Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Research Methods: Interviews

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Last time we looked at focus groups as a qualitative research method. This time the focus shifts to interviews. Sitting down face to face with a research participant and asking probing and insightful questions can be daunting—especially when feeling the pressure to be probing and insightful! However, if your research question dictates that interviews are the best method of data gathering, you need to dive in and get started. How do you know if interviewing is a good fit for your research? Beck and Manuel (2008) suggest that if you want to understand or explore finely shaded human issues, if your question seems best answered in prose rather than with numbers, and if you want to explore a trend or an experience looking for themes, then the interview is a good choice for data gathering (p. 82).

There are a few types of interviewing styles to choose from: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews. As may be evident, structured interviews involve asking the same set of questions to each research participant. There is no room to move beyond the set of questions. This style of interview is often used in conducting surveys. In qualitative research, the structured interview is quite limiting. Semi-structured interviews allow for more flexibility.

They involve having a set of guiding questions that will keep the interview on track. However, the researcher can follow topics of interest during the interview without having to adhere to a structured set of questions. For unstructured interviews, the researcher will have an idea of the avenues he/she wants to explore, but the interview is more like a conversation—flexible and unrestricted. Because the conversation can, and is expected, to go anywhere, comparing data between interviews becomes more difficult.

Interviews can be conducted in person, over the telephone, or electronically using a program such as Skype. The advantage to being face to face is the ability to see facial expressions and body language. These can be jotted down as notes as the interview progresses and may be useful in the data analysis portion of the research. Conversely, interview participants may be shy or uncomfortable with a face to face conversation or unfamiliar with the technology. Using the telephone or Skype is cost effective, as no travel is involved, and may provide a certain level of comfort to participants. The factors must be weighed carefully in order to choose the best method of conducting the interviews.

Beck and Manuel (2008) break down interviewing as a research method into a series of steps:

1. Identify participants. Once participants are known to you, make sure you build enough time into the project to schedule the interviews. Meeting everyone's needs can be time consuming.
2. Decide on the type of interview (in person, telephone, etc.).
3. Decide on the facilities in which to conduct the interviews. This may be out of your control if you decide to meet the participants on their own turf. If you do travel to meet participants, be mindful of the potential risk involved. Ensure someone knows where you are and consider developing a fieldwork policy if your organization does not have one.

4. Check and test your equipment. The last thing you need is a voice recorder with dead batteries.
5. Design an interview schedule that is well-paced and that includes topics to explore.
6. Obtain formal signed consent.
7. Pace the interview, giving adequate time for each question and response.
8. Follow proper protocol which is usually determined prior to beginning the research at the ethics approval stage (adapted from Beck & Manuel (2008), pp. 95-96).

One important thing to consider before undertaking interviews as a data gathering method is the different types of people you may encounter. These types can include dominant talkers, long-winded participants, the "expert" type, argumentative types, and the shy person. The interviewer needs to be prepared with techniques and tactics to move the interview along, quell a potential argument, or draw out a reticent participant.

There are many resources to help you get started in using interviews as a research method. Here are just a few:

Dilley, P. (2000). Conducting successful interviews: Tips for intrepid research. *Theory into Practice, 39*(3), 131-137. Retrieved 21 May 2012 from http://www.jstor.org/stable/i264807

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

And here are some examples of research that uses interviewing as a data gathering method:

Duncan, V., & Holtslander, L. (2012). Utilizing grounded theory to explore the information seeking behavior of senior nursing students. *Journal of the Medical Library Association,100*(1), 20-27. doi:10.3163/1536-5050.100.1.005

Valentine, B. (2001). The legitimate effort in research papers: Student commitment versus faculty expectations. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 27*(2), 107-115. doi: 10.1016/S0099-1333(00)00182-8

Major, J.A. (1993). Mature librarians and the university faculty: Factors contributing to librarians' acceptance as colleagues. *College and Research Libraries, 54*(6),463-469. Retrieved 21 May 2012 from ERIC database (EJ473071).

There is not enough room in this column to delve into data analysis, and basically that depends on which theoretical approach you are taking, e.g., grounded theory. If you think that interviewing might be the way to go for your research, look to the literature and discuss your ideas with experienced colleagues. As well, if you are just beginning a research project using the interview method, you are not alone. I am, too! Next time around, the topic will be bibliometrics.

References

Beck, S. E., & Manuel, K. (2008). *Practical research methods for librarians and information professionals.* New York, NY: Neal-Schuman.