Qualitative interviews

University of Twente, 05.07.2010.

Workshop plan:

Locating the method in the battlefields of the qualitative methodology
Prerequisites for interviewing informants: research questions
The right tool for the job:
We can go wrong and other practical issues

- Researcher as in instrument of data collection

Locating the method in the battlefields of the qualitative methodology

advantage:
- high internal validity – you can get at the very meaning of the question, not like in survey – you have no control on informants" understanding of the question
- do not depend on prior knowledge of possible answers

disadvantage
- generalisation
- unknown external validity
- very low reliability
- questionable comparability
- number if interviews depends on money and time
- time consuming

- **whatever you can get from the interviews is a PERCEPTION – perception of facts**

Not good for establishing causal relationship
Good for finding causal mechanisms
Can (and often do) make studies purely descriptive

Differences between interviewing informants (I) and respondents (R)

Informants – the experts

Cilj istraživanja
- How do academics perceive the changes… (respondents) – konstrukti/osobna percepcija
- How do academics' changing conditions of work affect relationship between teaching and research? (informants)

Cilj intervjua
- R: kako oni konstruiraju/percpecija/osobna interpretacija

- I: intervju se koristi da bi se saznalo nešto o socijalnim konstrukcijama/novim situacijama

Uloga ispitanika:
- R: empirijski object
- I: ekpertiza/eksperti/prikupljanje podataka je naša zadaća/*"experts' interviews"* – they posses unique information about the social processes we are interesting in and we want to get that expert knowledge

Respondents:
- all statements are data
- bias is always a valuable information

Informants:
- statements can be irrelevant
- bias is distortion

R-I discussion
- R: how do people construct their working experience?
- I:
- **The difference is weather the perception itself is the target or is something we USE to go further and analyze the social construction – we are reconstructing facts from reconstructed interviews**
- **R:** more biographical, narrative, subjective

- **Primjer:**
- **R: intervjuirat ces 20 ljudi na sveučilištu da saznaš o njima;**
- **I: intervjuirat ćeš 20 ljudi na sveučilištuI da saznaš o sveučilištu☺**

Interviewing informants:

- open interview
- semi-structured interview

- the more structure we put in interview guide, the more control we have
- što su pitanja bolje pripremljena I što sam ja kao voditeljiva više pripremljena, lakše/uspješnije se detektiraju oni dijelovi koi su irelevantni I prelazi se na slijedeća pitanja – structure helps a lot with addressing diversity and unrelated topics
- we need a conceptual background_
    - what empirical info we need for answering our theoretical research question;
    - which info bust be obtained by interviews;
    - who must be interviewed – who has the background knowledge
    - list of variables and their definitions (it is challenging to operational sociological/constructs)

- hypotheses about the causal relationship or causal mechanisms (we don't test them in the same sense as in quantitative but you need assumptions of what is going on in your empirical domain to structure questions better)

Variables:

- variable is a very important concept for every empirical research – not exclusive for quantitative researches
- independent variables - we're interesting in effects but not causes
- dependent – interesting in causes not effects
- intervening -

- multidimensional, complex variables in qualitative vs. one-dimensional variables in quantitative

- you choose variables for a specific research question/purpose, **you don't assume outside this particular investigation**

- correlation – statistical concept (zanimljiv primjer: muži žena – žena donese info o korelaciji pušenja I raka pluća; on donese info o korelaciji pada vrijednosti proizvoda na burzi I neželjene trudnoće/djece/children of postmen…tako nekako☺

- statistically significant correlation is just a HINT – then I need to look very careful if there are links to assume the connection – is there any causal relationship? Are there causable factors I can rule out?

