

Unstructured Interviews

by

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There is no such thing as a worthless conversation, provided you know what to listen for. And questions are the breath of life for a conversation.

--James Nathan Miller, 1965

Ideal conversation must be an exchange of thought, and not, as many of those who worry most about their shortcomings believe, an eloquent exhibition of wit or oratory.

--Emily Post, 1922

Introduction

Interviews are a widely used tool to access people's experiences and their inner perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of reality. Based on the degree of structuring, interviews can be divided into three categories: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005). A structured interview is an interview that has a set of predefined questions and the questions would be asked in the same order for all respondents. This standardization is intended to minimize the effects of the instrument and the interviewer on the research results. Structured interviews are similar to surveys (see the later chapter on survey research), except that they are administered orally rather than in writing. Semi-structured interviews (see the later chapter on this method) are more flexible. An interview guide, usually including both closed-ended and open-ended questions, is prepared; but in the course of the interview, the interviewer has a certain amount of room to adjust the sequence of the questions to be asked and to add questions based on the context of the participants' responses. This chapter will focus on unstructured interviews as a qualitative research method for data collection.

The unstructured interview technique was developed in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology as a method to elicit people's social realities. In the literature, the term is used interchangeably with the terms, informal conversational interview, in-depth interview, nonstandardized interview, and ethnographic interview. The definitions of an unstructured interview are various. Minichiello et al. (1990) defined them as interviews in which neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined. Instead, they rely on social interaction between the researcher and the informant. Punch (1998) described unstructured interviews as a way to understand the complex behavior of people without imposing any *a priori* categorization, which might limit the field of inquiry. Patton (2002) described unstructured interviews as a natural extension of participant observation, because they so often occur as part of ongoing

participant observation fieldwork. He argued that they rely entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction.

While the definitions are not the same, there is more agreement about the basic characteristics of unstructured interviews. The researcher comes to the interview with no predefined theoretical framework, and thus no hypotheses and questions about the social realities under investigation. Rather, the researcher has conversations with interviewees and generates questions in response to the interviewees' narration. As a consequence, each unstructured interview might generate data with different structures and patterns. The intention of an unstructured interview is to expose the researcher to unanticipated themes and to help him or her to develop a better understanding of the interviewees' social reality from the interviewees' perspectives. While unstructured interviews can be used as the primary data collection method (as in the two example studies discussed later in this chapter), it is also very common to incorporate unstructured interviews into a study primarily based on participant observation (see the chapter on that topic).

Just because unstructured interviews don't use predefined questions doesn't mean that they are random and non-directive. Unstructured interviews cannot be started without detailed knowledge and preparation, if you hope to achieve deep insights into people's lives (Patton, 2002). The researcher will keep in mind the study's purpose and the general scope of the issues that he or she would like to discuss in the interview (Fife, 2005). The researcher's control over the conversation is intended to be minimal, but nevertheless the researcher will try to encourage the interviewees to relate experiences and perspectives that are relevant to the problems of interest to the researcher (Burgess, 1982).

The decision to use unstructured interviews as a data collection method is governed by both the researcher's epistemology¹ and the study's objectives. Researchers making use of unstructured interviews often hold a constructivist point of view of social reality and correspondingly design studies within an interpretive research paradigm. They believe that, to make sense of a study participant's world, researchers must approach it through the participant's own perspective and in the participant's own terms (Denzin, 1989; Robertson & Boyle, 1984). No hypothesis should be made beforehand and the purpose of inquiry is theory development rather than theory testing.

In an ideal unstructured interview, the interviewer follows the interviewees' narration and generates questions spontaneously based on his or her reflections on that narration. It is accepted, however, that the structure of the interview can be loosely guided by a list of questions, called an *aide memoire* or agenda (Minichiello et al., 1990; Briggs, 2000; McCann & Clark, 2005). An *aide 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 is open-ended and flexible (Burgess, 1984). Unlike interview guides used in structured interviewing, an *aide memoire* or agenda doesn't determine the order of the conversation and is subject to revision based on the responses of the interviewees. Using an *aide memoire* or agenda in an unstructured interview encourages a certain degree of consistency across different interview sessions. Thus, a balance can be achieved between flexibility and consistency.

