

Writeup of Kvale (1996)

Kvale, S. (1996). The interview as a conversation. In *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing* (pp. 19-37). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

In this chapter, Kvale (1996) discussed interviews as various forms of conversation. First, he distinguished three kinds of conversation: “everyday interactions ... professional interchange[s], and ... philosophical dialogue[s]” (p. 19); the “ideal description of a conversation” (p. 21) in his mind was as “a process of two people understanding each other” (Gadamer, 1975, as cited in Kvale, 1996, p. 20), based on Plato’s philosophical dialogues. He then presented examples of a philosophical dialogue, a therapeutic interview, and a research interview to illustrate the similarities and differences amongst different conversation and interview types. Philosophical dialogues are “harsh” and gain knowledge through “argumentation” (p. 23); qualitative research interviews have less tension and rarely contain arguments about “the logic and truth of ... statements” (p. 24). A therapeutic interview—e.g. a psychiatrist’s session with a patient—features the interviewer reflecting so as to emphasize the “emotional aspects” of the conversation, rather than arguing, asking for clarification, or offering interpretation (p. 26). Research interviews are intended “to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own perspectives,” are “semistructured,” and focus on particular themes (p. 27). Kvale then presented a list of 12 “aspects of the mode of understanding in the qualitative research interview” (p. 29). From these, such an interview (a) should obtain “uninterpreted ... [and] nuanced descriptions that depict the qualitative diversity ... of a phenomenon” (p. 32); (b) requires “deliberate naïveté and [an] absence of presuppositions” on the part of the interviewer (p. 33); and (c) can be affected by the training, background, and “sensitivity” of the interviewer to particular topics (p. 35). Kvale concluded that interviews as conversations are a particular “form of conversational technique” (p. 36); are “a basic mode of knowing” and of obtaining knowledge (p. 37); and help us understand “human reality ... as persons in conversation” (p. 37).

Analysis

Kvale’s approach to qualitative interviewing, philosophically and epistemologically, shows a clear focus in a conversational, social constructivist viewpoint of the world (shared also by Suchman & Jordan, 1990). By placing interviews in the frame of philosophical dialogues, therapeutic interviews, and research interviews, he is able to identify where qualitative

interviews draw from the first two approaches and where they differ, at least in conception as conversations. While a researcher biased against social constructivism or interviews-as-conversations might take issue with Kvale's approach and the 12 aspects he derives, to an open-minded student or researcher his approach should make much sense; just as it takes two to argue (philosophically or not) and one cannot easily psychoanalyze oneself, it takes an interviewee and an interviewer interacting—having a conversation—for a qualitative research interview to take place and generate useful data for analysis. Kvale also stated his points clearly and persuasively, with a heavy dose of epistemological argument. It is in this latter role that I feel his chapter best succeeds and can be best recommended to current and future qualitative researchers: as useful material on a common epistemology taken when conducting a qualitative interview-based study and thus as broad-brush recommendations for how interviewees should think about, plan, and carry out such interviews.

Keywords: interviews, conversation, interactions, philosophical dialogue, therapeutic interview, professional interview, research interview, themes, semistructured, life world, understanding, prompting, description, epistemology, social constructivism

Writeup of Meho (2006)

Meho, L. I. (2006). E-mail interviewing in qualitative research: A methodological discussion. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57(10), 1284-1295. doi:10.1002/asi.20416

Summary

Meho (2006) provided a useful overview of e-mail interviews, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they can be conducted effectively. He started by noting the method of “online asynchronous interviewing [had] never been reviewed” separately, only in conjunction with other “online research methods” (p. 1284); it also had not been used much by library and information science (LIS) researchers. He briefly reviewed studies “test[ing] the suitability of e-mail for qualitative interviewing” as well as simply using it as a method (p. 1285) before discussing the “benefits and challenges” of e-mail interviews based on the literature (p. 1285; also see Table 2, p. 1292). He found e-mail interviews

- are usually cheaper and more efficient;
- allow populations who are difficult to interview with other methods to be contacted;
- reduce the chance of conflict sometimes caused by synchronous interaction; and
- have similar if not higher data quality compared to face-to-face interviews.

Challenges and weaknesses that Meho found included that

- the response time and number of e-mails may greatly differ between participants;
- participation will naturally be limited to users of e-mail;
- overall response rates are typically low;
- new ethical issues have to be addressed;
- “visual or nonverbal cues are missed” (p. 1289);
- participants’ writing may not be as clear as their speaking;
- probing is more difficult, depending on the length and number of e-mails; and
- questions may need clarification for some participants (although this happens with other interview techniques as well).