- **Causal relationship vs. causal mechanism**

  - causal relationship: A causes B
  – but we need to know HOW A causes B!
  - causal mechanisms as a "black box" – to je najvažnije - objasniti kako i zašto;

A	CAUSAL MECHANISMS	B

OPERATIONALISATION of interview guides

– operationalisation: a translation of theoretical research interest into questions that can be competently answered by interviewees

- conceptual framework has to be translated into interview guides
- theoretical research question – empirical research questions – interview guides – interview guide that is adopted to a specific interviewee

- **RULE No 1: can not jump from theoretical question to interview guides and question because you will lose a lot of info**

- česta greška - pitanja se postavljaju tako da se dobije OPINION POLL☺ (da/ne)
- start with the dependent variables

- **empirical research questions:**
  - not about the relationship between the concepts;
  - important for a large empirical data collection!
  - just a step in a translation process – NOT interview question!
  - balance the complexity of the questions and their number
  - important function – they are what you keep in mind when you go to interview – forget a theoretical question/follow the empirical ones – you can better respond during the interviews

- no general rule about the number of interviews – it has not to do much with the reliability but the completeness of information
- triangulate interviews' perspective!
  - How many people who have different perspective exist/I should address
  - To what extent do this perspectives overlap?
  - Enough interviews that will make confident on what you are researching☺
  - The whole idea of qualitative interviews is a FLEXIBILITY
  - **Less interviews but done carefully is much better then doing a certain number only because it has been written in a project proposal and/or prescript by somebody else!**
  - **Just interviews topics, try to avoid sending interview questions!**
  - **Don't rush interviews, carefully operationalise interview guide and produce interview questions!**

Communication rules (Haller, 2001)

1. the interviewee may refuse the answer
2. strict assignments of roles between interviewer and interviewee
3. the interviewer leads the dialogue

Types of questions (Glaser and Laudel, 2009 – Expert interviews…)

Expected response:

a) opinion
b) facts

- great field of a "grey area" between opinion and facts questions

Example: Interviewee – the head of department

1. Why do you think is there so much reorganisation of universities? (opinion, bias) – NOT GOOD! Double check!

2. What are advantages and disadvantages of the new budget allocation process for your department?
(opinion question;)

3. How has the new budget allocation process change the income of your department? / what was the impact / the consequences?
(facts; we might get this info from documents, for example, but if not, interview is a tool for this kind of data collection – have to appreciate the national context as well as different kind of situations/context of making interviews)

- avoid hypothetical questions/situations…if so…what would you do if…?
- Simulations are better to use! (Patton)
- Hypothetical situations – simulations of observation (for finding out informal rules and procedures / to get facts that are difficult to access…*If I want to enter your (academic) community what rules I would have to know to survive here? If I was your PhD student, what steps should I go through to get my PhD topic?)*
- Indirect provocations – recommended if you interview some elite; (some things you know from different documents/people/previous researches…*other rectors told me…I was told by…half of mine interviewees told me…*balancing social expectations)
- using info from the interview you got earlier from the same respondent and putting into context for the new one…*you mentioned before…but now it seems like…why is that…?*
- **Bridging the questions** – very important when have different topics – building bridges between topics

Rules for phrasing interview questions:

1. **Openness**
   - avoid dichotomous questions (yes/no answers)
2. **Neutrality**
   - avoid suggestive questions (*I know that some kinds told me…while others told me…what about you?* – for highly sensitive questions;*)*
3. **Clarity**

- use platform questions (a longer sentence before the question like an intro to the question)
- be careful on overloaded questions! (rather make it a sentence for platform – first sentence then the question)

4. **Simplicity**
   - avoid multiple questions

- questions must be clear, easy to understand and **use everyday language** (always double check the language – everyday vs. social science language)
- make use of platform questions
- phrase your questions as open questions
- the clarity of a question is more important than its openness
- if using other sources, ensure they stay anonymous! (like…*other interviewees told me*…avoiding names and functions!)

