



Using Unstructured Interviews in Educational and Social Science Research: The Process, Opportunity and Difficulty

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Abstract

One of the methods deployed by constructivist paradigm is unstructured interviews method which allow for detailed professional conversation between a researcher and participant(s). This paper presents literature survey data on interview process, opportunity and difficulty of using the method in professional collection of information from human subjects. In this paper, the methodological opportunity is an inclusive connotation for strengths and advantages of using unstructured interviews which can benefit researchers using the method, and difficulty is a connotation for weaknesses and disadvantages of using the method, posing limitations researchers have to address. There are numerous strengths and advantages of using unstructured interviews method as the weaknesses and disadvantages posing challenges to researchers are. However, the methodological opportunity of using unstructured interviews method outweighs its difficulty.

Key words: Unstructured interviews, Process, Opportunity, Difficulty

1. Introduction

Constructivists use unstructured interviews method among others to unfold the realities from the inside world of human subjects. Unstructured interview process is explored in this literature survey and the opportunity for knowledge generation as well as challenges and weaknesses posing difficulty for choice of the method are well examined. The need for this literature research arose from critique imposed to the method by the positivists on its applicability. The findings bring in its credibility to applicability based on ontological realities by weighing through its process and opportunity and difficulty sides. Therefore, the paper presents literature review on unstructured interviews method, adopted review methodology, analysis of the interview process, and opportunity and difficulty of using the method, and the conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Comprehending interviews

An interview is a session set to generate data through conversation involving at least two people, one being an interviewer and other interviewee or interviewees (1). When the session is carried out under a trained lead analyst, the interview becomes a professional process (2). Being a professional process, it requires pre-determined framework for definite records of practices, standards, process achievement, and an address of challenges and reinforcement, as for references (3) and (6). Under such premises, there must be a reputable purpose or working assumptions and rationale for the interview process (2). Interviews may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. These types are connotations described for the convenience of the degree of flexibility allowable during interview process but in a real sense there is no a single interview which is truly unstructured, instead, designs vary from highly structured to highly unstructured, as for references (2) and (4). The superiority and hence the choice of the method from such levels relates to the research purpose, the questions to be answered and the research context (5).

2.2 Unstructured interviews process

2.2.1 The data generation process

Unstructured interview is sometimes referred to as in-depth interview due to the tendency of engaging with the units of analysis to the real generation of crucial information about the personal experiences and perspectives (1). The enquiry process in this engagement may be individual face-to-face, group or telephonic interviews (1). The analytical approach used to generate knowledge on particular social life aspects becomes a subject to changes, which is an important attribute linked to the functional utilization of unstructured interviews (2). Preparation for interview according to Castillo-Montoya requires preparing and refining protocol to ensure that: interview questions align with research question; enquiry based conversation will be well constructed; a feedback can be made on the protocol itself; and piloting the protocol (7). Accordingly, piloting is done to simulate the actual interviews in as real condition as possible and check the preciseness of the order of questions. In a real sense simulation of the rapport, conversation practices, consent, space, recording and timing estimates the possibility of using the research instrument, as Baker (1994) was cited in reference (7). Each question may be examined for clarity, simplicity, answerability and conformability to social rules that apply to ordinary conversations (8).

The interview process is navigated through three important stages (9). In the first stage, a position is sought to contextualize the interviewee's experience relevant to the topic at hand. This is proceeded by emphasizing on the concrete details of the interviewee's experience on the topic to foster experience reconstruction on how he or she is practically participating in that experience. The last stage requires the interviewee to reflect on the meaning of the experiences, especially, on how they make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences pertaining the research topic. Following up these three stages creates a possibility for the interview to shift from a relatively unstructured early phase to a more focused stage in which the interviewer integrate earlier materials to evolve critical meanings gained by the interviewee from experiences (9). It therefore becomes the process of constructing a reality to which both parties contribute (10). An interview guide is a recommended instrument for this data generation method, as it allows some flexibility during the process giving a room for the activity to navigate through a wider coverage of concepts (6,10). So far, the interviewer must be experienced to match with the crucial role of checking on "apparent contradictions, *non sequiturs*, imbalance, implausibility, exaggerations and inconsistencies" arising from interview sessions that are to be cleaned for standardization (10). He or she must act professionally, assert some authority but create friendly and trustworthy environment to foster execution of a successful interview flowing naturally and rich in details (11). To be successful, participants are to be lightly trained by the researcher prior to the interview process for coherence so as to give responses with clarity (2).

