Field Methods for Academic Research – Interviews, Focus Groups and Questionnaires

in Business and Management Studies

By

Dan Remenyi PhD

This extract consists of the contents pages, the preface and 10 pages from Chapter 1. The book can be purchased from:

http://www.academic-bookshop.com
# Contents

How to Use This Book ................................................................. ix  
Preface ......................................................................................... x  
Chapter 1 Effective Interviewing for Academic Research .......... 1  
  1.1. Introduction ...................................................................... 1  
  1.2. Planning of an interview .............................................. 4  
  1.3. Arriving for and starting the interview ....................... 7  
  1.4. How to capture the data .............................................. 8  
  1.5. The interview schedule .............................................. 9  
  1.6. The interview .......................................................... 12  
  1.7. The end of the interview .......................................... 14  
  1.8. Field notes .......................................................... 15  
  1.9. Photographs .......................................................... 16  
  1.10. Interview assistants ............................................... 16  
  1.11. The impromptu interview ....................................... 16  
  1.12. Unexpected challenges ........................................ 17  
  1.13. Advantage: semi-structured interviews ................... 18  
  1.14. The interview alone .............................................. 19  
  1.15. Interview success ................................................ 19  
  1.16. Telephone, video and internet interviewing ............ 20  
  1.17. Group interviewing ............................................... 21  
  1.18. Interviewing in a different language ....................... 22  
  1.19. Protection of informants and its limitation ............... 23  
  1.20. The transcript .................................................... 24
2.14. The facilitator or moderator ............................................. 57
2.15. Planning the focus group .................................................. 58
  2.15.1. What questions will be put to the focus group? ...... 58
  2.15.2. Where will the focus group meet? ......................... 59
  2.15.3. What sort of participants will be required? .......... 59
  2.15.4. Who will be invited to participate? ....................... 59
  2.15.5. The rules of the focus group meeting ............... 60
  2.15.6. Other invitation issues ............................................ 60
2.16. Inter-organisational and intra-organisational focus groups ............................................. 61
2.17. The focus group meeting .................................................. 62
  2.17.1. Welcoming and the opening and introductions ...... 62
  2.17.2. Explaining the procedures ...................................... 62
  2.17.3. The discussions .................................................... 62
  2.17.4. Paper exercises .................................................... 63
  2.17.5. Debriefing and the thanks and farewells .......... 63
  2.17.6. In an ideal word .................................................... 63
2.18. A field note to reflect on the focus group ...................... 63
2.19. Ethics committee .......................................................... 64
2.20. There are no right or wrong answers ......................... 65
2.21. Limited intervention of the facilitator ......................... 66
2.22. Virtual focus groups - telephone and online .............. 67
2.23. Impromptu focus groups .............................................. 67
2.24. Multiple focus groups ............................................... 68
2.25. Focus groups in different languages ......................... 68
2.26. The output/outcome from a focus group ....................... 69
Field Methods for Academic Research

3.9. The route to a competent questionnaire.......................... 96
3.10. Working through the questionnaire preparatory issues .. 97
3.11. Example of Questionnaire Preparation......................... 98
3.12. Building the questionnaire questions ......................... 100
3.13. Constructing the questionnaire ............................. 103
3.14. Pre-coded questions .............................................. 107
3.15. Continuing building the questionnaire ...................... 108
3.16. Moving to hypothesis testing ................................ 109
3.17. Other parts of the questionnaire ............................ 110
3.18. Personal details about the informant ....................... 111
3.19. Common vocabulary ........................................... 113
3.20. The nature of open questions ................................. 114
3.21. Screening questions ........................................... 114
3.22. Layout of the questionnaire .................................. 115
3.23. Incentives for responding ................................... 115
3.24. Field testing a questionnaire ............................... 116
3.25. Different languages ............................................. 116
3.26. Software for questionnaire development ................ 117
3.27. Generic issues with questionnaires ....................... 117
3.28. Specific questionnaire types ................................ 119
3.29. ServQual Questionnaires ...................................... 119
3.30. Delphi Study Questionnaires................................ 120
3.31. Software for data analysis ................................... 121
3.32. Digital data ..................................................... 121
3.33. Summary ......................................................... 122
Exhibit 3.1: Example of a Questionnaire Protocol........... 124
How to use this book

This book has been written to help researchers improve their technique with regards to interviewing, focus groups and questionnaires.

