

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN USING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS IN DATA COLLECTION

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Abstract: Qualitative interview is the most commonly used data collection method used in qualitative research. Its ability to collect detailed information and offer insights from participants' feelings and opinions, among other things, have made it a most preferred data collection method for many qualitative researchers. Like any other qualitative data collection methods, it is not immune to criticisms from various scholars, especially those with positivist orientation. This has been motivating various researchers to find different and better ways of conducting qualitative interviews to achieve research goals. This also motivated conducting this study to discuss factors that researchers have to consider when conducting qualitative interviews. The use of secondary data obtained from a systematic literature review of 31 journal articles published by four journals (indexed in Scopus database dedicated to publishing qualitative studies) was done. Thematic coding was done which led to the identification of seven factors that have to be considered in qualitative interviews. These factors are pilot tests, selection of the right participants, participants' convenience, sample size, selection of interview questions, cultural dimensions and length of interview sessions. Qualitative researchers are therefore recommended to consider these factors when conducting qualitative interviews. Due to the flexibility expected in qualitative studies, researchers are also reminded to consider the purpose and nature of their studies in the process.

Keywords: qualitative interviews, data collection, research methods, qualitative research

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INTRODUCTION

Interviews have a very long history inside and outside research domains. For the purpose of collecting information; individuals, businesses, radio and TV stations have been using interviews to get insight into various issues. In research, qualitative interview is one of the commonly used data collection methods. It has a long history in social science studies particularly in qualitative research. The method has also been used in studies associated with natural science. Qualitative interview has been considered useful in offering in-depth details of issues under investigation. The design is also considered flexible with the ability to probe for more information from a study's subjects. Despite its importance and contribution in advancing knowledge, qualitative interviews have been considered a difficult method to use in data collection (Majid et al, 2017). Novice and experienced researchers may find qualitative interviews less effective due to the failure to apply the required principles and observe the required methodological protocols. Against this backdrop, the objective of this paper is to identify factors to consider when using qualitative interviews as a method of data collection. This paper adopted systematic literature review to achieve the said objective.

What is a qualitative interview?

Considering the fact that this paper has been prepared for an audience that comprises both novice and experienced qualitative researchers, it is imperative that 'qualitative interview' is defined. Qualitative interview is a data collection method that uses the exchange of words of mouth to obtain information that is used to answer research questions. The interview normally involves two parts: an interviewer (researcher) who asks

questions and an interviewee (subject) who responds to the asked questions.

Types of qualitative interviews

Interviews can be generally categorized into three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

Structured interviews; in this type of interview a list of questions is prepared and a researcher strictly refers to that list to ask questions. Structured interviews are inflexible as they disallow a researcher to probe for more information from the subjects. However, they lead to standardized responses since all subjects are asked the same questions. This helps the researcher to make comparisons and easily detect patterns from the responses provided. Structured interviews help to limit the amount of data to be collected and consequently a scope of a particular study is well known in advance.

Semi-structured interviews; in semi-structured interviews, a list of leading questions is prepared in advance that a researcher refers to during interview sessions, with room to add more questions based on the subjects' responses. Semi-structured interviews are more flexible compared to structured interviews and consequently more details are expected to be collected.

Unstructured interviews; in unstructured interviews, a researcher starts an interview session without any questions prepared in advance. Random questions are normally asked based on the researcher's own decision. This is the most flexible type of qualitative interview and large volumes of information are expected to be collected. No matter how flexible unstructured interviews are, it is important to preliminarily define their scope to avoid loss of focus and the collection of an unmanageable amount of data.

Literature review

Qualitative interview is a most preferred method of data collection in social sciences that has been used for decades (Alsaawi, 2014). It is well known for its ability to collect in-depth and detailed information that help researchers to understand feelings, meanings and perceptions of respondents among other things. Qualitative interviews are the cornerstone of theory development (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007). In using this method, one normally starts with what is known to what is not known as the result; this method may form a base for other studies including quantitative studies (Bolderston, 2012).

