The use of semi-structured interviews in pedagogical research

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Can simply talking to someone constitute a legitimate form of research?

In sociology and related disciplines, interviewing is a long and well established research technique.

There are usually 3 types of interview:

Structured - uses a structured questionnaire

Semi-structured - uses open-ended questions

Unstructured - questions based solely on what the interviewee says
Qualitative research interviews in general

Aim is to uncover the interviewee’s meanings and to avoid the researcher imposing their own structures and meanings.

Data collection and analysis is time-consuming (often expensive too!).

“High quality analysis of qualitative data depends on the skill, vision and integrity of the researcher; it should not be left to the novice.” Pope et al, 2000 BMJ
Why semi-structured interviews?

i. semi-structured interviews are well suited to educational research, especially case studies.

ii. semi-structured interviews enable the deep exploration of experiences.

iii. interviewee has freedom in responses but interviewer retains control.

(Grever, 1995)

Gives freedom in the sequencing and wording of questions as a result of interviewee responses.

(Robson, 2002)
Mistakes to avoid

(Mitchell and Joley, 2007)

1. Avoid leading questions
2. Avoid questions that invite the social desirability bias
3. Avoid double-barreled questions
4. Avoid long questions
5. Avoid negations
6. Avoid irrelevant questions
7. Avoid poorly worded response options
8. Avoid big words
9. Avoid ambiguous words and phrases
Interviewer bias

Interviewer bias reduced by semi-structured format (Mitchell and Joley, 2007).

The following strategies should additionally be employed:

monitoring body language, recognizing self-censoring, and understanding the correct balance between leading an interview and listening to a participant.
Gathering the data

Most often nowadays interviews will be recorded. Some researchers think it good practice to also write contemporaneous field notes!

The ideal recording device will be small and unobtrusive, easy to use, producing good quality recordings. Newer recording devices use the USB port on a computer to directly download digital files.
Data Analysis

Transcribing interview data: for a 30 minute interview - at least 2.5 hours for a full transcription. Additionally, a lot of text will be generated (up to 20 pages per interview).

A good transcription will convey the full range of feelings and meanings.

Computer packages can improve the efficiency of data management and analysis - eg. NVivo.

This may however, remove the researcher from the data and take the place of close and careful analysis.
Immersion in the raw data!

Repeatingly listening to the tapes, reading transcripts and any notes in order to list key ideas and recurrent themes.

Coding: annotating the transcripts with numerical codes associated with different themes.

Identifying patterns and developing interpretations.
An audit trail

Data analysed through iterative cycles of data reduction and conclusion drawing enables “the researcher [to] impose meaning on the data in an open-minded and tentative way” (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

A similar systematic coding system has been also used by Murray (2002) with emerging themes being coded by independent researchers to obtain a measure of inter-observer reliability.
Potential Pitfalls

The use of students themselves as researchers has recently been commended by the Higher Education Academy.

Also undergraduates as researchers concept - Healey and Jenkins.

However it has been observed that student interviewees will give different responses to academic staff compared to student interviewers (Freestone and Chu, 2012).