These can be conducted on a limited number of respondents and can be time-consuming. The researcher has little control over the responses as respondents tend to speak more about issues concerning them than the subject under study. Less caution can generate enormous data, which may be later difficult to organise and analyse, hence requiring more effort and skills on the researcher's part. Interviewing several people every day could be a tiring experience and may cause fatigue. The tendency to get personally involved with the interviewees may lead to the risk of introducing bias in the results as a researcher may impose his/her own perspective.

It is possible that respondents may not be able to properly articulate what they actually think or believe at times. In such situations, the researcher will have to ask probing questions to seek clarity. Some respondents may give

'politically correct' statements for various reasons, and it will depend upon your skills as an interviewer to adequately examine their responses and arrive at findings.

The purposive sampling technique is generally used for in-depth interviews, which involves choosing the region and the respondents for a specific purpose. In this regard, refer to the points discussed in Unit 4, Block-I on Sampling Methods.

Activity-4

Do some background research before undertaking in-depth interviews with block-level officers on a development project of your choice. List some key areas for exploration and formulate questions about them.

Check Your Progress: 4

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.
 2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. List some limitations of in-depth interviews.

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2. What steps will you take to plan an in-depth interview?

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6.7 INTERVIEWING SKILLS

From the above discussion, it is clear that despite being a common data collection tool, interviews are difficult to conduct and require skills and a certain amount of tact. The following points are common to all the interviews discussed above and need to be kept in view while conducting Interviews:

- You need to build rapport with respondents by making some introductory remarks about the purpose of the study and seeking their cooperation. Ensure you take informed consent that their participation is voluntary and they are willing to cooperate.
- For better results, the interview may be preceded by a more general information gathering and observation exercise to identify critical areas for pursuing in greater depth.

- You need to ask clear, neutral, and unambiguous questions. Loaded or leading questions should be avoided, which will elicit leading answers (We have discussed different types of questions - leading, ambiguous, double barrel, etc. in Unit 7 of Block 2).
- You need to stay focused, and the interview should keep moving in a direction consistent with the objectives of the study. If the discussion loses focus, the researcher should bring the discussion back to the main point.
- If you do not understand something said by the respondent during the Interview, ask supplementary questions and explore the issue further to seek clarity.
- As a researcher, it is extremely important for you to be a good listener and not give your own views on an issue. The Interview is *not* an exchange of information but *obtaining* information from the respondent.
- You need to maintain neutrality and objectivity throughout the process of data collection and remain non-judgmental. Any show of signs through facial expressions, body language, etc., will likely impact the responses.
- You should maintain a polite and formal interaction and be sensitive to the subject's entirely different perspective.
- You should refrain from offering unsolicited advice and false promises, which may put you in an awkward position at a later stage.
- Finally, you should check that all questions are covered, thank the respondents, and ask them if they have any questions.

Recording Medium

The recording medium needs to be carefully selected to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. These generally include handwritten notes or audio/video recordings. While taking notes, you must be extremely careful when listening and noting down the responses. It is often impossible to note down everything in the presence of the respondents. A good researcher goes back in time and tries to recall the entire sequence of events once the interview is over. In larger studies involving many interviewees, debriefing sessions are organised regularly for the exchange of information. If audio recording has to be conducted in rural areas, an adequate battery supply must be carried out as there may be a power failure. Video recording has been found useful for certain studies. However, the presence of a camera can make the subjects conscious, and they may put on an act or give politically correct answers. Please remember that informed consent for audio or video recording is mandatory.

Transcription

Once the Interview has been conducted and recorded, the entire conversation must be transcribed, which is time-consuming and tedious. Sometimes, it may take 5-6 hours to transcribe an hour-long interview. After transcription, the entire material has to be checked for accuracy and to make sense of the entire conversation. Then, the data has to be classified and coded under certain themes and categories using appropriate qualitative data analysis

techniques such as the constant comparative technique, the analytical induction strategy, etc. According to Berger, there are no absolute rules about coding, as a great deal depends on the nature of the material being coded. You will read more about qualitative data analysis in subsections 15.5 and 15.6 of Unit 15 of Block 4.

6.8 ETHICAL ISSUES

The purpose of research is knowledge production and generation. However, as researchers, you are not expected to adopt any means to obtain information; hence, some ethical norms will be in order while using Interviews as a research tool. Some of these ethical issues have been discussed in previous units, such as the participation of people in Interviews should be voluntary, and nobody should be compelled to participate. They need to be informed about the nature and objectives of the study and how the findings will be used. Further, they can opt out if they do not feel comfortable at any stage during the Interview. Thus, 'informed consent' forms the basis of selecting respondents, and if confidentiality has been promised, you must uphold it. You must treat all your research subjects respectfully and protect them from invasion of privacy and any physical, financial or emotional harm. Some subjects may not be capable of fully understanding the implications of your study and thus may be more vulnerable or sensitive for a particular subject. For example, when selecting children as subjects, you need to get the approval and cooperation of parents. Parents and legal guardians must be present when children are being interviewed.

