Reflections on a Qualitative Interview

Carl Abelardo T. Antonio

Author's email address: carl-abelardo.antonio@connect.polyu.hk

Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Department of Health Policy and Administration, College of Public Health, University of the Philippines Manila

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Abstract

Interviewing is one of the more commonly deployed data collection method in qualitative research. Textbooks and journal articles abound that describe the process for conducting various types of interviews. In this paper, I offer a short methodological and reflexive discussion of an interview I conducted as part of a course requirement, focusing on the potential impact of the interview process on the collection and interpretation of data. The purpose of this paper is to draw researchers' attention to some issues that may arise in the context of a qualitative interview, and to propose possible approaches to addressing these.

Introduction

One aspect of my doctoral thesis topic being considered at the moment is an evaluation of a national policy, with the end in view of providing government with concrete recommendations on ways to improve both the policy content and its subsequent implementation at various administrative levels. My initial literature review, however, has provided me with very scant information on policy and the government body that it created (will be referred to as "GB" throughout the document). In fact, the only official source available online is the policy document itself (an executive order), while other sources are news articles or press releases concerning the formation of this organization.

With guidance from my teacher in qualitative research, I designed a mini-research to help me establish the viability of my thesis topic. The overall aim of the project was to gather additional information regarding GB, specifically focusing on its functions and the challenges it has faced over the past year since its inception.

Brief description of primary data

I conducted a semi-structured interview with one member of GB who was personally known to me (I will refer to as "FH" in this paper). I emailed my informant inviting her for an interview on 08 November 2018 (as soon as my methods teacher and I agreed on this approach) and explaining the purpose and intent of the activity. While she immediately agreed and consented to the interview, it took some time before we were finally able to conduct the interview proper (26 November 2018) because of her office schedule. The initial plan was to conduct the interview through Skype, but we later decided to do a telephone interview instead, after considering the speed of internet connection in the Philippines, our prior experiences in using videoconferencing software in the local setting, and the potential technical difficulty it might pose in our interaction. There were no fixed questions for the interview. Instead, I prepared a guide listing the topics that I wanted to cover during my dialogue with my informant, specifically: (a) basic information on GB; (b) contribution and role of FH's unit to GB; (c) distinction between GB and similar organizations; and (d) perceived challenges of being faced by GB.

During the interview itself, which commenced at 9:55 am of 26 November 2018, I began by thanking FH again for agreeing to the interview. I explained to her once more the purpose of the mini-research, and sought her consent to record our conversation.

Prior to the start of the recording, FH inquired from me is she is required to speak in English throughout the interview. I assured her that she can speak comfortably, and that I can analyze the data even if she speaks in the local language. As such, we conducted the interview primarily in English (I would say 95% of the time), although we used Filipino in some instances.

The recorded segment of the interview lasted for 32 minutes (the unrecorded segment consisting of preliminaries

Phil J Health Res Dev April-June 2019 Vol.23 No.2, 54-58

lasted for around three minutes), roughly divided into the following parts:

Table 1. *Description of the interview segments/components*

Recorded segment	Description of discussion point/s
00:00 to 00:35	Introduction
00:36 to 12:31	Information on GB and its relationship with FH's unit
12:32 to 17:34	Apparent overlap between roles of GB and other agencies
17:35 to 25:06	Challenges faced by GB
25:07 to 31:25	Future direction and potential solutions to challenges
31:26 to 32:22	Conclusion

Immediately after the interview, I wrote down field notes on what happened, or what I thought took place, as well as my initial impressions of our conversation. Transcription of the audio-recording segment for analysis took place between 26 and 29 November 2018, during which time I listened to the recording for around four times to ensure accuracy of text I typed down. I then proceeded to read the transcript (sans audio) to familiarize myself with its contents before proceeding with the analysis. For purposes of this paper, I carried out analysis of an extract from the interview transcript, roughly corresponding to the segment 17:35 to 25:06 (or roughly a third of the duration of the entire interview) in the audio recording of the interview.