In most cases, qualitative interviews and grounded theory are inseparable (Foley et al., 2021). Grounded theory was initially proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The theory has been evolving as a result of contributions from various theorists resulting from different genres of the theory. The first genre by Glaser and Strauss is known as traditional grounded theory. Other genres are evolved and constructivist (Tie et al., 2019). Grounded theory is an inductive theoretical framework that forms a base and guides development of new theories, assumptions and concepts grounded from data. The theory offers flexibility in data collection and interpretation. The theory is mainly used when little is known on a particular issue (Tie et al., 2019). The reason qualitative interviews are normally guided by the theory is that qualitative interviews seek for insights from participants and therefore collected data are grounded from participants' thoughts, feelings, perceptions and the way they assign meanings to various things (Foley et al., 2021; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). Interviews are capable of doing various things that other data collection methods cannot (Alamri, 2019; Alisaawi, 2014). For example, the

method gives a researcher an opportunity to collect the amount of data which is considered adequate for the particular study by considering data saturation. Data saturation is a point reached during data collection where no new relevant data can be collected. It signifies sufficiency of data (Cobern & Adams, 2020). Moreover, qualitative interviews give a researcher an opportunity to easily understand subjects' feelings, attitude and perceptions towards a particular phenomenon simply because it involves a human-touch (McGrath et al., 2019).

Although qualitative interviews are considered to be important in both qualitative and quantitative studies, they are considered to be less scientific from the positivist view point (Anyan, 2013). Qualitative interviews like any other qualitative data collection methods are considered to be subjective. Interpretation of data cannot be uniform across different researchers, something that makes people (particularly those with a positivist view) doubt its accuracy. Numerous doubts on qualitative interviews make some people doubt its ability to enhance generalizations of the findings generated from the qualitative interview-based study (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Moreover, qualitative interviews always lead to the creation of bulky data which, if not well managed, may cause the study to be less effective (Mwita, 2022).

To avoid loss of focus, the use of codes and thematic analysis is advised. Coding is simply a systematic process done by a researcher to assign specific meaning to phrases and sentences recorded during data collection. Each meaning detected is given a specific code (Linneberg, 2019). This means phrases and sentences from participants can be reduced to codes. On the other hand, thematic analysis is a data analysis method of qualitative data

that involves identification of themes that are relevant to the research purpose. This method also helps to leave out information that is not relevant to a particular study (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). When codes are created based on emerging themes, they result in what are known as thematic codes. Apart from these methodological aspects which enhance the effectiveness of qualitative interviews, researchers tend to consider other factors or use various techniques which are important in enhancing the achievement of research goals (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007). These strategies vary from one study to another. This paper conducted a review to identify factors that may help qualitative interviews to be done in a proper manner and ultimately help in achieving research goals.

METHODS

This paper adopted a systematic literature review to collect data. Initially, a total of eleven journals dedicated to publishing qualitative articles were identified from Google scholar. In order to ensure that articles included for a review are those published by reputable journals, seven journals were excluded to remain with only four journals indexed in Scopus database. This led to an inclusion of Qualitative Research Journal, International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, and The Qualitative Report. A total of 82 articles published between 2019 and 2022 were randomly downloaded from the journals. This followed with excluding journal articles that did not involve qualitative interviews. Fifty-one (51) articles were excluded from the list resulting in the inclusion of 31 journal articles which were used for a review. During analysis, thematic coding was done after scanning methodology sections of the articles to

enable identification of factors that were considered in qualitative interviews. A list of authors whose articles were involved in the review is presented in Table 1.

Table1: Reviewed articles' authors

S/N	Author(s)	S/N	Author(s)
1	Nyashanu (2021)	17	Borglit et al. (2022)
2	Woodrow et al. (2021).	18	Tarp et al. (2022)
3	Hassan et al. (2021)	19	Fanai & Mohammadnezhad (2022)
4	Jackson & Andipatin (2021)	20	Egan (2020)
5	Kayzouri et al. (2020)	21	Pennington (2020)
6	Ashfaq et al. (2020)	22	Foulke & Romo (2020)
7	Reid et al. (2020)	23	Sun & Critchfield (2020)
8	Nielsen et al.(2022)	24	Lloyd (2020)
9	Telhede et al. (2022)	25	Kallis (2020)
11	Chen et al. (2022)	26	Kauer & Keeley (2019)
12	Sabbah et al. (2022)	27	Ranaei et al. (2022)
13	Lin et al. (2021)	28	Ghanbari & Nowroozi (2022)
14	Zhang et al. (2022)	29	Adzovie & Adzovie (2022)
15	Guo et al. (2022)	30	Newport et al. (2022)
16	Eqylan et al. (2022)	31	Noprival et al. (2021)