These techniques are addressed in three separate chapters and thus there is no suggestion that the reader should necessarily start reading this book from the beginning through to the end.

The three data or evidence collection techniques are addressed from the point of having decided to use them through to the point at which the data has been captured and is ready for analysis.

The forms and letters required to support the research activities described on this book are available on the Academic Publishing Website, http://www.academic-publishing.org.
Preface

Interviewing, focus groups and questionnaires are often recommended as appropriate methods of data collection for academic research in the business and management field of study. And sometimes this is correct. However research degree candidates are often expected to either know how to use these techniques or they are expected to pick up the knowledge and skills required as they proceed. This is probably due to the fact that every day we see someone being interviewed on television, we hear about focus groups in the news, and we are regularly required to complete questionnaires for all sort of issues.

But academic interviewing is quite different to what is regularly portrayed on television. Academic focus groups are often different to focus groups held for marketing and government surveys and the work required in designing, implementing and managing a questionnaire is really quite complex.

If these three field methods are not planned, implemented and managed correctly they will produce nothing of value and will result in much wasted time for the researcher.

This book looks closely at these three field methods and provides sound advice based on experience on how to work with these data gathering methods.

In addition this book supplies examples of research protocols, letters of introduction, letters of consent and some example questionnaires.
Chapter One
Effective interviewing for academic research

The art of conducting effective academic research interviews is not well understood and the practice of interviewing in the field is not always effective. Because nearly everyone has either experienced an interview or watched one on television it is often assumed that there is little to be learnt about an academic research interview. This is not correct. The researcher needs to create an interview protocol and use it as a guide during the interview. The researcher needs to project an empathic but formal image to the informant. A successful academic research interview can be a positive experience for both the researcher and the informant and produce insightful data which may be converted to an interview transcript which is suitable for academic analysis. The academic researcher always needs to be mindful that he or she is a guest of the informant and his or her organisation.

Key words and phrases: Academic research interview, interview protocol, knowledgeable informant, research transcript, academic interviewing, field-notes, active listening skills, researcher confidentiality

1.1. Introduction
In the context of academic research an interview is a formal technique whereby a researcher solicits verbal evidence or data from a knowledgeable informant. After the verbal evidence has been obtained the researcher will normally need to convert the record of the interview into a written transcript before analysis is performed, and the objective of the interview is to obtain insightful data for this purpose. An academic research interview is unlike any other type of interview such as an employment interview, an appraisal interview or a news broadcast interview. It is especially different to the celebrity interviews which are part of the current television culture. It is
sometimes incorrectly thought that interviewing is simple and in fact a natural process, as we constantly see interviews on the television or hear them on the radio (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). In reality competent academic interviewing is a skill which has to be learnt and improved by practice. The academic researcher will find it challenging to conduct successful interviews and therefore it is important to understand the issues involved and to carefully prepare for an interview (Silverman 1997).

There are several different types of interview and this chapter only addresses semi-structured face-to-face one-to-one interviewing.

Some academics regard an academic research interview as mostly an asymmetrical event where the objective of the researcher is to maximise the amount of data or evidence he/she can collect from the informant and thereby increase his/her likelihood of being able to answer the research question. In this view it needs to be remembered that the objective of the academic research interview is not to have an interesting dialogue with the informant but to collect evidence which will be produced in the form of an interview transcript that will be useful in answering the research question. Other academics are cognisant of the fact that the term interview is composed of the prefix “inter” and the noun “view”. With this in mind it is argued that the researcher and the informant co-create the responses to the questions and thus the data collected is not a simple list of facts. Kvale (1996) points out that there are two philosophical orientations which a researcher may take to interviewing. He refers to these as the miner and the traveller orientations. The miner orientation assumes that the informant is in possession of data or evidence which if it can be extracted by the researcher will lead to answering the research question. This is a distinctly positivist attitude towards research and data in particular. The traveller orientation does not make this assumption. As a traveller the researcher acquires data or evidence which may help directly answer the research question but is equally likely to provide more context and a
greater understanding of a wider range of matters of interest. This view which represents an interpretivist orientation is usually seen as providing a wide range of knowledge or understanding.