Unstructured interviews can be very useful in studies of people's information seeking and use. They are especially useful for studies attempting to find patterns,

¹ Interpretive research and its epistemological stance is also discussed in the chapter on participant observation.

generate models, and inform information system design and implementation. For example, Alvarez and Urla (2002) used unstructured interviews to elicit information requirements during the implementation of an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. Due to their conversational and non-intrusive characteristics, unstructured interviews can be used in settings where it is inappropriate or impossible to use other more structured methods to examine people's information activities. For example, Schultze (2000) used unstructured interviews, along with other ethnographic methods, in her eight-month field study in a large company investigating their production of informational objects.

Although unstructured interviews can generate detailed data and enable in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, they are still underused in information and library science, compared to surveys and semi-structured interviews. Fortunately, as observed by Ellis and Haugan (1997), a shift has been occurring in the study of information use, toward a more holistic view. The effects of this shift are reflected in a change in data collection approaches, "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, p.384-385). If Ellis is correct, we will see an increasing use of unstructured interviews in information behavior research.

The Role of the Interviewer

The interviewer has a unique position in an unstructured interview. He or she is an integral part of the research instrument, in that there are no predefined frameworks and questions that can be used to structure the inquiry. To a great extent, the success of the interview depends on the interviewer's ability to generate questions in response to the context and to move the conversation in a direction of interest to the researcher. Thus, an unstructured interview is more open to interviewer effects than its structured and semi-structured counterparts. To become a skillful interviewer takes knowledge and experience (Minichiello et al., 1990).

The 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. Even so, it is generally preferable that the interviewer present him- or herself as a learner, a friend, and a member of the interviewee's group, who has sympathetic interest in the interviewee's life and is willing to understand it (Burgess, 1984). Adopting this kind of role makes building rapport between the interviewer and interviewees possible; it further makes in-depth understanding of the interviewees' lives possible.

The merit of an unstructured interview lies in its conversational nature, which allows the interviewer to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes (Patton, 2002). This characteristic of unstructured interviews requires interviewers to have a rich set of skills. First, the interviewer should be able to listen carefully during the conversation. The interviewer often starts the interview with 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 or she talks. Second, in order to adjust the interview direction in response to the individual interview context, the interviewer has to be able to "generate rapid insights [and] formulate questions quickly and smoothly" (Patton, 2002, p.343).

Most importantly, interviewers should be good at questioning, probing, and adjusting the flow of conversations at an appropriate level. This skill is reflected in three aspects of the interviewer's questioning tactics. First, interviewers should be adept at using the appropriate type of question, 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, which allow interviewees to provide descriptions about their activities; structural questions, which attempt to find out how interviewees organize their knowledge; and contrast questions, which allow interviewees to discuss the meanings of situations and make comparisons across different situations. Each type of question is used at different points in the interview to encourage interviewees to talk or to probe for more details. Second, interviewers should be able to monitor and control the directiveness of their questions, comments, and even gestures 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 was expected or desired by the researcher. Patton (2002) cautioned that interviewers should "guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation" (p.343). Denzin (1989) also pointed out that a "sympathetic identification" with interviewees' points of view is necessary, but the interviewer should avoid giving advice and/or passing judgments on respondents (Denzin, 1989, p.109). 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 with little interviewing experience. Third, interviewers should be able to maintain control of the pace and direction of the conversation. While the interviewer allows the interviewee to raise new topics or move the conversation in directions that the interviewee believes are important, it is the interviewer's responsibility to engage the interviewee in the conversation and keep the conversation focused on the researcher's concerns. As Minichiello et al. (1990) note, an unstructured interview is "always a controlled conversation, which is geared to the interviewer's research interests" (p.93). A productive conversation is possible when a balance of control is achieved.

