



RESEARCHING SOCIAL LIFE I - SC101

Week 24: In-Depth Interviews and
Focus Groups

Lecture overview

- The in-depth interview method
 - Will go through an example of published research (Brown et al interview, part of your assessment)
- Focus group interviews

In-Depth Interviewing

- Many applications
 - Public, commercial and scientific, social and political science
- Versatile approach to doing social research
 - Share life stories, understand how MP's relate to their constituents, attitudes and behaviour rooted in childhood such as political ideologies, family ideologies, social identities, social mobility, barriers to behaviour
 - Form and build theoretical understanding concepts

Depth Interview versus Focus Group

- Individual stories, less guarded, secrets
- Explore individual attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours and their relationship to life events and personal circumstances
- Explore situated behaviours and their personal meaning (household, family, school, work, marginalised communities)
- Interviewer not moderator, proactive approach
- Build upon focus group findings

Purpose of In-depth Interview

- “The goal of responsive interviewing is a solid, deep understanding of what is being studied.” Rubin and Rubin (2005:35)
- But grabbing a tape recorder, grabbing respondents and jumping straight in? “theoretical naivete” (Kvale 1996)

Related Philosophies

- Hermeneutics
 - Interpretation of events through understanding the meaning of objects, norms and structures to individuals within their culture
 - Depth Interviewing help learn rules of the group or culture being studied (Rubin & Rubin 1995)
 - Prison life, public school, old age
 - Purpose and meaning of objects, religious symbolism
 - “washing machine symbol of domestic freedom”

- Phenomenology

- The subjects' perspectives on their world, deals with conscious thoughts and how the individual perceives themselves situated within the social world and its structures
- Situated study, black and poor in Chicago (Ventakesh)
- Explore meanings of citizen roles within cultures
 - fatherhood, motherhood (generational and cross cultural differences), teacher

Read Good Published Research

- Online journals available through library
 - Qualitative Research
 - Forum : Qualitative Social Research
 - Qualitative Health Research
 - Qualitative Market Research

 - Examine Research Design
 - Objective Setting, Thematization, Analysis

Published qualitative research

- Main Research Question
 - What impact does childhood leukemia have on the career development of young adult survivors?
 - (Brown, Pikler, Lavish, Keune 2008, Qualitative Health Research Vol 18 no.1)
- Methodology
 - 11 depth interviews, participants aged 19-24
 - Inclusion criteria, (a) chemotherapy (b) 6 months of medical treatment (c) were between the ages of 18 and 25 (d) met the 5-year criteria for survival
 - 1 page demographic questionnaire, signed consent form
 - Mixture face to face (in hospital) and telephone interviews

- **Data Collection**

- Transcripts provided by professional
- Respondents viewed and agreed/added to transcripts

- **Data Analysis**

- Four major themes identified
- (1) Education and career choice, (2) current experiences
- (3) Future expectations (4) family support

- Findings

- Future Expectations – respondents typically perceived positive life development “cancer makes me stronger knowing I’ve overcome one of the largest obstacles that some people will ever go through. As close as I was to dying, the doctors thought I had less than a week, I knew I had a purpose in life after that”. Some negative effects “often wonder if any other illness is cancer related”

- Family and friends ... Fathers found the adjustment more difficult and were more protective “I think he [father] took it the hardest. I was his first son and he probably had high hopes for me athletic wise because he’s very athletic. He probably saw what was going on and thought there went my chance. I kind of get babied from him a little bit. He’s always the one worrying about me . . . and was the one that was more protective”

- Conclusions (many)
 - Broad reluctance to work within medical profession (apart from one)
 - Uncertainty of cancer acted as a catalyst in their life
 - Uncertainty led to positive life attitude

Research Questions/Themes

- How, if at all, has your cancer diagnosis influenced your educational plans?
- How, if at all, has your cancer diagnosis influenced your work/career plans?
- What, if any, decisions have you made regarding work/career, and why?
- How does your cancer diagnosis affect you today, if at all?
- Tell me about your future
 - How has your family dealt with your cancer diagnosis?
 - What, if any, influence has your family had on your educational decisions?
 - What, if any, influence has your family had on your work/career decisions?

Main Question Formats

- Introductory questions, permission to record
- Main Questions/Key Questions
- Probes

“can you tell me a little bit more about that”, “how did that make you feel”, how did you react to this news?”
- Transition Questions

“you mentioned earlier that your mother was a very dominant member of the household, can you tell me what effect this has had upon your experiences of being a mother?”