Before addressing the practical issues related to effective interviewing it is important to mention that the data collected from an interview will at best be the recollections of the informant who may or may not recall the situation being discussed accurately. Some researchers will point out that it is difficult to use the word accurate in this context and they will argue that all memory is subjective and highly influenced by selective perception and selective retention. With this in mind interpretivists will argue that the best which can be obtained from an interview is the recollection of impressions of past event. In addition to this the data is being heard by the researcher who may or may not hear the answers correctly. In addition both the informant and the researcher will have interpreted what has been seen, heard or experienced through their own system of biases. Thus although interviewing is an increasingly important data or evidence collection technique, the data so obtained has to be viewed with caution. It is argued that observation is a better form of data than interviewing, but it is not possible to observe past events or for that matter past or current intentions. Where possible observation should be used together with interviewing. Wittgenstein (2001) supported this view when he said:-

*If you want to know whether a man is religious don’t ask him, observe him.*

Interviews are always open to the challenge of informant and researcher bias as well as their competence in recalling, recording and understanding the events discussed in the interviews. High quality interviewing is a craft skill which cannot be learnt from books or lectures. Craft skills are only learnt by working alongside an accomplished practitioner. Yet in general universities and business schools do not attempt to create environments in which this skill can be
learnt. Researchers are expected to acquire the skills of interviewing through a process of learning by doing with actual informants. This of course leads to the problem that some interviews will not result in valid or reliable data.

Interviewing will not suit all researchers. To be a successful interviewer the researcher needs to be an outgoing and personable individual who can present him/herself in an empathic way. Introverted interviewers will have difficulty with this and would therefore probably be more comfortable using an alternative data collection technique.

1.2. Planning of an interview
Academic research interviews need to be planned if they are to be a success. Not only is it necessary to plan the content of the interview it is also important to plan the number and types of informants required for the study. It is not possible to establish numeric guidelines as to how many interviews should be conducted. Sometimes a small number will be adequate while on other occasions a larger number will be necessary. For an academic research degree it is usual to have a substantial number of informants. There is a theoretical answer to the question of how many interviews should be conducted, which is that interviewing should be continued until data saturation is reached. Data saturation may be defined as the point when additional interviews are not uncovering any new data or evidence. The challenge here is that it is quite subjective to state that no new data is being found and difficult to know how an objective benchmark could be used to justify the claim of data saturation.

With regards who is to be interviewed this chapter focuses on researchers who need to approach individuals and organisations with which they are not employed. Sometimes researchers are able to conduct interviews in-house where they work. In such a case access is often not so difficult and the arrangements to meet the informant may be a little less formal but the other issue discussed here will be relevant.
Effective Interviewing for Academic Research

It can be quite difficult to obtain access to the most appropriate individuals. An introductory letter from the university pointing out that the research is worthwhile can be a distinct help. But often researchers have to compromise and interview those who are prepared to give them time for the interview. The primary issue here is that the researcher should try to reach the most appropriate people and this may take a considerable amount of time and it may be necessary to use indirect routes or indirect approaches such as approaching the gatekeepers. A gatekeeper is an individual or an organisation which can help a researcher obtain access to the right organisations and the most appropriate individuals within them. Gatekeepers may be auditors, consultants, professional institutions, chambers of commerce etc. Within an organisation personal assistants (PA) are often gatekeepers who have been known to jealously guard the time of their bosses and they have been known to simply refuse to pass on requests for interviews. Sometimes the only way of getting around the over protective PA is to accept an interview with another member of the organisation and then, when on the premises, try again to make contact with the intended individual.

