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Semi-structured Interviews

Characteristics of Semi-structured interviews

- The interviewer and respondents engage in a formal interview.
- The interviewer develops and uses an 'interview guide.' This is a list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order.
- The interviewer follows the guide, but is able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate.

When to use semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing, according to Bernard (1988), is best used when you won't get more than one chance to interview someone and when you will be sending several interviewers out into the field to collect data.

The semi-structured interview guide provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data.

Semi-structured interviews are often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to allow the researchers to develop a keen understanding of the topic of interest necessary for developing relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions.

The inclusion of open-ended questions and training of interviewers to follow relevant topics that may stray from the interview guide does, however, still provide the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand.

Recording Semi-Structured interviews

Typically, the interviewer has a paper-based interview guide that he or she follows. Since semi-structured interviews often contain open-ended questions and discussions may diverge from the interview guide, it is generally best to tape-record interviews and later transcript these tapes for analysis.

While it is possible to try to jot notes to capture respondents' answers, it is difficult to focus on conducting an interview and jotting notes. This approach will result in poor notes and also detract for the development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Development of rapport and dialogue is essential in unstructured interviews.

If tape-recording an interview is out of the question, consider having a note-taker present during the interview.

Benefits

Many researchers like to use semi-structured interviews because questions can be prepared ahead of time. This allows the interviewer to be prepared and appear competent during the interview.

Semi-structured interviews also allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms.

Semi-structure interviews can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data.

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