Meho’s recommendations for effective e-mail interviews (pp. 1291-1293) included (but were not limited to)

- soliciting participation “individually if possible” (p. 1291);

- fully disclosing both the researcher's identity and the purpose of the study;
- providing "nontraditional incentives" (p. 1292);
- ensuring both questions and the instructions for completing them are clear;
- sending of one or two reminders (but no more) that include all previous materials;
- ensuring timeliness with follow-up questions; and
- being particularly aware of misunderstandings and credibility issues that may affect data quality.

Meho concluded e-mail interviews have "a number of challenges" but that it is possible to overcome most of these; e-mail interviews provide "a viable alternative" to other interview methods (p. 1293).

Analysis

Meho's article is definitely very useful for anyone planning or wanting to conduct interviews via e-mail, and is a nice companion to Suchman and Jordan's (1990) treatment of face-to-face interviews. His review of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach is probably the strongest part of the article; researchers can take each of the areas he discusses and explore their options further for a particular study they are conducting. The recommendations near the end are also relatively useful; while most are common sense they provide actual advice based on the advantages and disadvantages reviewed earlier in the article. One area I felt could have been discussed further was that of combining different interview methods; in many cases it may be possible and even advantageous to interview some participants via synchronous methods (be they face-to-face, via telephone, or online), while others are only accessible via asynchronous e-mail. Unfortunately, Meho only stated that "a mixed mode interviewing strategy should always be considered when possible" (p. 1293) and did not address the issues that may occur when mixing interview methods. Despite this flaw, the article is still well-written and provides an excellent overview of e-mail interviews. I would certainly recommend it as a good starting point to anyone interested in using this method as part of a qualitative or mixed-method research study.

Keywords: interviews, e-mail interviews, strengths, benefits, weaknesses, challenges, asynchronous, online, virtual, recommendations, interview process, cost, time, recruitment, participation, media, data quality

Writeup of Suchman and Jordan (1990)

Suchman, L., & Jordan, B. (1990). Interactional troubles in face-to-face survey interviews. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 85(409), 232-241.

Summary

Suchman and Jordan's (1990) article discussed the differences between survey interviews and conversations, recommending changes to the process of the former "to explore a more collaborative, interactional approach" (p. 233). They argued that the survey interview was most often seen as an "instrument" and thus "many of the interactional resources of ordinary conversation are disallowed" or suppressed (p. 232). Because instruments for survey interviews are often constructed by an external researcher, not by the interviewer themselves, there is a tension between the "local control" assumed "in ordinary conversation" and the external control of the instrument (p. 233). Suchman and Jordan provided numerous excerpts from interviews to illustrate the differences and the issues they caused, most related to this tension. In traditional survey interviews, interviewers are not supposed to (a) shorten questions to remove unnecessary clauses in context; (b) make inferences to avoid asking inappropriate or unnecessary questions; (c) record any opinions or answers not asked for by the instrument, which are therefore lost; and (d) clarify the meaning of interview questions, as would typically occur in a normal conversation. Instead, they are supposed to hold rigid to the "externally imposed, often repetitious script," resulting in interactions often becoming "predictable" (p. 235). This often forces interviewees into providing answers without elaboration or with elaboration that contradicts previous answers or is unrelated to the question(s) asked. Often, the "different views of the world" held by the interviewer, interviewee, and instrument creator are not accounted for, since qualitative data on these views cannot be included to improve validity (p. 237). Validity also takes a hit from misunderstandings between interviewees and interviewers, which are often difficult for the latter to be aware of and repair during the interview itself; the answer recorded for a question may be different than what would emerge from a qualitative reading of the conversation. Suchman and Jordan argued that meaning in interviews should be seen as collaboratively constructed and the interview itself as "fundamentally an interactional event" (p. 241). To improve validity, they specifically recommend making questionnaires "at least visually available to both" interviewers and interviewees and allowing interviewers to clarify, elaborate, infer, and otherwise engage the interviewee in a conversation about the questions (p. 240).