The detailed plan for an interview or a series of interviews is referred to as an interview protocol. Exhibit 1.1 at the end of the chapter shows an example of an interview protocol.

In order to be granted an interview the researcher will normally have approached the individual or informant some time in advance. A gatekeeper may have been involved in introducing the researcher to the organisation and to the informant to be interviewed. If a gatekeeper is involved then the researcher should make independent contact, preferably by voice, with the informant before turning up for the interview. Sometimes an informant may ask for a letter from the researcher on a letterhead from the University setting out what is being requested and occasionally a letter from the researcher’s supervisor or Head of Department will also be required. An example of such a letter is shown in Exhibit 1.2 at the end of the
chapter. Research interviews normally take place on the premises of the informant and this will usually be in his or her office or workstation. Sometimes an informant will suggest that the interview be conducted in a meeting room or even in a refectory or canteen. The researcher may not have any influence over where the interview will take place. It is important to be on time for the interview and researchers will often plan to be at the reception of the organisation some 15 to 30 minutes before the appointed time in order not to be late due to travel delays. If the researcher is early then a period sitting in the reception of the organisation can provide an opportunity for useful observations of the organisation and the people who pass through the reception. Interesting observations made during a waiting period such as this should be recorded and these are referred to as field notes.

What constitutes an interesting observation will differ from situation to situation. Such observations may include noting the parking arrangements, the security procedures in place to handle visitors to the premises of the organisation, dress code, the quality of the reception area and the friendliness of the reception staff. It may also be worth recording if the informant was available on time or whether it was necessary to wait for the informant to be available. Whether refreshments are offered while waiting might be another issue worthy of note. These minor points may support the researcher in understanding the attitudes which will be obtained from the interview/s. In advance of the visit to the organisation the researcher should have undertaken some research about the nature of the organisation, the types of products and services which it has to offer and acquired some knowledge of the organisation’s client base. The more informed the researcher is about the organisation the more likely he or she will obtain more comprehensive information during the interview. If it is a public sector organisation, it is useful if the researcher can obtain information about its stated objectives and its strategy and how these fit into government policy. For both private and public organisations it is helpful if the re-
searcher can obtain information on the dress code and thus dress appropriately. If dress code information is not available then it is better to be slightly more formally dressed rather than being too informal. Part of the interview protocol will address what has to be done during the interview including a script of the main issues to be addressed on arrival and before the researcher leaves the informant.

1.3. Arriving for and starting the interview
On arriving in the office of the informant, it is important to establish a warm but formal rapport by perhaps shaking hands and thanking him or her for giving you their time for the interview. This gratitude should be genuine and sincere. It is important that you explain the purpose of the visit and that you reiterate the topic of your research and also the specific research question. It is then essential to enquire if the informant is still prepared to proceed with the interview. It is useful to specify how long you think the interview will last. One hour is a satisfactory period of time in which a considerable amount of data can be collected and the duration will not be too tiring for either the researcher or the informant. It is also important that the informant has the knowledge to answer the type of questions which will be asked of him/her. If the person turns out not to be a knowledgeable informant then point out that a misunderstanding has occurred and see if he/she can point you to an appropriate person. Assuming that he/she is knowledgeable and agreeable and the time period is satisfactory, the next step is to complete the requirements of the university’s ethics committee. This involves handing the informant a Research Participants Information Document which spells out what the research is about and how the evidence/data will be used. An example of a Research Participants Information Document is supplied in Exhibit 1.3. Allow five minutes for this document to be read and answer any questions which are raised. Then offer the informant a copy of a Letter of Consent to sign. Make it especially clear that anything said will be held in total confidence by the researcher. An example of such a document is provided in Exhibit 1.4.
With regards seating during the interview, if possible try to avoid sitting directly opposite the informant, across a desk, but rather be seated at adjacent sides of a board room table. If there is the opportunity to sit in some comfortable chairs this can be advantageous. But in practice the researcher often has no option other than to accept the seating arrangement offered by the informant.

Ensure that the researcher’s mobile telephone is switched off.