Using my personal judgement as to the tone and rhythm of FH's speaking pattern, her interjections (e.g., "ano?" [in this context, roughly equivalent to the English right?], "'di ba?" [roughly equivalent to the English isn't it], "right?") as well as what I thought were groups of words forming sensible phrases, I segmented the interview transcript into lines on which I performed in vivo coding. The intent was to label these lines with codes (one to three words in length) that were as close to the speaker's words as possible as a prelude to further analysis.

Similar to analysis in narrative research, I next decided to identify second-order codes or themes from large tracts of the interview transcript. Having generated the initial list of codes and themes, I returned to the interview transcript for a second round of review, this time trying to examine the text in a more nuanced fashion. The intent of this part of the data analysis process was to uncover any underlying pattern in what was said; subtle suggestions of relationships or even explanatory themes relating to the challenges confronting GB identified during from the second-order codes or themes; or, any absences, present absences, or absent presences that manifested itself in the text that is relevant to what I was trying to understand in the interview. My interpretation of the analyzed data, while mere conjectures given that the basis is a short extract of an interview with one person alone, nonetheless, point to potential avenues for further exploration as I continue to develop my ideas for my thesis.

Methodological discussion

I designed this mini-research with a post-positivist mindset, understanding that, while there is a reality out there that can be measured (in this case, the reality that is the inter-agency committee, its functions, and troubles), knowledge about it will, in most cases, be imperfect [1]. We can only glean a partial picture of different aspects of policy – the policy intent, process, or product – in our research. One of the reasons for the latter is that policies are very seldomly neutral, affected as they are by the interplay of many different values and motivations of stakeholders [2]. There is also the tacit understanding of the interrelatedness of the different structural and societal components linked to policy, such that a change in one produces a cascade of alterations of different magnitudes across the entire chain. Nonetheless, policies, while constituting words spouted by politicians or text written in statutes, are real and have effects on the lives of people in a certain locality or situation in which it is being enforced.

Interviews are appropriate for post-positivist research since it is one of the most highly adaptable of the different research methods (i.e., it can be deployed for use with different research paradigms) [3]. Consistent with my stance, I employed semi-structured interviewing technique – I had a list of topics that I wished to cover in the interview, but I also allowed some degree of flexibility in the approach and the course of the conversation. I would suppose that this position is also reflected in the way I analyzed the data, basically "mining" it for content that will help shed light on the question I had in mind when I pursued this venture. To my mind, FH's first-hand knowledge is a good substitute for the lack of official documentation on GB.

While interviewing is one of the most common methods of data collection, there were challenges that I encountered, specifically as it relates to the medium that was used for this project, which led me to reflect not only on their implication for my thesis but also on how to address these concerns moving forward.

As with my prior experience, getting affirmative response for an interview is usually straight-forward and easy. Scheduling of the definite interview date and time, however, is usually another matter altogether, as I had to find common time with my informant. And in most cases, I would suppose that time flows differently for the interviewer and the interviewee – the former is under pressure to complete the task within a certain period (what with other data to be collected, analyzed and written about), while the latter may view the interview as an added burden or intrusion into their professional and personal schedules. In the end, there is a chance that the interview may simply become another part of either person's “to-do” list that has to be crossed off, compromising the quality of the interaction and subsequently, the data that can be gathered. As such, good practices may include requesting for schedule of interviews early in the research process, or dividing the interview into multiple short visits (as opposed to a one-off process).

Conducting the interview also requires some sort of “easing in” and “settling down” for both interviewer and interviewee. The metaphor I could think of is pairing off two persons to dance for the first time, with each sizing the other up and trying to get a feel of how to proceed. FH and I have worked with each other for the past five years in various capacities. Nonetheless, I could sense that we were initially talking in a formal, yet awkward fashion at the start of the interview, including the unrecorded segment when I was seeking her consent, with the process feeling unnatural (compared with our many face-to-face informal conversations in the past). Towards the middle of the interview, however, we were already able to find our pace and somehow each relaxed a bit, and pace and cadence of our past conversations somehow manifested itself. The implication for my thesis is to really take time to establish rapport with informants, which may mean meeting with them for a couple or several times prior to the interview proper, if feasible, to break the proverbial ice and somehow foster a connection between interviewer and interviewee.