Analysis

Suchman and Jordan's article focuses on what they term *survey interviews*, which differ substantially from the qualitative research interviews discussed by Kvale (1996) and Meho (2006). Rather than gathering substantial qualitative data, based around a conversational interaction between the interviewer and interviewee on the phenomena or situation under study, survey interviews traditionally gather mostly quantitative data from interviewees. Suchman and Jordan point out many of the problems with such an approach, with their stated intention being to improve the validity of studies using survey interviews. However, their article also implicitly makes the argument for qualitative interviews having even higher validity and generally being an even more useful method for conducting research into complex problems and issues. As noted by Kvale and clearly echoed by Suchman and Jordan, such interviews are more conversational and allow the interviewer to shorten, alter, remove, or add questions as necessary during the interview, as a reaction to the interviewee's responses. The collection and subsequent coding of these responses as qualitative data, rather than the forced division of responses into predetermined quantitative categories, would provide a more complete picture of a research problem than a rigid survey interview could ever offer. The latter still has a place when quantitative summary data about an issue is all that is necessary, and certainly the validity of this data would improve if Suchman and Jordan's recommendations were put into place. However, I feel their article shows interviews are best conceived as conversation, that meaning and understanding is socially constructed in context, and that qualitative interviews can provide richer data than quantitative interviews. To that end, I would certainly recommend it to other students and researchers, especially those who come from a quantitative background and are interested in learning more about and conducting qualitative research interviews.

Keywords: survey interviews, interviews, conversations, social constructionism, collaborative, quantitative vs. qualitative, meaning, understanding, validity, interaction, clarification, elaboration, engagement

Writeup of Lincoln and Guba (1985)

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Implementing the naturalistic inquiry. In *Naturalistic inquiry* (pp. 250-288). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Summary

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) chapter did not focus on interviews, but rather on the entire process of actually carrying out qualitative research of all kinds (including interviews). After stating some common presumptions of such research, they noted four elements that required attention early and often:

- “making initial contact and gaining entrée” (p. 252),
- “negotiating [informed] consent” (p. 253),
- “building and maintaining trust” throughout a project (p. 256), and
- “identifying and using informants” carefully (p. 258).

Next, they discussed what they referred to as “unfolding the design,” the process of following a broad yet unpredictable and ever-changing design plan (p. 259). This process includes

- changes in the “focus for the inquiry” (p. 259);
- changes in the “fit” between epistemology and focus (p. 260) and between epistemology and theory (p. 261);
- the process of data collection and site selection (they provided an extended example of this, pp. 261-265);
- “determining successive phases”—often overlapping and iterative—of the research process (p. 265);
- the actual use of “human instrumentation” (p. 266) and collection and analysis of data (p. 267);
- “planning the logistics” (p. 267); and
- “planning for [and building] trustworthiness” (p. 267).

Lincoln and Guba encouraged researchers to be flexible and prepared for changes throughout the process. Their next section was on data collection techniques and sources. They discussed the varying degrees in interviews of structure, overtness, and “quality of ... relationship between interviewer and respondent” (p. 268), stating that naturalistic interviews typically err towards being unstructured, fully overt, and having a peer relationship. They also discussed the process

of interviewing (pp. 270-271), issues of notetaking and recording interviews (pp. 271-273), and the similarities in approach between observations and interviews. Next, they discussed records and documents, arguing that collection of such records and other documents had “often been ignored” (p. 276) but would be particularly useful for naturalistic research. They continued with a discussion of “building trustworthiness” and validity (p. 281) through field journals, safeguards, on-site interactions, triangulation, additional materials, debriefing, and audit trails, and concluded with a discussion of “implementation problems” (p. 284) including conflicts between epistemology and funding, problems caused by “emergent” design (p. 285), and issues that may occur in the field.

Analysis

As noted at the beginning of the summary above, Lincoln and Guba’s chapter was not solely or even primarily about interviews, despite it being assigned by Fidel as a reading for a week on “in-depth interview[s]” and “qualitative analysis and interpretation” in her qualitative methods syllabus (<http://courses.washington.edu/insc572/schedule.shtml>). They did cover interviews at some length, showing a bias towards unstructured interviews where interviewer and interviewee can be seen as peers; other kinds of interviews appear, in their view, to be mostly “for triangulation or member-checking purposes” near the end of a study (p. 269). One of their steps in particular that I think at least some other qualitative researchers might question was for interviewers to “summarize and ‘play back’ for the respondent what he or she believes has been said” at the end of the interview (p. 271). I would see this as requiring premature analysis, based on a few minutes of reflection at most, on the part of the interviewer; in some cases it might also give away too much about the study to the interviewee. Lincoln and Guba also showed bias against tape-recording interviews, a common occurrence in qualitative interviewing accepted by many researchers. Despite these potentially problematic biases, I feel Lincoln and Guba’s chapter could be useful as a general overview of the qualitative research process—better placed as an introductory reading (alongside e.g. Mason, 1996) or with those on general data collection and analysis (e.g. Bauer & Aarts, 2000)—as long as readers were aware that it presents the view of just two qualitative researchers, not necessarily one accepted by all such researchers.

Keywords: implementation, research process, presumptions, initial contact, informed consent, trust, informants, epistemology, data collection, sampling, trustworthiness, flexibility, interviews, observation, note-taking, recording, implementation problems