

Unstructured interview

(Last updated date: 4/7/06; By Yan Zhang)

Introduction

Interview is a widely used tool to access people's experiences and their inner perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of reality. Based on the degree of structuring, interview can be divided into three categories: structured interview, semi-structured interview, and unstructured interview (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Structured interview is the interview that has a set of predefined questions and the questions would be asked in the same order for all respondents. The effects of instrument and interviewers to the research results are intended to be minimized by this control. Structured interview is similar to survey and questionnaire except that it is administered orally rather than in writing. Survey and questionnaire have been reviewed in Chapter 19. Semi-structured interview lies in between in terms of the flexibility of the interview process. Predefined questions, usually more open-ended than questions in a structured interview, are prepared, but in the course of interview, interviewers have a certain room to adjust the sequence of the questions to be asked and add questions based on the context of the conversations. Semi-structured interview has been introduced in detail in chapter 22. In this chapter, I am going to elaborate on unstructured interview as a qualitative research method for data collection.

Unstructured interview technique was originated in anthropology and sociology as a method to elicit people's social realities. In the literature, the term was used with informal conversational interview, in-depth interview, nonstandardized interview, and ethnographic interview in an interchangeable manner. The definitions of unstructured interview are various. Minichiello (1990) defined unstructured interview as interviews in which neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined. They rely on social interaction between the researcher and informant to elicit information. Punch (1998) described unstructured interview as a way to understand the complex behavior of people without imposing any a priori categorization which might limit the field of inquiry. Patton (1990) regarded unstructured interview a natural extension of participant observation. He defined that the unstructured interview relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction, typically an interview that occurs as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork.

While the definitions are not the same, the basic characteristics of unstructured interviews are laid clear. Researchers come to the interview with no predefined theoretical framework, and thus no hypotheses and questions about the social realities that they are interested in. Rather, they have conversations with interviewees and generate questions in response to interviewees' narration. As a consequence, each unstructured interview might generate data with different structures and patterns. The intention of unstructured interview is to expose researchers to unanticipated themes and to a better understanding of interviewees' social reality from interviewees' perspectives.

Without predefined questions doesn't mean that unstructured interviews are random and non-directive at all. Zweig (1943) indicated that unstructured interview cannot be started without detailed knowledge and preparation, which is vital for achieving deep insights into people's life. In real studies, researchers usually keep in

mind a general scope of issues that he/she would like to discuss in the interview (Fife, 2005). Researcher's control over the conversation is intended to be minimized, but nevertheless present to keep interviewees relating experiences and developing answers that are relevant to the problems of interest to the researcher (Burgess, 1982). In fact, unstructured interview is "always a controlled conversation, which is geared to the interviewer's research interests" (Minichiello, et al. 1990: 93).

The decision to use unstructured interview as a data collection method is governed by both researchers' epistemology and research objectives. Researchers making use of unstructured interview often hold a constructive point of view of social reality and correspondingly take an interpretive research paradigm. They believe that to make sense of a subject's world, researchers must approach it through the subject's own perspective and in the subject's own terms (Denzin, 1989; Robertson and Boyle, 1984). No hypothesis should be made beforehand and the purpose of inquiry is theory developing rather than theory testing.

In an ideal unstructured interview, the interviewer follows interviewees' narration and generates questions spontaneously based on the reflection of it. It is accepted, however, that the format of the interview can be loosely guided by lists of questions, called aide memoire or agenda (Briggs, 2000; McCann and Clark, 2005; Minichiello, 1990). Aid-memoire or agenda is a broad guide to topic issues that might be covered in the interview rather than the actual questions to be asked. It serves as a reminder to the researcher of research topics. It is open-ended and flexible (Burgess, 1984). Unlike interview guidelines used in structured interviewing, aid-memoire or agenda doesn't determine the order of the conversation and is subject to revision based on the responses of interviewees. Using aid-memoire in the unstructured interview enables a certain degree of consistency across different interview sessions. Thus a balance can be achieved between flexibility and consistency.