Conducting an Unstructured Interview

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

Step 1: Getting in: accessing the setting. Various difficulties in gaining access to research settings have been documented, especially when the researcher is an "outsider" in the environment. Negotiation techniques and tactics are required in this situation. The researcher also has to take into consideration the possible political, legal, and bureaucratic barriers that may arise during the process of gaining access to the setting (Lofland et al., 2006).

Step 2: Understanding the language and culture of the interviewees. A primary focus of an unstructured interview is to understand the meaning of human experiences

from the interviewees' perspectives. Thus, unstructured interviews are governed by the cultural conventions of the research setting. This requires that the researcher can understand the interviewees' language and, further, its meanings in the specific cultural context of the research setting (Minichiello et al., 1990; Fife, 2005).

Step 3: Deciding on how to present oneself. An unstructured interview is a two-way conversation. The quality of the conversation is influenced, to a great extent, by how the interviewer represents him- or herself. The interviewer's self representation will depend on the context he or she is in, but in all cases, the interviewer is a "learner" in the conversation, trying to make sense of the interviewee's experiences from his or her point of view.

Step 4: Locating an informant. Not every person in the research setting will make a good informant. The informant (i.e., the interviewee) will be an insider who is willing to talk with you, of course. But even more importantly, the informant must be knowledgeable enough to serve as a guide and interpreter of the setting's unfamiliar language and culture (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Step 5: Gaining trust and establishing rapport. Gaining trust and establishing rapport is essential to the success of unstructured interviews. Only when a trustful and harmonious relationship is established will the interviewee share his or her experience with the interviewer, especially if the topic of the conversation is sensitive. When endeavoring to cultivate rapport, the interviewer might need to be careful: it's easy to become so involved with your informants' lives that you can no longer achieve your research purposes (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

Step 6: Capturing the data. Note-taking is a traditional method for capturing interview data. But in an unstructured interview, note-taking is likely to disrupt the natural flow of the conversation. Thus, when possible, it is preferable to audio record the interviews by tape or digital recorder. In situations where only note-taking is possible, you will need to take brief notes during the interview, writing up more detailed notes immediately after each interview (Fontana and Frey, 2005, Lofland, et al., 2006). As you develop your interviewing skills, you also will want to practice a variety of memory techniques, to be able to capture as much detail as possible from each interview.

The Challenges of Unstructured Interviews

While the flexibility of unstructured interviews offers a number of advantages, there are three main challenges that researchers face when using unstructured interviews as a data collection method. The first challenge is that this method requires a significant amount of time to collect the needed information (Patton, 2002), especially when the researcher first enters the field and knows little about the setting. It takes time to gain trust, develop rapport, and gain access to interviewees. Because each interview is highly individualized, the length of each unstructured interview session also might be longer than structured or semi-structured interview sessions (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

The second challenge for researchers is to exert the right amount and type of control over the direction and pace of the conversation. It is difficult to control the degree of directiveness of the questions and statements proposed during the conversation. This issue was discussed in the previous section. Also, 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 to stay on the major theme and risk missing additional useful information

(Patton, 2002). Furthermore, when the interviewee moves the conversation/interview in a direction that is not useful, the interviewer will need to decide when and how to interrupt the conversation gracefully, to return it to a topic of interest for the purposes of the research (Whyte, 1960). Researchers agree that, to develop your skills in sensitively controlling unstructured interviews, both training and experience are important.

The third challenge is analyzing the data gathered by unstructured interviews. The questions asked in each unstructured interview were dependent on the context of the interview and so can vary dramatically across multiple interviews. Different questions will generate different responses so that a great deal of effort has to be made to analyze the data systematically, to find the patterns within it (Patton, 2002).