In its entirety, the interview process requires careful preparation, much patience and considerable practices necessary to draw up data from coverts of the participants by deploying their interests. Particularly, the interviewer asks appropriate questions and the participants give out explanations or opinions (2). To achieve this activity, the researcher has to "clarify questions, correct misunderstandings, offer prompts, probe responses and follow up on new ideas in a way that is just not possible with other methods" (9). The role of the researcher in this case is to interplay between the research process and the epistemological and philosophical bases underpinning researched matter (2). Again, the interviewer must be in capacity to create a rapport favoring more authentic elicitation of information. On a similar matter, Jong and Jung have insisted that the interviewer has to build rapport and catch the interviewee's interests (5). Strategically, the rapport is effectively created through handling apprehension and favoring exploration, cooperation and participation stages of introduction (4). Hannan and McKenzie caution on the same issue that there must be a pleasant chat before getting into specific concepts of the research (10). Accordingly, it is implied by rapport that the interviewer must demonstrate sufficient skills to rapidly develop positive relationship with the participant. Such skills are required to pay attention to where the session is being held, seating arrangement, and researcher's personality of display and the manner of approach to optimize equality between both parties. Through the process, the interviewer has to appropriately introduce himself

or herself and the topic of investigation, and run questioning from simple to complex order within a few minutes of between 30 and 60 or 90 under special circumstances (9,11). Under similar conditions, there should be a few questions between 5 and 10 (4) and the maximum number can be 15 (9). Importantly, the basic research question has to be sufficiently involving the participants of focus and the guide questions should be composed in a way different from the way research questions are written (4,7). Moreover, it is imperative that the researcher be involved in active listening to show the interviewee that much attention is being paid on the comments given in order to motivate the later to keep good pace on motion (4).

2.2.2 Theoretical, snowball and opportunity sampling techniques

One of the difficult tasks in interviews is to acquire the representative participants for the study. The hardship accrues from the fact that selected key informants must have knowledge to play a role in a setting, and willingness and ability to serve as translators, teachers, mentors and commentators for the research (5). The dilemma of participants' selection in unstructured interviews method can be resolved by adopting theoretical and snowball sampling techniques (2). However, in theoretical sampling the selection of participants must be done with care to increase diversity in order to get a wide range of perspectives (9). This can be effected by selecting representative participants from definite categories of participants' pools (9). The number of subjects studied is not an important factor for data quality but the information adding knowledge to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, the selection process continues until a theoretical saturation is reached when the researcher cannot uncover any new meanings in more interviews (9,12). So, the number of interviews depend on the nature of questions, participants and the amount of data needed (11). Logistically, interviewers can obtain participants using informal networks of existing prospective interviewees known to the researcher or key interviewee (10). In some instances, snowball sampling may be welcome into this by requesting respondents to supply the names of potential participants (10). Specifically, snowballing is used in areas where participants are acquired through personal contact and recommendation as the research project proceeds or the opportunity sample in those areas where access is offered (9,10). Alternatives include approaching a senior member in the organization or approaching participants directly (9).

2.2.3 Recording and analysis of unstructured interview data

Before the interview process, the researcher has to do a piloting session in order to refine the content, and determine feasibility and usefulness of the interview guide, as for Creswell (2009) cited in (11). For the purpose of determining the sampling range earlier and quality of questions, the researcher must begin data collection concurrently with data analysis (4). The researcher can then use assistants for interviews but has to do transcription himself or herself in order to understand what is being discussed (10). The usefulness of using assistants is vested in increased capacity to recruit more interviewees for participation and reduction of chances of researcher's biases prone to carriage to analytical process. There are several methods of recording interview session. The most powerful technique for data recording is audiotape or videotape recording (2) that can help the researcher maintain the interview in focus (6). However, to avoid difficulties in analysis, the tape-recording must be free from excessive background noise, have strong batteries and allow for proper storage and retrieval (4). Data analysis in unstructured interviews method can be comparative, content, and thematic and discourse analyses (4).

Firstly, in comparative analysis data from different categories of sources is compared and contrasted in continuous manner until the research is satisfied with issues arising. It is often used together with thematic analysis. Secondly, in thematic analysis theme scrutiny is done by ensuring that themes arise from data patterns independent of the researcher (9). It is highly inductive with data collection and analysis taking place simultaneously "enabling the process to move back and forward between transcripts, memos, notices and research iterative" (4). Accordingly, the iterative concurrent data collection and analysis processes eventually lead to a stage where no new categories of data is generated, the final stage. Thirdly, content analysis requires that data are coded by content when the collection phase is completed. It is useful in

interviews utilizing open-ended questions to elucidate appropriate responses (2,4). Lastly, discourse analysis forms a conversational analysis which interpret speech as a performance. It therefore comes to be the prime requirement that the researcher must invest much time to reflect on the comments made by the participants to perform high quality data analysis (5).

