

ASKING QUESTIONS

Research interviews

I don't mind doing interviews. I don't mind answering thoughtful questions. But I'm not thrilled about answering questions like, 'If you were being mugged, and you had a lightsaber in one pocket and a whip in the other, which would you use?'

- Harrison Ford

Qualitative interviewing is a key technique or method for studying people. It might be seen as a way of collecting information that appears to be empirically simple. Yet in practice it can represent a sophisticated method and effective technique for understanding and assessing the thoughts, perceptions, opinions, feelings and rhetoric of a specific individual or group of people. The aim of qualitative interviews is not to end up with unequivocal and quantifiable meanings on a study's focus, but to describe (and later discuss) the meanings expressed by the interviewees – even when ambiguous or contradictory (Kvale 1999, Silverman 2013, Bertrand and Hughes 2005). Qualitative interviews don't count specific data but interpret meaning through words; in other words, not whether you would use a lightsaber or a whip, but how you *feel* about the question being asked!

This research technique is one of the most commonly used in social research (if not the most used) either as the main or secondary research technique. Interviews are usually used to explore perspectives on particular ideas, programmes, situations or topics in considerable depth. The number of people involved is usually smaller than for focus groups or surveys. Qualitative interviewing is not, in general, very useful for eliciting answers to straightforward questions from large numbers of people.



KEY IDEAS

There are four types of research interview:

- 1. Informal interviews:** these tend not to contain pre-organised questions and are not 'controlled' by the researcher. They are usually used to introduce the researcher to respondents where the main aim is to gain the confidence of the potential informant/interviewee. Sometimes this form of interview is used as a pilot method prior to using a more structured or detailed method.
- 2. Unstructured interviews:** these involve in-depth questioning but the questioner has scant control over the questions being asked or the direction the interview might take.
- 3. Semi-structured interviews:** these involve written lists of questions and/or topics, but allow for spontaneous Q & A and take an in-depth approach. Here the researcher is focused on the topic(s) and is trying to obtain information/data but exercises little control over responses of interviewee. Generally, this method is the most broadly used in qualitative studies. The interviewer should have a list of themes and of questions and should engage in follow-up questions depending on the dynamic of the conversation and what is expressed by the interviewee.
- 4. Structured interviews:** this involves scheduled questions for all respondents; they are generally shorter than those used for the semi-structured interview. Questions are pre-determined and all respondents/interviewees must answer the same set of questions.

Questionnaires tend to be considered structured interviewing by some; yet there is no consensus over this by scholars (many argue that because it is not a conversation, questionnaires and surveys – both of quantitative character – should not be considered interviews).



KEY READINGS

Bertrand, I. and Hughes, P. (2005). *Media research methods: Audiences, institutions, texts.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kvale, S. (1999). *Doing interviews.* London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research.* London: Sage.

ACTIVITIES

1. Can you think of a media-related topic and formulate five questions to be answered by others to address the key aspects of the topic?
2. Can you find an example of a good interview carried out in the studio of a television programme? Was it an open interview, a semi-structured one, or something else?
3. Which news stories can you find today that have used interview techniques? Which sources were used?