Unstructured interview is a useful method to collect detailed data about people's information seeking and use. It is especially useful for studies purported at finding patterns, generating models, and informing information system design and implementation. For example, Alvarez and Urla (2002) used unstructured interviews to examine information requirement during the implementation of an ERP (enterprise resource planning) system. Due to its conversational and non-intrusive characteristics, unstructured interview can be used in settings where it is inappropriate or impossible to use other more structured methods to probe into people's information activities. Schultze (2000) used unstructured interview, along with other ethnographic methods, in her eight-month field study in a big company researching their work of producing informational objects. It is also possible to make use of unstructured interview to study how people use libraries in the library. The natural inquiry approach of unstructured interview is more possible to reveal the real usage of the library. Further exploration of how to improve library usage and service can be conducted based on the research results.

Although unstructured interview can generate detailed data and enable in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, it is still underused in the ILS field compared to survey, questionnaire, and semi-structured interview. Fortunately, as observed by Ellis, a shift has been occurred to the study of information use toward a more holistic view. The effects of the shift on the research design is reflected on a change in data collection approach "from a macro-approach, studying large groups via questionnaires or structured

interviews, to a micro-approach, studying small groups via observation or unstructured interviews” (Ellis, 1997:384-385). We are hoping to see more studies to be done using unstructured interview method.

Role of interviewers

The interviewer has a unique position in an unstructured interview. He/she is an integral part of the research instrument in that there are no predefined frameworks and questions to refer to during the inquiry. To a great extent, it depends on the interviewer to generate questions in response to the context and push forward the conversation to directions concerned to the researcher. Thus, unstructured interview is more open to interviewer effects than its structured, standardized and semi-structured counterparts. To become a skilful interviewer takes knowledge and experience (Minicheiello et al., 1990).

What role that an interviewer adopts is critical to the success of an unstructured interview. The choice of roles is constrained by many characteristics of the interviewer, such as gender, age, social status, race and ethnicity. But generally it is preferable that the interviewer presents himself/herself as a learner, a friend, and a member of the interviewee’s group who has sympathetic interest in the interviewee’s life and willing to understand it (Burgess, 1984). Adopting this kind of role makes building rapport between the interviewer and interviewees possible; further makes in-depth understanding of those people’s life possible.

The merit of unstructured interview lies in its conversational nature, which allows the interviewer to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes (Patton, 1990). This characteristic of unstructured interview requires interviewers a rich set of skills. First of all, the interviewer should be able to listen carefully in the conversation. The interviewer often starts the interview by a very broad and open question, such as, “how do you feel about the ...”. The interviewee then can take over and lead the conversation. In such conversations, the interviewer usually listens and reflects more than he/she talks. Secondly, in order to adjust the interview direction in response to individual interview context, the interviewer has to be able to “generate rapid insights and formulate questions quickly and smoothly” (Patton, 1990: 282).

Thirdly, interviewers should be good at questioning, probing, and adjusting the flow of conversations at an appropriate level. This skill is reflected at three aspects of the interviewer’s questioning activities. First, interviewers should be adept at using appropriate type of questions based on the specific interview context. The kinds of questions posed are crucial to the unstructured interview (Burgess, 1984). Spradley (1979) identified three main types of questions: descriptive questions that allow interviewees to provide descriptions about their activities; structural questions which attempt to find how interviewees organize their knowledge; and contrast questions which allow interviewees to discuss the meanings of situations and make comparisons across different situations. These particular questions are used at different points in the interview to encourage interviewees to talk or to probe for more details.

On the second aspect, interviewers should be able to monitor and control the directiveness of their questions, comments, and even gesture and actions. (Burgess, 1984). It is important for interviewers not to ask directive questions when initiating the interview because directive questions may bias the data by leading interviewees to respond in a way that they thought is wanted by the researcher. Patten (1990) cautioned that

interviewers should “guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation” (Patton, 1990:282). Denzin (1989) also pointed out that a “sympathetic identification” with interviewees’ point of view is necessary, but the interviewer should avoid giving advice and passing judgments on respondents (Denzin, 1989:xxx). Whyte (1960) provided a six-level scale to evaluate the degree of directiveness in any question or statement made by the interviewer by examining it in the context of what immediately preceded it during the interview. Controlling and adjusting the directiveness of questions and statements is a big challenge for interviewers, especially for those novice ones.