3. Literature Research Methodology

I surveyed scholarly articles, books and other sources relevant to the applicability of unstructured interviews method in educational and social science research, as well as related methodological difficulty. I followed steps suggested by Ramdhani, Ramdhani and Amin to review and use ideas made by other authors in a similar topic (13). The general purpose of the study was to evaluate the opportunity and difficulty of using unstructured interviews method in educational and social science research. So, the guiding questions were: How can unstructured interviews method be effectively used in educational and social science research? What is the methodological opportunity of using unstructured interviews method borne to its strengths and advantages? What is the methodological difficulty of using unstructured interviews method borne to its weaknesses and challenges? A scrutiny of the unstructured interview process, strengths and advantages offering opportunity for applicability of the method as well as difficulty accruing from related weaknesses and challenges was carefully done.

Navigation through literature and analysis were assisted by Zotero software and MAXQDA 2020 software with study themes appropriately coded for analyzed soft documents. The themes included 'unstructured interviews method', 'strengths of using unstructured interviews', 'advantages of using unstructured interviews', 'weaknesses of using unstructured interviews', and 'challenges of using unstructured interviews'. The documents for review were collected in a period of about seven days. About 50 documents were collected and screened against the criteria for validity, reliability and data quality. Only 22 documents were used in this study. Focused coding and analysis of documents took about seven days. Selection of the documents was restricted to publications relevant to this study, specifically, the scholarly articles and books published in English language on studied themes. Documents were obtained from online libraries and Google scholar and the University of Dar es Salaam Research Libraries. The documents used in this review were from reputable publishers. For the purpose of the study, strengths and advantages provided the opportunity for suitability of using unstructured interviews while weaknesses and challenges posed difficulty use of the method.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents opportunity and difficulty of using unstructured interviews method and relevant discussion.

4.1 Opportunity of deploying unstructured interviews method

For qualitative researchers using unstructured interviews method in the educational and social science research field have the advantages of utilizing the strengths related to this method as identified below:

Table 4.1 Summary of opportunity of deploying unstructured interviews

Strengths and advantages	Source surveyed
High return rate and data rich with new insights	6: (1),(2),(4),(7),(11)&(14)
Flexibility in data generation process	4: (1),(4),(11)&(16)
Minimize errors of misinterpretation and misrepresentation in data generation process	5: (1),(2),(4),(11)&(14)
Ideal for probing public sentiments underlying expressed opinion	3: (1),(11)&(17)
Participants can grasp on lived experiences	4: (1),(4),(6)&(16)
Justification of occurrence of a phenomenon	3: (2),(11)&(21)

From Table 4.1, it was found that the use of unstructured interviews method contain an array of strengths and advantages further elaborated in the next paragraphs, forming the opportunity for utilizing it in educational and social science research:

- a) The method results to research output rich in good amount of new data with high quality and new insights, as for references (4), (7) and (14). It is thus a more powerful method to elicit narrative data from people's views and opinion at first hand in greater depth(11). Though it might be having weaknesses, challenges and some ethical dilemmas, it remains the best tool for qualitative data collection (2). Particularly, researchers using the method benefit from high response rate than in other research methods (1). Indeed, the method is readily applicable for qualitative research projects involving small samples or in mixed-methods research.
- b) It allows the research process to be flexible so as to favour exploration of any concepts connected to the research topic and describing the knowledge generated (1,13). This flexibility is extended to modification of questions adding thematic issues arising with time as the interviewer learns about the problem settings (4) thereby giving a room for in-depth exploration of the case (1). As such, questions are well interpreted and improved in the research process. Wherefore, the participant's terrain of perceptions can be easily explored with all tangential areas of significance. It therefore gives researchers the all ability to generate data from the meaning of different events or issues underlined to the topic of study (16).
- c) The errors of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of concepts or themes that form consistently in highly structured instruments are minimized (1,4,14). This means the ordinary research processes are faced by interviewer's misperceptions of interviewee's comments and interviewees' misunderstanding of questions (11), situations which are well minimized in unstructured interviews than in any other research method. It therefore gives the researcher a chance of refining research questions at any time to suit the requirements to generate data on the same topic in particular contexts.
- d) The method is applicable for research involving complex and emotionally laden issues requiring probing public sentiments underlying expressed opinion (1). This applicability implies that the method assists researchers to acquire knowledge of how and why people behave or develop perceptions in certain ways (11). Essentially, the method aids to data fostering an understanding of the quality and nature of people's motives to behaviors and their perceptual experiences over a particular context. Therefore, it can improve researcher's understanding of values, beliefs and perceptions across groups of participants (17)
- e) It also allows the participants to grasp on their lived experiences to give appropriate comments (4,6,16). The established safe and comfortable environment for the participants allows sharing of personal experiences and attitudes regarding the research (4), which they mention (1). This strength allows interviewees to give out their own voices and express their own thoughts and feeling (11).
- f) Moreover, it justifies knowledge of the occurrence of a particular phenomenon (2). The ability to justify the occurrence of a case or an issue and why, how and when it happened or was felt as confessed by the subjects, makes the method the best of qualitative methods. Indeed, the method gives a "detailed account of human behavior and beliefs within the contexts they occur in" (11). Therefore, it is the best choice for exploring the constructs and dilemmas of ontological reality in natural settings (2).