- opinion questions are only useful if the opinions are needed – if you can, avoid them!
- **Narration triggers=main questions** – more important then questions about the details (probing questions)
- Use provocations for special purposes – inherent risks – use them economically, use it once or twice (others told me…)!
- First question is very important for building trust – warming up question
- Last question – make the comfortable feeling for the end / give the interviewee opportunity to add something that has not been covered

Checking the interview guide
- why is the question included?
- What does the question aiming at, what is the spectrum of possible answers?
- Why is the question formulated this way?
- Why is the question placed here? (questioning the structure of interview guide; structure by different topics/past to present or other way around – different periods of time)

Exercise 1 – Analysis of an interview (transkrpit materijali)

1. determine the type of the question; us as many different classifications as possible
2. what mistakes did the interviewer make?
3. What effects did these errors have?

- sometimes during the interview you get a sense of a general question, and want to repair it at the moment…raising additional specific question for the clarity sake;
- you have to give an impression of a very serious work/prior research to the interview moment – state your homework and sources;
- check list at the beginning of the interview or a prior e-mail communication

Exercise 2 – Construction of interview questions from empirical research questions

Is the researcher involved in decision-making process on science policy or research funding? What is his or her status in science policy circles (average, leading expert?) How much and though which mechanisms is the researcher involved?

Interview questions differ on:
a) Known involvement
b) Unknown involvement

Selecting interviewees - main criteria:

- who has relevant info
- who is accessible (not necessarily means that)
- who is willing to give relevant info
- who is most able to give the info / has the most knowledge

Face to face or "remote" interviews

	Face 2 face	Phone	e-mail	internet
+	Nonverbal info Contextual info Control on interview situation Trust-building	Time and money saving	Time and money saving Maybe better acceptance rates because interviews can be sliced	Time and money saving
-	Expensive Time consuming	Only acoustic info	Probably shorter answers because they must be written down	

Interviewing in pair?

Advantages:

- 4 eyes and ears see and hear more
- one can check the tape recorder or write the protocol

Disadvantages:

- the communication situation changes radically (1:1 situation vs. 1:2)

- ukoliko se ispitanik odbije snimati, snimiti samog sebe odmah nakon intervjua, citati vlastite biljeske I podsjecati se…onda tek kasnije raditi na transkriptu svog snmljenog govora☺
- **savjet: max. 2 intervjua/dan**; sve iznad toga naginje kvantitativnoj filozofiji – npr. Nijedan fizicar nece napraviti 5 ekperimenata na dan, istom logikom, ne treba ocekivati da ce istrazivac raditi 5 intervjua na dan!

- Grab as much time from your interviewee as you can☺
- **Full transcripts NOT summaries!** – to avoid information loss and to avoid uncontrolled data analysis
- **Transcripts: Note laughter, pauses, not correct the grammar** (it is a lot of work that is not justified nor relevant, danger to change some of the context), **have to come up with your own rules but be consistent,**
- **International researches – great challenges**
    - qualitative data analysis
    - extract info from the interviews on English;
    - coding has to be in English and what follows has to be in English

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Ethical rules:

- Informed consent (participation is always voluntary!)

- inform participants about the purpose, the consequences, their role in our research, data usage

- No harm must come to the participants

Contacting the interviewees

- 1st snail mail letter / avoid e-mail (overload)
- then phone call to make an appointment

Rules for conducting interviews

- Listen actively
    - do not interrupt
    - allow breaks for thinking
- Ask flexible
- Clarify things that you didn't understand
- Ask about details
- Ask short and unambiguous probing questions
- Show competency
- Avoid evaluations

Twente, 06.07.2010.

Do we need to understand research content?

Pro:

- general social science methodology
- scientific content affects outcome of actions

Contra: (reading materials No 11)

- tacit adoption of interviewee's perspective
- danger of "going native" / loose the objective perspective but we are not the experts on their scientific content and we cannot properly understand the science and that's why simply refuse to "get into science"
- cannot be adequately done by social scientists – we are not the experts!

Have to find a way of dealing with the research content for the specific research purposes – we are not a field experts, have to be careful!

When do we need to understand the research of our interviewees?