1.4. **How to capture the data**
The objective of the interview is to acquire data or evidence which will be used to help answer the research question. As this data will be verbal the researcher needs to capture it as quickly as possible. Interview notes are always essential (unless one has a remarkable memory) and these will normally be scribbled as the informant is speaking. However when taking down such notes, even if the researcher is skilled in shorthand techniques, it is difficult and will often lead to incompleteness. There is also the problem with scribbled notes that sometimes the researcher won’t be able to read his or her handwriting later. It is therefore helpful if the researcher is able to record the interview on a non-intrusive device. This is clearly a significant advantage to the researcher as having such a recording will greatly facilitate the subsequent creation of a transcript of the interview. The researcher needs to have had the ethics committee specific approval for this and also the informant has to have agreed to the recording. Obtaining such permission from either the ethics committee or the informant can be a problem because of the need for confidentiality. The textual transcript of an interview can be easily anonymised whereas a voice recording cannot be. Permission to record will not always be given by either the ethics committee or the informant.

When recording an interview, the informant may ask to have the recorder switched off while discussing a sensitive question or issue. Such a request should be complied with. If a recording device is used then voice levels should be tested before the interview com-
Effective Interviewing for Academic Research

It is useful to make it clear to the informant that their voice recording will only be held until the research has been completed.

Some researchers have taken an assistant with them to interviews where the assistant has been responsible for the recording of the interview leaving the researcher to focus on the discourse with the informant.

1.5. The interview schedule
To an important extent the effectiveness of the interview depends on the questions, listed in the interview schedule, which the researcher will put to the informant. Thus the directness of the questions, the exact wording and the order in which they are put, are all critical issues. In addition the questions asked need to be focused on the research question and its sub-questions. This alignment between the research question and the interview schedule is of considerable importance and thus time needs to be spent by the researcher reflecting on what questions to ask and how these questions may be put to the informant. Leading questions should be avoided and the researcher needs to be careful of the tone with which the questions are asked. Direct questions can be problematic and sometimes an indirect question can produce much better results. An example of this could be, if the researcher asks the informant; “Are you involved in the strategic policy formulation process?” and the informant is not, this could lead to the informant feeling that he or she is somehow not as senior in the organisation as they should be. This could generate some embarrassment and discomfort between the informant and the researcher. If the question is asked, “Could you please tell which members of staff are involved in the strategic policy formulation process?” then if the informant is a member he or she will say so, but there can be no suggestion that the researcher thought that the informant should have been in this type of position and thus no embarrassment. The researcher has to ensure that he or she does not appear to the informant to be directly or indirectly judgemental (Silverman 2000).
With regards to the wording of questions, it is critical that the researcher and the informant share a common vocabulary or professional language\(^1\). If the researcher asks a question and the informant does not understand the words used then the outcome of the interview will be of little or no use. Sometimes it is suggested that the researcher should provide a glossary of terms for the informant. It is also suggested that the researcher could prepare diagrams which could be used to explain the processes about which the researcher wants to enquire. Glossaries and diagrams can be helpful in some circumstances but such props are indicative of possible misunderstanding between the researcher and the informant and if they are used then the researcher will need to exercise considerable caution when analysing the resultant transcript.

On commencing the interview the researcher should have in his or her possession an interview schedule. An example of an interview schedule used by a student is shown in Exhibit 1.5. This document has two parts. The first part of this document referred to as descriptive questions is used to record some basic information about the organisation and the place of the informant in it. These descriptive questions should be kept to a minimum and any question which the informant might consider, under normal circumstances, as personal should be avoided. Thus do not ask for a person’s age or income or race unless such issues are central to the research.

The second part of the interview schedule contains the detailed individual questions which are intended to facilitate the answering of the main research question i.e. a list of the issues about which the researcher wishes to obtain data. Once again parsimony is required and it is important that this list should not be a lengthy one of “wouldn’t it be nice to know” type questions.

\(^1\) Sometimes the informant and the researcher will have slightly different definitions of a concept and when this occurs the differences should be highlighted and reconciled if possible (Silverman 2001).