My interview data was able to address the purpose of my mini-research partly, but it has opened a lot more avenues for additional questions that I may need to pursue, either via additional interviews or collection of data by other means. For example, I would suppose that the challenges mentioned by FH is only a partial list derived from her own vantage point as a representative of her unit to the GB. Representatives of other units and sectors may have a different perception as to the challenges being faced by the organization, which means I may need to interview these sectoral actors in my thesis. Another point worthy of consideration is my observation on the apparent centrality of decision-making process within GB, something difficult to measure but which I may be able to glean from observation of meetings of the body, or even a review of minutes of meetings of the organization (subject to approval of access, of course). The point, then, is to carry out data collection from multiple sources and using multiple approaches.

While the telephone interview was rather convenient as Icould conduct it from the comfort of my office (no need for me to fly home to Manila for a short interview), and my informant could respond from her own private space, it nonetheless was disconcerting as it removed all visual cues that I usually rely on when communicating with another person. Gone are eye contact, body posture, and hand gestures that could have been a rich source of additional data to give context to what was being said, a limitation of the method highlighted by other scholars who have explored the use of this method in social science research [4,5]. Instead, I had to rely on the tone and intonation of voice, cadence of speech, as well as any pauses to guess how the interview was progressing. Both interviewer and interviewee also had to check and seek reassurance that the other was still present (e.g., Fh usually ending her statements with a rhetorical “right?” or its local equivalent “'di ba?” or “ano?”, and me responding with either a “yes”, “okay” or “uhum”). It was advantageous that I have worked with FH previously and knew how she spoke.

Reflexive discussion

I have alluded in the preceding paragraphs about my prior working relationship with my informant, FH. From 2013 to 2018, we worked as colleagues in a sectoral committee, while I was their office's technical consultant between 2016 and 2018. These engagements provided me with the opportunity to further interact with FH, their office being rather small (my estimate is that there were only three technical staff in their office, and a handful and administrative personnel at that time). This long-standing interaction with people working in FH's sector has afforded me a peek into the promises and challenges in the sector, something which heavily influenced my choice of a research topic. The decision to focus on service provision, organization, and policy, on the other hand, is a product of my affiliation and identification with my home unit in the Philippines (Department of Health Policy and Administration in the College of Public Health, University of the Philippines Manila).

This identity/these identities, to my mind, has influenced the activities undertaken for this mini-research, something which I characterize as a process of continuous role clarification and role (re)negotiation, similar to the concept of social roles in symbolic interactionism [3,6]. In essence, the interview uncovered a process of navigating shift in identities – of myself with respect to the research topic, between myself and my informant, and my informant with respect to the organization/s she is representing – something I have not previously fully considered. Stated another way, we were constantly figuring out which hat/s we were, or are supposed to be, putting on during our interaction, some of which I summarize in the table on the next page.

Glimpses of this role clarification and (re)negotiation can be seen in my decision to select her as my interviewee (I was confident that she would consent to an interview) and her quick acquiescence (her reply to my email invitation was "I will be happy to oblige"); the awkwardness and stiffness of our initial interaction, which eventually gave way to a more relaxed conversation towards the latter part of the interview; her seeming cautiousness, if not reluctance, to disclose insider information regarding GB (this may be an overinterpretation on my part); and her closing words, exhorting me to share with her any finding that may help improve the organization's effectiveness (which I take to mean that she is viewing me as an "expert").

The resulting role ambiguity was an elephant in the room that we did not address, and something I only realized by looking at the matter in hindsight. The medium through which the interview was conducted, to my mind, further depersonalized the interaction, and certainly did not help the role clarification process.