4.2 Difficulty of deploying unstructured interviews method

The method has the following weaknesses and challenges, and thus posing disadvantages to researchers opting to use it:

Table 4.2 Difficulty in using unstructured interviews

Weaknesses and Challenges	Sources
Prone to potential subconscious biases	5: (1),(2),(11),(14)&(15)
Consume much time and financial resources	7: (1),(2),(5),(7),(11),(15) &(16)
Challenge of comparing data	2: (15)&(16)
Challenge of interviewing vulnerable populations	2: (18)&(19)
Challenge of managing the Hawthorne effect	2: (10)&(22)
Challenge of preventing the Placebo effect	3: (2),(14)&(22)
Challenge of avoiding the Halo effect	3: (1),(5)&(22)
Limitation of generalizability from small scale study	3: (11),(14)&(15)
Challenges of getting informed consent and keeping participants 100% anonymous	4: (4), (5)(11)&(19)

From Table 4.2, it was found that:

- a) The method is challenged by its nature of enquiry being susceptible to potential subconscious biases of the interviewer (11,14). In fact, such enquires are controlled conversations that may be twisted by the interests of the researcher (2). Borrowing an example from Boyce and Neale, if members of a particular department are interviewed to assess the workability of a particular programme, they may decide to prove that it works or responses may be subconsciously twisted by the researcher being the member of that department and the organization (15). This implies for demand of more experienced researchers to carefully put the objectivity of the study at the forefront during study rationalization, weighing thematic plausibility, eliciting information in the interview session and screening distractors during data analysis. It comes to the mind that at the interview session the interviewer is maximally faced by the challenge of managing the criticality of validity and reliability of the data generated (1).
- b) It also requires much investment of time and financial resources and this has received much attention and precaution as the biggest challenge to researchers opting for this method especially in research topics requiring big samples and travel to different geographical localities where researchers have to physically attend interview sessions (1,5,11). However, under the current development of computer applications, the alternative means such as Zoom, WeChat, Skype and Messenger video chats may be used to provide face-to-face online data generation with subjects, though its lethality on data elucidation from physical rapport needs more study, as for references (2,16). Other methods such as telephone interviews can also be used for similar purpose.
- c) The researchers may be challenged by the way data are to be compared (16). Accordingly, both data interpretation and analysis may be difficult and complex for the researcher especially “with elusive data on one side and stringent requirements for analysis on the other” (p. 105). It implies that testing of the repeatability of the findings using the same guide on the same case may show different patterns of two similar data sets in as much as the subjects are different. Moreover, it is even more challenging to compare data from this method with data generated from other methods on the same case. Merging such data with similar data from other quantitative tools require profound skills and experience of the researcher in the field.
- d) It is also challenged by the ways of generating data from vulnerable populations (18,19). Specifically, it is ethically and technically costing to involve special populations such as children, subjects with frail health or communicative handicaps and tiresome frail elders. Researcher’s

emotional and psychological stability is required at the floor that after complying with all legal and ethical provisions protecting such groups, he or she must be in a position to overcome frustration and desperation which may result from the interviews and endure the pace (18,20). Moreover, in certain circumstances interviewing people who are frightened, ill or incompetent to give informed consent themselves jeopardizes the research output as far as the matter of ethical standards are concerned. The way this matter is handled by the researcher may support or constrain the research process (19).