Examples

Two studies that relied primarily on unstructured interviews will be discussed here. In the first, Cobble Dick (1996) investigated the information seeking behaviors of artists by interviewing four of them about their information needs and the sources they used to address those needs. In the second example, Attfield and Dowell (2003) investigated the work-related information behaviors of newspaper journalists in London. In each case, the interviews were based on a list of the study's main research questions, rather than a more detailed interview guide.

Example 1: Artists' Information Seeking Behavior

While artists constitute a significant proportion of the nation's educated professional class, their information needs have been largely ignored by information professionals (Bates, 2001). This situation leads to the first purpose of this study: to investigate the context of artists' information seeking and their sources of information, so as to draw some tentative conclusions about artists' information seeking behaviors. The information sources used by artists are extremely diverse, so a structured and standardized questionnaire with little flexibility would not be 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 the exploratory nature of the research, Cobble Dick (1999) 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 the unexpected" (p.347).

Since the study was exploratory, the sample that Cobble Dick chose was quite small but represented some of the diversity in the population of interest. Two male artists and two female artists participated in the study. They were a sculptor, a painter, a fiber artist, and a metalsmith, thus representing different media. Furthermore, they represented two main traditions: fine art and crafts. They were all faculty in the same university in the Midwest, so shared many goals, tasks, facilities, and information sources on campus. In addition, they all had access to the public libraries, the museums, and the other academic libraries in the surrounding area.

Cobble Dick's two research objectives shaped her planning for the interviews. Drawing on several 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: 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 an *aide memoire* or agenda, serves as a reminder for researchers to make sure that all the issues in which he or she is interested are covered. The amount of structure incorporated in the interviews in this study is very close to that of semi-structured interviews in terms of the level of control imposed by the researcher. Nevertheless, these interviews would 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 interviews, the researcher had to ask questions based on the individual context of the conversation.

Unstructured interviews based on an *aide memoire*, as outlined above, would produce more consistent and structured data across different interviewees than interviews conducted without any pre-existing structure. Imposing structure on the interviews can make data analysis easier (though you are likely to sacrifice some diversity in the interviewees' responses). Burgess (1984) advocated this approach, when he argued that "interviewers need to ensure that similar topics are covered in interviews where the data are to be used to make comparisons" (p.111). In this study, the data collected in the course of these interviews were organized into the eight categories outlined in the *aide memoire*. Based on the data analysis, tentative conclusions about artists' information seeking behaviors were made and a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was organized into eight topical sections, some of which corresponded to the issues outlined in the *aide memoire*, while others were induced directly from the interview data.

Ensuring confidentiality to protect interviewees from the possible risks of participating in a study is a concern for all studies involving human subjects, including studies incorporating unstructured interviews. 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 strong art program. While it's possible that someone could identify the participants from these demographic characteristics, it's unlikely. Cobbleddick masked the identity of the university, which makes the identification of the individual participants difficult and, to a certain degree, ensures the anonymity of the participants.

Cobbleddick did not provide details on many aspects of how she implemented unstructured interviews in this study. She did not report, in this article, where the interviews took place, how long the interviews lasted, or what method was used to record the interviews. She also did not mention how she probed issues of particular interest during the interview process, how she controlled the direction and pace of the interviews, or how she handled the emergent issues or discussions which were not expected in advance. This lack of detailed description of her interviewing procedures might be due to the fact that the focus of the article was on reporting the findings rather than elaborating on methodological concerns. However, we hope that other researchers will provide detailed information about how they implemented their research methods. Only through this practice can studies be repeated in the future by other researchers, as they continue the work or verify the findings.

Example 2: Information Seeking and Use by Journalists

Our second example (Attfield & Dowell, 2003) explored information seeking and use behaviors by journalists at a London-based national newspaper, *The Times*, by using unstructured interviews. It was part of a project aiming to specify system requirements and design implications for an integrated information retrieval and authoring system based on an understanding of journalistic information behaviors. The sample consisted of 25 journalists: 19 home news writers, four feature writers, one obituary writer, and one systems editor. Follow-up emails were used to collect additional data when necessary. To ensure confidentiality, the interviewees' identities were not revealed.