Table 2. *Roles of interviewer and interviewee*

CTA	FH
Interviewer (seeking information)	Interviewee (source of information)
PhD student / researcher	Program technical officer
Outsider / Ring-side spectator	Insider
Consultant / technical adviser / expert	Client
Friend / colleague (in the sectoral committee)	Friend / colleague (in the sectoral committee)
University of the Philippines / PolyU	GB
Hong Kong	Philippines

The implications of this phenomenon are quite vast. For one, I am now questioning the voluntariness of her participation in the interview, despite my repeated statements to her in the email and prior to the start of the interview that she is being invited in a research activity, and that she could refuse to participate (or at least refuse to answer some of my questions). Did she agree to the interview as a friend and colleague, with the intent of helping another one (me) fulfill an academic requirement? Was she providing information to an "expert" with the expectation that I am able to offer a solution to the issues faced by her organization? Or was she simply trying to be polite – most Filipinos find it hard to say no to others? How would these roles shift in in my future interviews based on the degree to which interviewer and interviewee are familiar, personally or professionally, with each other?

It does not help that existing references on interview as a research tool, or research methods in general, is silent on this aspect [1,3,7,8]. Perhaps the closest would be the exhortation for the researcher to identify, and be reflexive about, his positionality [9], but which is still insufficient to address the concern that I have raised as it only says that researcher must clarify to himself – and perhaps to those who will read his proposal or report – his beliefs about the world, where he stands on the research topic, and how these influence the research process and product. It is silent, however, on how to deal with role ambiguity at the point where the researcher and research participant interact.

Turning to the literature on role ambiguity derived from other disciplines [10–12], a proposed solution is to begin an interaction with a clear definition of roles for each member of the dyad (or group). The theory is that declaring and being upfront about the role we are playing at a particular moment in time reduces the guessing game that results to role ambiguity.

The question, however, arises, if this technique is really useful and practical in the realm of research, or even in real life, since it is quite a feat, not to mention a tasking requirement, to block out all the identities that may influence the researcher-participant interaction. Further, very few would be conscious about these roles. To my mind, one way forward in this dilemma is to accept this multiplicity of selves that we – researchers and participants – bring to the research process and interaction. Researchers may need to get to know their informants well to have an idea of the hat/s that they bring to the table, in the same manner that researchers are exhorted to be reflexive and to identify their positionality.

Concluding thoughts

In summary, interviewing as a method of data collection for my topic has its promise. The data I was able to gather in this mini-research has provided me with some insight on the aspects of my thesis topic that I can further develop and explore as I prepare for my confirmation seminar. Operationalizing it in the field, however, means investing time in getting to know informants better prior to the interview proper. Within the context of my research topic, I would prefer to still conduct face-to-face interviews when feasible, complemented with data collected from other sources.

References

1. Denzin NK, Lincoln YS. (2017). The Sage handbook of qualitative research (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
2. Buse K, Mays N, Walt G. (2012). Making health policy (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
3. Haralambos M, Holborn M, Chapman S, et al. (2013). Haralambos & Holborn Sociology: Themes and perspectives (8th ed.). London: Collins.
4. Novick G. (2008). Is there a bias against telephone interviews in qualitative research? Research in Nursing & Health 31(4):391-398. doi:10.1002/nur.20259.
5. Schulz M, Ruddat M. (2012). "Let's talk about sex!" On the applicability of telephone interviews in qualitative social research. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research 13(3).
6. Ransome P. (2010). Social theory for beginners. Bristol: The Policy Press.
7. Flick U. (2014). An introduction to qualitative research (5th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
8. Seale C. (2018). Researching society and culture (4th ed.). London: Sage.
9. Savin-Baden M, Major CH. (2013). Research choices and lenses. In Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice (pp. 35-49). London: Routledge.
10. Bauer JC, Simmon PR. (2000). Role ambiguity: A review and integration of the literature. Journal of Modern Business 3:41-47.
11. Pearce J. (1981). Bringing some clarity to role ambiguity research. The Academy of Management Review 6(4):665-674. doi:10.2307/257646.
12. Sell M, Brief A, Schuler R. (1981). Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of the literature and directions for future research. Human Relations 34(1):43-71. doi:10.1177/001872678103400104.