Generalization: we need to understand the research content whenever…

- the content of research has an impact on dependent variables
- dependent variables include aspects of the research
- dependent variables are likely to vary between fields of research (e.i. if research practices contribute intervening variables)

How much of our interviewees' research do we need to understand?
Enough to fully ascertain the role of research content and variables deriving from it (such as epistemic cultures) in our explanations.

What do you mean by…? – very simple probing question into research content

Strategy of informed interviewing – going into to the science life of an interviewee:

- ask about research
- translate scientific descriptions into sociologically relevant variables
- avoid scientific arguments while interviewing
- find the level on which we can talk competently
- **ad-hoc pidgin** – pidgin:
    - reduced language that enables communication between people who don't know each other languages (Galions – pidgins in interdisciplinary research – reading material)
    - using general elements of researchers' life worlds because all researches:

        - solve problems derived from the existing knowledge by applying methods to different object
        - they use resources
        - utilize formal (published), informal communicable and tacit knowledge
        - collaborate
        - communicate by publishing, visiting each other or meeting at the conferences
- ad-hoc pidgin emerge in the interview
- implicit negotiation of the level of communication
- interviewee's ability to simplify and willingness to adopt is very important – some scientists simply refuse to talk about their work/research on the basic level (specially a problem in the field of mathematics)

examples of general terms:
- scarcity of resources
- reduce empirical basis
- means to conduct research

Acquisition of knowledge (of a specific science field):

a) about the science
- textbooks
- Wikipedia
- Other lay-level descriptions
- University brochures (for attracting students)
- **"EPISTEMIC CULTURES" / epistemic properties of field** – find some readings materials! (e.g. decomposability of the research problem varies across disciplines and it is very important to get acquainted with some fields particularities – e.g. natural scientist talk about their PhD students as grateful resource for the research while social ones usually make a construct of time allocation for somebody and something usually not important for the research they do) – large set of comparative observations are the best way to get in touch with these epistemic properties

Comment [Tv1]: Grit I jochan rade na listi epistemic properties of 6 fields – javiti bilo što ako budemo zapazili kao particularity u određenim poljima

c) about the research
- internet (about projects)
- publications
- research proposals
- reports
- posters
- lab visits

c) studying structural properties of the interviewee's publication (blibliometric research trail)

Sociologically treatable intervening variables used for explaining institutional effects on empirical production/research in various fields:

- diversity of research portfolios
- dependency on uninterrupted research time
- competitiveness
- resource dependency

university network access/web of science:
t4110360
leskyockac

Good/bad researcher as an interviewees

- do we want previous success or current potential?
- It is important to assess the researchers status of performing – collect the info on performance level prior to the interview:

1. Know Thy Interviewees:

- Publication lists (webs/web of science)
- Citations where appropriate
- Books reviews where appropriate
- Grants
- Editorships
- Awards

2. Use interview to collect further info on performance level, if possible – talk about the plans:
   - As above
   - New plans

- categorize informants according to information on performance (high-medium-low level)! – careful – this is not the valid quality assessment – list of info for comparisons! – **do it at the end!!! – it is a matter of analysis, not of a criteria for informants selection**
- Check how the info provided by the informants might be affected by this performance level
- Check how the analyst's judgment of quality-dependent info might be affected by the categorization you made
- Be very careful what you publish!!! (published info on performance may cause some harm to the respondents)
- When you find contradictory statement you have to look for "hidden variables" – e.g. did the interviewee have the bad day? Did something happened on the university/in private life what might influenced his/her attitudes that differ greatly from other interviewees

- You are allowed to interrupt politely – use breaks to interrupt and resuming questions

- Write a short report after the interview, especially if you work in a group (particularities/problems in arranging interviews; unusual aspects of

interview situations; promises made during the interview; any notes you made additional to the transcript)

- Avoiding "two styles of interviewing" – e.g. if there is need to handle respondents and informants – these parts should be somehow separated – no actual strategies, but have to be aware of the parallel session actually going on / one part may influence the other one

- Record keeping – apply the toughest rule from one country in the CPR (e.g. Germany – 5 years)