On the third aspect, interviewers should be able to take a good control of the pace and direction of the conversation. Ideally in an unstructured interview, researchers’ control over the interview is minimized, but it is interviewer’s responsibility to control the interview by engaging interviewees in the conversation and simultaneously keeping the conversation on the track that of concern to the researcher. A productive conversation is possible when a balance is achieved.

The process of unstructured interview

There are no official and all-agreed-upon working guidelines for how to conduct an unstructured interview. But in practice, some researchers comply with the steps listed below (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Punch, 1998) when planning data collection by unstructured interviews.

Step 1: Get in: accessing the setting. Various difficulties were documented on getting access to research settings, especially when the researcher is an “outsider” of the environment. Negotiation techniques and tactics are required in this situation. The interviewer also has to take into consideration the possible political, legal, and bureaucratic barriers during the process of getting in (Lofland, et al., 2005).

Step 2: Understanding the language and culture of the interviewees. A primary focus of unstructured interview is to understand the meaning of human experiences as it is described from the interviewee’s perspective. Thus, unstructured interviews are governed by the cultural conventions of the research settings, which requires that the researcher can understand interviewee’s language and further its meanings in the specific culture context (Fife, 2005; Minichiello et al., 1990).

Step 3: Deciding on how to present oneself. Unstructured interview are two-way conversations with the least control from the interviewer. The quality of the conversation to a great extent is influenced by how the interviewer represents self in the interview. The interviewer’s self representation is dependent on the context he/she is in. But it is for certain that the interviewer is a “learner” in the conversation, trying to make sense of interviewees’ experiences from their point of view.

Step 4: Locating an informant. Locating the interviewee is to find an insider of the group under research who is willing to talk with you, or act as a guider and translator of the unfamiliar language and culture (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Meanwhile, the informant also needs to be knowledgeable enough to server as a good interpreter of the setting.

Step 5: Gaining trust and establishing rapport. Gaining trust and establishing rapport is essential to the success of unstructured interviews. “The giving of one’s story is a deeply valued gift” (Donalek, 2005). Only when the trustful and harmonious relationship is cultivated can the interviewee share his/her experience with the interviewer, especially on sensitive topics. When endeavoring to cultivate rapport, the

interviewer might need to watch out and prevent himself/herself losing the necessary distance for being objective and becomes a spokesperson for the group under the study (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

Step 6: Collecting the empirical materials. Note-taking is a traditional method of recording interview materials. But in an unstructured interview, note-taking is hard and could disrupt the natural flow of the conversations. Thus, it is better to audio record the interviews by tape or digital recorder. In situations where only note-taking is possible, interviewer should take notes regularly and promptly, write down everything no matter how unimportant it might seem at the time, and try to be as inconspicuous as possible. Then write up more detail notes immediately after the interview (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Lofland, et al., 2005).

Challenges of unstructured interview

The flexibility of unstructured interview can bring up unanticipated topics and savvy information. As a price for this advantage, three main challenges are facing researchers using unstructured interview as data collection method. The first challenge is that it requires a great amount of time to collect systematic information (Patton, 1990), especially when the research first gets into the field and knows little about the society. It takes time to gain trust, build up rapport, and gain access to interviewees. Because of each interview are highly individualized, the length of each unstructured interview session might be longer than structured or semi-structured interview sessions (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

The second challenge for researchers is to control the direction and pace of the conversation. First of all, it is hard to control the degree of directiveness of the questions and statements proposed during the conversation. This issue has been discussed in detail the previous section. Secondly, when a new topic emerges in the discussion, it is difficult for the researcher to know whether to follow it and risk losing continuity or stay on the major theme and risk the omission of additional information (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, when facing the situation that the interviewee is not likely to stop on a certain topic when he/she should be or there has been too much off-topic chatting, the interviewer should decide when and how to interrupt the conversation so that the interruption would not seem accident and irritating (Whyte, 1960). Researchers agree that to be apt at controlling in unstructured interviews, training and experiences are equally important to the sensitivity of the interviewer.

The third challenge is analyzing data gathered by unstructured interviews. Because the questions asked in the unstructured interview are dependent on individual interview context and various across sessions. Different questions will generate different responses so that a great deal of effort has to be made to analyze the data systematically to find patterns (Patton, 1990).