Source: Indexed Journal Articles Published in Scopus Database from 2019-2022

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the factors to consider when using qualitative interviews;

Pilot testing

Pilot tests in qualitative inquiry are not commonly used like in quantitative studies and their importance has been generally underestimated in many qualitative studies (Malmqvist et al., 2019; Majid et al., 2017). However, pilot testing is important to detect flaws in the design and potential challenges that an interviewer, subjects or the whole process might face before, during and after data collection. This may help researchers to increase the quality of their interviews and consequently their respective studies (Roberts, 2020; Turner, 2010). Before conducting qualitative interviews, researchers are advised to conduct a pilot study to improve the quality of the subsequent studies. From the analysis of this study, studies by Nielsen et al. (2022), Telhede et al. (2022), Chen et al. (2022), Guo et al. (2022), Zhang et al. (2022), and Nyashanu (2021) admitted to undertake pilot testing prior to their studies. Nyashanu (2021) explained that, among other things, the pilot test helped in building rapport with the participants; therefore, a researcher familiarized himself with the participants. This gives an impression that, apart from improving a tool for data collection, researchers may get familiar with the participants in terms of their culture and preferences. This may also be useful in creating a friendly atmosphere between researchers and their subjects. Moreover, adjusting interview questions to suit participants' context can be done as the result of pilot tests.

Selection of the right participants

Each study has its own purpose and in achieving that purpose, data has to be

collected from the right subjects. Unlike in quantitative studies where random sampling is key, in qualitative studies specifically in qualitative interviews, subjects are not sampled in that way; rather purposive sampling technique is used to ensure those with the right information are interviewed. Researchers are therefore advised to carefully select those to be included in their respective studies. Identifying the right participants is also helpful in saving time and other resources. A researcher who interviews subjects who do not possess information needed for the study is more likely to seek other people until he/she finds those with the needed information. This may result in unnecessary prolonging of the data collection process. Having the right people increases the chances of reaching data saturation earlier. Out of 31 studies involved in this study, 29 used purposive sampling and 2 studies used snowball sampling techniques which are both non-probability sampling techniques. Purposive sampling technique is therefore the most preferred sampling technique in qualitative interviews. One important reference from the reviewed studies can be found in the study of Jackson and Andipatin (2021) that focused on exploring the challenges fathers experience when parenting children with dyspraxia. The authors explained that the use of purposive sampling technique was important in their study since the study focused on collecting data from fathers that demonstrated presence and involvement in their childrens' lives.

Participants' Convenience

Quality and amount of data collected can significantly affect participants' convenience. Two things are important in this factor: the first one is time and the second one is the actual place where interviews are conducted. The studies

involved in the review used various strategies to enhance participants' convenience. A researcher has to ensure that subjects are asked on which time is appropriate for them (Nielsen et al., 2022; Jackson & Andipatin, 2022; Egan, 2020). A subject who is interviewed at an inconvenient time may rush to give answers which are not relevant and detailed enough. During interview sessions, research participants should not have other things to do. It is advised that research subjects know in advance the expected duration of the interview sessions so they can fix their schedule well to avoid inconveniences and interruptions that can be avoided. A place where interview sessions will be held is also very important to consider. It should be a quiet place that makes participants comfortable (Guo et al., 2022; Lloyd, 2020). A place to be used for interview sessions has to be communicated to the participants before the sessions start. It is also important to consider whether interviews will be done face-to-face or using technological means such as telephone or video conferencing. Some interviews are effective when done through telephone calls rather than face-to-face. The same applies to video conferencing. To enhance convenience, studies by Sabbah et al. (2022) and Guo et al. (2022) used either phone calls or WhatsApp to conduct interviews. Security and safety purposes may also dictate what mode to be used. To protect the subjects who were involved in the study of Sabbah et al. (2022) and Guo et al. (2022) against COVID-19; phone call interviews were administered.