The recruitment of respondents is yet another ethical area, especially in FGD. Including respondents known to a researcher who does not meet the criteria for selection will lead to a skew in findings. Payment for participation is generally made in market research to cover the travel expenses and the time used. However, academic research has ethical implications as it may be argued that the study's findings have been compromised. Like other research methods, ethics are involved in data analysis and the reporting of interviews. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2003), data should not be tampered with, and the responses should not be fabricated or changed. Further, science is a public activity, and researchers have an ethical obligation to share their findings and methods with other researchers who may wish to examine the research instruments, methodology, sample selection, and other relevant items and apply them in their own research work.

Activity-5

You have to collect data using interview methods from rural women on their reproductive health. Discuss some ethical issues involved.

Check Your Progress: 5

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. List some ethical issues that need to be considered while doing research.

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2. Why is publishing considered to be an obligation for the researcher?

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6.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed interviews as a research method under the broad classification of informal, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. The strengths and limitations of each type of Interview were thoroughly discussed and analysed. The application, interview process, and care to be taken were described in detail. We also looked at some guidelines for conducting interviews and emphasised the need to follow certain ethical norms largely pertaining to minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, and others. As a researcher, you must consciously and systematically use the interview method to generate new knowledge and insights through your study.

6.10 FURTHER READINGS

1. Berger, ArtherAsa (2000) Media and Communication Research Methods, Sage Publications, London, New Delhi
2. Bertrand Ina & Peter Hughes (2005). Media Research Methods: Audiences, Institutions, Texts, Palgrave MacMillan, New York.
3. Brennen Bonnie S. (2013). Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies, Routledge, New York
4. Krueger Richard A. (1998). Analysing and Reporting Focus Group Results, Sage Publications, London
5. Morgan David L. (1998). Planning Focus Groups, Sage Publications, London
6. Priest S. H (2010). Doing Media Research: An Introduction, Sage Publications, New Delhi
7. Wimmer R.D. & Joseph R. Dominick (2003). Mass Media Research: An Introduction, 4th edition, California, Wadsworth Series in Mass Communication.

6.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

1. Informal interviews are useful in:
 - Gaining confidence in the subject in the initial stages of field research
 - Obtaining information on sensitive issues
 - Adding depth to data obtained by other research methods.
2. Some limitations of informal interviews are:
 - The information obtained is not systematic
 - Data from one respondent may not be comparable with other respondents
 - It is not effective for interviewing a large section of the population.

Check Your Progress: 2

1. Telephonic interviews are:
 - Relatively cheaper and easier to conduct
 - Select closed-ended questions can be easily administered to respondents
 - Useful in journalistic research exploring a focused area.
2. Online surveys have the following limitations:
 - Access to technology is limited in rural areas and cannot cover all sections of society.
 - If a representative sample is not included, the findings of a study will be skewed.
 - Linguistic and socio-cultural barriers may affect the response rate and data quality.

Check Your Progress: 3

1. Some limitations of FGDs are:
 - Not easy to conduct without proper training
 - Difficult to select a representative sample who meets the specific criteria
 - The data obtained is not comparable and requires complex analytical techniques.
2. The moderator's role is crucial for the success of FGD. He or she has to facilitate the discussion and keep it on track in light of research objectives. He or she has to respond to new ideas and encourage those with something interesting to say. He or she has to involve everyone in the discussion and stay in charge without being obtrusive.

Check Your Progress: 4

1. Some limitations of in-depth interviews are:
 - It requires more effort and skills on the part of the researcher
 - The researcher may impose his/her own perspective and introduce bias in the results
 - Interviewing several people every day may cause fatigue
 - Over-enthusiasm can generate enormous amounts of data that may be difficult to analyse later.
2. While planning an in-depth interview, I shall take the following steps:
 - Outline some basic questions in light of the study objectives
 - Identify the respondents for the Interview
 - Outline the purpose of my study
 - Persuade them to participate in the study
 - Follow up with them, as it may take several attempts
 - Schedule the interviews at a convenient place and time.

Check Your Progress: 5

1. The following ethical issues need to be kept in view while doing research:
 - Informed consent and voluntary participation of the respondents
 - Providing information to them about the research objectives and process
 - Protecting them from invasion of privacy
 - Protecting them from any form of physical, financial or emotional harm.
2. Publishing scientific results is an ethical obligation on the researcher. As science is a public activity, researchers need to share their methods and findings with other researchers who may wish to examine the research process followed and apply it in their own work. The knowledge thus accrued is shared with other scholars, enabling society at large to benefit from the results.