Example 1: Artists' information seeking behavior

Artists constitute a big proportion of the nation's educated professional class. As a group, it is larger than natural scientists, social scientists, and lawyers in terms of the number of practitioners. But artists' information needs were largely ignored by information professionals (Bates, 2001). This situation leads to the first purpose of this study: to investigate artists' information seeking context and sources of information so

as to gain some tentative conclusions about artists' information seeking behaviors. The information sources used by artists are very diverse; some of them may be very unusual. It makes structured and standardized questionnaire with little flexibility not an effective tool for data collection. This leads to the second purpose of the study: to establish a basic framework for developing standardized questionnaires. Given the complexity of the research phenomenon and exploratory nature of the research, Cobbleidick chose to conduct unstructured interviews, which she called in-depth interviews, with a limited number of subjects, hoping that the unconstrained and in-depth discussions allowed by unstructured interviews could expose her to "the emergence of unexpected" (Cobbleidick, 1999: 347).

There were four subjects, two males and two females, participated in the study. As the study was exploratory and the findings were not tended to be generalized, the sample that Cobbleidick chose were small but very representative. They were a sculptor, painter, fiber artist, and metalsmith, representing different media disciplines. Furthermore, they represented two main traditions of the west arts, fine arts and craft arts. They were working in the same university in Midwest as faculty, sharing many goals, tasks, facilities, and information sources on campus. In addition, they all have access to the public libraries, museums, and other academic libraries in the surrounding area.

Cobbleidick had a clear research objective in mind before she carried out the interviews: to identify the specific information needs of artists. Drawing on years of personal observation, she proposed a systematic structure to guide the line of questioning in the interviews. The structure included eight research issues that she wanted to cover in the interviews. The eight issues were (1) the processes that place the finished work of art in a community, (2) technical information needs, (3) visual information needs, (4) inspirational information needs, (5) libraries, (6) books, (7) technology, and (8) keeping up with contemporary developments in the visual arts. In an unstructured interview, this type of structure, also called aide-memoire or agenda, serves as a reminder for researchers to make sure that all the issues he/she interested in were covered. By detailing the interview issues at a comparatively high level than most of the other unstructured interviews, the interviews in this study are very close to semi-structured interviews in terms of the level of control that imposed by the researcher. But they still should be regarded as unstructured interviews in the sense that the wording of the questions and the order of the questions to be asked were not predetermined. Similar to other unstructured interview, the researcher had to ask questions based on individual conversation context. Also, Cobbleidick didn't have a predefined theoretical framework intending to explain artists' information needs and information seeking behavior.

Unstructured interviews based on aide-memoire as outlined above would produce more consistent and structured data across different interviewees than the ones that without it. The structure imposed in the interviews can make the later-on data analysis easier. Burgess held this view that "interviewers need to ensure that similar topics are covered in interviews where the data are to be used to make comparisons" (Burgess, 1984: 111). In this study, the data collected in the course of these interviews was organized into the eight categories as outlined in the aide-memoire. Based on the data analysis, tentative conclusions about artists' information seeking behaviors were made and a survey instrument was developed. The survey is described in eight topical sections.

Some of the sections directly based on the issues outlined in the aide-memoire; the others were derived from the data analysis across the four interviews.

Ensure confidentiality to protect interviewees from possible risk of participating in a study is a concern for studies involving human subjects. It is also the case for unstructured interview. In this study, only four subjects were interviewed and their sexes were identified together with their major disciplines. They were also identified as the art faculty of a large Midwestern university with a traditional strong art program. But Cobblestick did mask the identity of the university, which makes the identification of the individual participant difficult and to a certain degree ensures the anonymity of the participants.

Cobblestick did not detail many aspects of how she implemented the unstructured interview method in the paper. For example, she did not report in this article that where the interviews took place, how long the interviews lasted, and what method was used to record the interviews. She also did not mention how she probed into issues she was interested in when necessary in the interview process, how she controlled the direction and pace of the interviews, and how she handled the emergent issues or discussions which were not expected by her in advance. This lack of detailed description of method use might be due to the fact that the focus of the article was reporting the findings rather than elaborating on method use and methodological concerns. But it is preferable that researchers can provide detailed information about how they implemented the methods in a study. Only by this practice, the studies can be repeated in the future by other researchers to continue the work or verify the findings.