Sample size

Unlike quantitative data collection methods, qualitative methods tend to use considerably smaller sample sizes for data collection. This is the same as qualitative interviews. Although

qualitative interviews require small sample sizes, the issue of what is a sufficient sample is an important one since it may affect the quality of the whole study. Having too few participants may limit the amount of information the study gathers. On the other hand, too many subjects in one study may lead to unnecessary wastage of resources, collection of bulky data that is not needed and making data analysis a more complex process. The sample size which is considered sufficient for qualitative interviews varies from one study to another based on the purpose and scope of the study, among other factors. In most studies, targeted participants are identified, followed by the recruitment of participants that continues until what is considered to be 'saturation' is reached. This means saturation is what determines the adequacy of data and consequently the sample size. Saturation is a point reached during data collection where no new relevant data can be collected from the study's subjects. In the review, the study of Ghanbari (2022) had the smallest sample size ($n=2$) while that of Fanai and Mohammadnezhad (2022) had the largest sample size ($n=31$). On average, the study involved in the review had a sample size of 15 participants.

Selection of interview questions

Structured and semi-structured interviews allow a researcher to design his/her questions before conducting interviews. These questions may also be pre-tested in pilot studies as previously noted in this study. Number of questions, their content and information intended to be collected has to be carefully thought out during a preparation stage. Having too many questions may make interview sessions too long and less efficient. Moreover, having inappropriate questions may lead to collection of irrelevant information. Research questions should emanate from research

goals and be informed by a theoretical framework and relevant literature in general. In the study of Fanai and Mohammadnezhad (2022), the interview guide used was developed based on relevant reviewed literature. There are some cases when researchers opt for unstructured interviews through which no prior questions are set. In circumstances like this, a researcher is still expected to carefully select questions to ask as the interview progresses.

Cultural dimensions

Before, during and after qualitative interviews the issue of cultural values of participants has to be carefully considered. Some questions may be considered offensive to some groups and make it difficult for them to comfortably participate in the interview sessions. Whoever prepares and asks interview questions has to be culturally sensitive. Before an interview starts it is also recommended to ask the participants what questions or issues may make them less comfortable to address if these issues are not well known before the sessions start. In the study of Woodrow et al. (2021) power imbalances, which may inhibit discussion around sensitive topics when interviewers are perceived as being from a more privileged position were noted. In the study, fun icebreakers, warm up and cool down activities were used which helped in rebalancing some of the power dynamics

Length of interview sessions

How long an interview lasts is an important factor to consider. Lengthy conversations are usually boring; when interviews take too long subjects may lose interest and consequently quality of information collected may be affected. It is important to consider how long will be okay for you as a researcher and your subjects as well. It is

recommended to take some breaks and gain energy and thereafter resume the session. This was used in the study of Lin et al., (2021) when subjects felt uncomfortable, the interview would be paused and the subjects could take a rest. It is also recommended to ask the participants if they think the sessions are taking too long. Researchers may also re-schedule the sessions for another time to limit length of the interview sessions (Zhang et al., 2022). On average, the study of Foulke & Romo (2020) had the shortest interview session which lasted 21 minutes. On the other hand, the study of Newport et al., (2022) had the longest interview sessions that lasted 53 minutes.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative interview is an important and most common method of data collection in social science studies. Its popularity in social science studies does not mean it is not used in natural sciences; natural scientists find it relevant and important to use qualitative inquiry in some circumstances especially when qualitative data are needed. Researchers in qualitative studies use various strategies to ensure data collected through qualitative interviews help in reaching their respective research objectives. Additionally, there are factors that are important to consider for qualitative interviews to be effective. It has been noted that there are factors that are acknowledged being considered in one study and not in another. This does not mean that some of the factors can be compromised or taken for granted; rather flexibility in qualitative studies may be one of the reasons. For example, the nature of the study may make one study have a smaller sample size and another to have a larger sample size, or one study may have longer interview

sessions than the other. During a review of papers included in this study, a researcher considered a factor to be important only when expressly mentioned in a study and its relevance or contribution was acknowledged. This doesn't mean that when a study is silent on a particular factor then that factor was not considered. It has been a practice for some researchers not to disclose all the methodological information in their studies. This paper is therefore serving a purpose of identifying important factors to consider in qualitative interviews in one paper to help other researchers in improving their research work especially when qualitative interviews are used as a means of data collection.

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