The purpose of this study was to provide a rich account of the information behaviors of journalists working at *The Times* – not only the journalists' observable behavior, but also the cognition behind their behaviors. In particular, Attfield and Dowell were interested in journalists' information activities such as their location, management, relocation, and use of information, in terms of the constraints imposed by their working context as well as the motivations behind the activities. Furthermore, they intended to probe why, when, and how each information activity would be undertaken within the working context of the journalist. They did not have a preconceived theoretical framework for this study; they did not propose categories of information activities beforehand; and they did not have pre-defined hypotheses to test. It was the researchers' intention to gain an understanding of the reality of the information activities of journalists and to build a model representing the information seeking and use behaviors involved in the journalistic research and writing process. The intensive and detailed data required by the research goals led to the selection of unstructured interviews as a data collection method.

Interviews were conducted at the journalists' workplace, and each lasted 20-40 minutes. Attfield and Dowell did not use a predefined question list, but did focus each interview on the research purpose: to understand journalists' work-related information seeking and use. A typical interview started with the researcher asking the journalist to describe his or her work assignment process – a very general request. Because it is logically the beginning of journalists' information seeking and because it focused on a very familiar part of the journalists' work routine, this request not only helped reveal contextual information about the journalists' information activities, but also presented the researchers to the interviewee as a learner, wanting to understand their work processes. Thus, this broad question served as a good starting point to engage the journalists in the conversation. As the interview progressed, the researcher could steer the discussion towards more specific issues related to the journalists' information seeking and use activities. By using this questioning strategy, the interview became a focused conversation. Unfortunately, more details about what kinds of questions the researchers used to pursue the issues in which they were particularly interested and how they controlled the direction of the conversation were not reported in the paper.

The authors captured the interviews by audio recording them,² and then transcribed them for analysis. Unstructured interviews often generate data with different patterns and structures from one session to another, which makes the data analysis very

² Attfield and Dowell (2003) did not explicitly describe their methods of data capture. Since they did say that they transcribed the interviews, we are assuming that they were originally audio recorded.

intensive and time-consuming. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, which is a data-driven emergent approach for building models from qualitative data (Strauss, 1987; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding (i.e., using codes induced from the data) was used to identify concepts about information-related activities that were of particular interest to the researchers. Then axial coding was used to identify relationships between the concepts, with the intention of contextualizing the identified phenomena.

When using unstructured interviews, one of the researcher's goals is to understand the language and cultural of the interviewees from the interviewees' perspectives. In the work processes of a journalist, some words have meanings different from their commonly understood (i.e., standard English) meanings. In this paper, Attfield and Dowell used those terms in the way that journalists use them, providing notes at the end of the paper to explain their meanings. In this way, Attfield and Dowell helped us to follow their own process of learning about the language and culture of these journalists.

In summary, this study identified the information activities of newspaper journalists. Attfield and Dowell generated a rich description of the journalists' motivations for these behaviors within the context of the requirements of journalistic work, which included the information products they created, the situation within which each was produced, and the resources that provided the means for production. This description was further developed into a model of the newspaper article research and writing process.

Conclusion

Unstructured interviews are most useful when you want to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon within a particular cultural context. In addition, they are most appropriate when you are working within an interpretive research paradigm, in which you would assume that reality is socially constructed by the participants in the setting of interest. Based on this underlying assumption, you will want to understand the phenomenon of interest from the individual perspectives of those who are involved with it. If these are your research goals, then it is useful to allow the interview/conversation to be mutually shaped by you and the interviewee. Imposing too much structure on the interview will inhibit the interviewee's responses and you are likely to come away with only an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Unstructured interviews are not useful when you already have a basic understanding of a phenomenon and want to pursue particular aspects of it. If your research goals are well-defined, then you can use other methods (e.g., semi-structured interviews or surveys) to collect the needed data more efficiently.

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