Example 2: Information seeking and use by journalists

The study explored information seeking and use behaviors by journalists at a London-based national British newspaper, *The Times*, by using unstructured interviews. It was part of a project aiming to specify system requirements and design implications for integrated information retrieval and authoring system based on an understanding of journalistic information behaviors. There were totally 25 journalists, comprising 19 home news writers, 4 feature writers, 1 obituary writer, and 1 systems editor at *The Times* participated in the interview. Follow-up emails were used to collect additional data when necessary. To ensure confidentiality, the interviewees' identify were not revealed.

The researchers had very clear research objectives and agenda before they started the interview process. They aimed to provide rich account of information behaviors of journalists working in *The Times* newspaper, not only the journalists' observable behavior, but also their cognition behind the behaviors. In particular, they were interested in journalists' information activities such as information locating, management, relocating, and use in terms of the constraints imposed by their working context as well as the motivations behind the activities; furthermore, they intended to probe into why, when, and how each information activity would be done given the working context of the journalist. They did not have preconceived theoretical framework for this study; did not proposed categories of information activities beforehand; and also did not have pre-defined hypotheses to test. It was the researchers' intention to learn the reality of information activities of journalists and build a model representing their information seeking and use behaviors involved in the broad journalistic research and writing process. Intensive and detailed data required by the research agenda makes the comparatively

easy-to-conduct survey approach, which only can shade lights on information seeking activities in a very broad sense, not an appropriate method to use. Thus, unstructured interview was chosen as the data collection method for achieving the proposed in-depth understanding of journalistic working process and information seeking and use activities.

Interviews were conducted at the journalists' workplace, which made the interviewees more comfortable to talk. Each interview lasted between 20 to 40 minutes. Instead of having a predefined question list, the researchers only bear in mind the general research issues as described above. A typical interview was started with the researcher promoting the journalist to describe their work assignment process. This is a very general and broad request. Because it is logically the beginning of a journalist's information seeking and related to the journalists' routine job and thus very familiar to them, this request not only helped reveal contextual information of journalists' information activities, but also presented the researchers to the interviewee as a learner, willing to understand their working process. This served as a good starting point to engage them in the conversation. With the proceeding of the conversation, the researcher would then steer the discussion towards more specific issues about the journalists' information seeking and use activities during that process. By using this questioning strategy, the conversations would be more relaxing and less intimidating for the interviewees. Unfortunately, more details about what kind of questions the researchers used to probe into the issues they were particularly interested in, how they control the directives of the questions and statements in the conversation, and how they control the direction of the conversation on the right track were not reported in the paper and could not be found anywhere else.

The authors also didn't specify what method they used to record the interviews in the paper. They only stated that the interviews were transcribed. Unstructured interview often generate data with different patterns and structures from one session to another, which makes the data analysis very intensive and time-consuming. Because Attfield and Dowel had a very clear research agenda, interview sessions in this study covered similar topics. This facilitates data comparison across sessions. The data was analyzed using Grounded Theory approach, which is a data-driven emergent approach for building models from qualitative data. Corresponding to this approach, open-coding data analysis method was used to identify concepts about information-related activities that were of particular interests to the researchers. Further, "axial" coding was used to identify the relationships between the concepts with the intention to contextualize the identified phenomena.

Based on the data analysis, a series of information activities of news journalists were identified. A rich description of the motivation of these behaviors in the context of the requirements of the journalistic work, which included product they produce, the situation within which it is produced, and the resources that provides the means for its production was generated. A model of the newspaper report research and writing process was produced based on data analysis.

Researchers making use of unstructured interviews usually believe that the social reality is constructed by the interviewees and they have to make sense of it from their stance in their terms. A big step in using unstructured interview is to understand the language and cultural of the interviewees. In the working process of a journalist, some words convey meanings different from their commonly understood one. It is worth noting

that this report used those terms in the sense of their meaning to journalists. Notes were provided at the end of the paper to explain the meanings of those words

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