- e) The interview session is always prone to a risky of the situation described by Mugenda and Mugenda as the Hawthorne effect which intrude when the interviewee's awareness of being in the session may motivate him or her to perform better, resulting into exaggeration of information (22). Interview's contextual factors such as the researcher's identity or position, topic under research and cross-cutting themes in the topic may sway out interviewee's emotional and psychological domain and result to giving faulty socially constructed ideological philosophies in a seemingly more or less wrong way. Under this context, the comments given by the interviewee must be assessed as they may not reflect realities. The researcher must be experienced to manage such situation by putting the interviewee in focus of objective reasoning, and weigh responses against criteria for plausible opinions and distractors (10).
- f) This method is also susceptible to Placebo effect, a situation in which the interviewee's previously synonymous learned topic influence over the current interview session (22). It is very important for the interviewer to identify the relevance of the interviewee's exposition, emotion and reactions in regard to the topic in motion so as to ensure data are drawn from running session, as for references (2) and (14). Technically, experience can help the researcher spot and clean the discrepancies and contaminations from data lest they affect quality of findings.
- g) A situation described by Mugenda and Mugenda (22) as the Halo effect with contexts addressed by Hofsi, Hofsi and Mago (1), and Jong and Jung (5) may occur especially when the researcher's judgment is being influenced by preceding interview sessions or his initial impression of the participants. To overcome the situation, the interviewer needs to be attentive and careful to keep the data the product of the respective interviewee. Ideally, non-managed transfer of situations from one interview settings to another may limit authenticity of data generation by contradicting with the intent of unstructured interviews which is to let new insights evolve as the interviews are in continuation. It requires practical reasoning and critical thinking skills to absolutely publish what the interviewees intended to comment such that the novice researchers may end up generating invalid and unreliable findings.
- h) Also, it is challenged by its study's credible acceptance of generalizability, which emanates from a controversy on the applicability of the findings from small samples (11). As explained earlier, this method runs through a few interview sessions and ends only when the data is saturated and no more new insights into it emerging. Contextually, the method uses an intensive data gathering approach involving a series of interviews with a single participant (9) rendering the analyses of the case with extended amount of time such that the researcher is caused to apply generalization to the larger population in a very limited way (16). Generally, this matter is one of the outlier limitations of using this method in educational and social science research which challenges the philosophical thinking of researchers planning to use unstructured interviews *per se* in the field (11).
- i) Moreover, it is challenged by ways of obtaining informed consents from the participants and keeping the participants 100% anonymous (11,19) throughout research studies. Jong and Jung insist that the respondents' right not to answer some questions should not be ignored (5). In particular circumstances, respondents may not be ready to sign in an informed consent and may demonstrate objection to enquiries made especially those deemed to victimize them or their third parties. So far, participants tend to fear sharing information that may jeopardize their position in life system (4). This is particularly why they are to be kept anonymous in findings and this

anonymity should be a tradition in research involving human participants. However, there seems to be hardship to keep the participants totally anonymous in the information which must be published, so as to protect them from their seriously potential enemies. Practically, educational and social science researchers tend to mention attributes which identify respondents in one way or another. Indeed, the practice of separating respondents from their identities to keep them anonymous to the all extent required is a potential problem as participants are never isolated entities. It remains difficult to conceal respondents' identities in as much as the real research practice is run in social settings where participants are immersed in a research universe.

5. Conclusion

Carrying out unstructured interviews require high competence of the researcher. The tool poses strengths and advantages which make it the best option for first-hand data generation in educational and social science research practices. Albeit policy makers fall in love with positivistic data for measures of social parameters using human subjects, they cannot neglect positive concerns of this tool. Particularly, there is conceived difficulty to use the method that is related to the identified weaknesses and challenges which require experienced researcher to respond to and overcome during the research process. However, unstructured interviews method provide data with genuinely firm bases. Indeed, "it is reasonable to think that, while unstructured interviews are not particularly predictive, they will not *hurt* accuracy" (14) in as much as they generate truly context specific responses. This method remain a perfect way in qualitative research and even in quantitative studies (2). Specifically, interviewees' oral voices can be more meaningful to describe values, feelings and beliefs than meanings in descriptions generated by quantitative measures such as Likert scale and semantic differentials trying to set up best and worst options for respondents to evaluate and discriminate plausible cases from probable distractors through highly structured instruments. Positivist thinking gives a room for researchers to set options of best and worst case scenarios from deductive reasoning based on own subjective thinking and perception of the phenomenon. In reality, nothing can be truly learned in sufficiency from human subjects unless a subject's voice is given out. The social and practical implications rises from this perspectives which views human beings as passive objects waiting to be researched. A similar case manifest in positivist practices which quantify of humans trying to dehumanize by reducing them to numbers. However, complimenting unstructured interviews method with positivist paradigm can be justified.

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