Question Formulation

- Articulation
 - People vary in their ability to discuss thoughts and ideas
 - Ask clear questions, clear meanings, make sense and sensitive to interviewee's context and world view
 - Child, elderly person, victim of violence
 - easy to understand, short, no jargon (Kvale 1996)

- Ask single questions that are truly open ended
- Recall
 - Ask about behaviours first (easier to recall) and will situate further questions about motivations, attitudes held, opinions etc.
- Sequence the questions (funnelling technique)
 - From broad to deep
 - All babies cry, of course. Some mothers feel that if you pick up a baby every time it cries, you will spoil it. Others think you should never let a baby cry for any reason. How do you feel about this? Why do you feel that way?

- Probing and follow up questions
 - To deepen the response, help obtain much richer data, give the interviewee cues as to where you want the interview to go
 - can you tell me more, why did that happen do you think? What effect did that have on you?
- Interpret or test your interpretation
 - Does that mean that? You said earlier that ... did this effect your decision to get married?
- Avoid sensitive questions or embarrassing questions

Fieldwork Materials

- Many practitioners advocate the use of some sort of guide
 - The Discussion or Topic Guide (Ritchie and Lewis 2003)
 - The Interview guide (Kvale 2003)
 - The conversation guide (Rubin and Rubin 2005)

The Discussion Guide

- **A discussion guide is** ‘a carefully worded memory aid to be used as a springboard and a safety net.’
- **A discussion guide is not** ‘a carefully structured set of worded questions to be read verbatim or ploughed through in order.’

Source: Krueger (1998)

Stages of the interview

- Arrival
 - Establish relationship
- Introduction
 - Interaction directed by introducing the topic
- Beginning interview
 - Opening questions, background
- During the interview
 - Guiding through main themes of research, probing
- Ending the interview
 - Unfinished business, final topic
- After the interview
 - Confidentiality, final reflections

Interviewer roles

- The Miner
 - Knowledge buried in the interviewee and unearthed by the interviewer
 - The interviewer digs for knowledge
- The Traveller
 - Knowledge is created and negotiated in the interview
 - the meaning of the interviewee's story is developed as the interviewer interprets them
 - the interviewer leads the subject to new

insights

Seven Stages of the Interview

1. Thematization
2. Design
3. Interviewing
4. Transcribing
5. Analysing
6. Verifying
7. Reporting

Perspectives in the interview

“The interview is a stage upon which knowledge is constructed” (Kvale 1996)

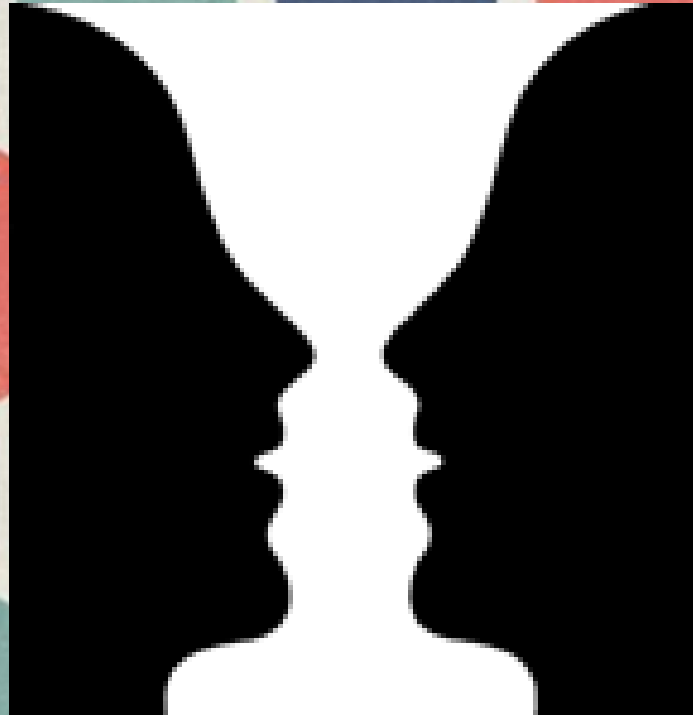


Figure and Ground Phenomenon introduced by Rubin, see Kvale (1996)

How (not) to carry out an interview

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuvDwdebFDA>

Scientific Status of the Interview

- Criticism from positivism as 'unscientific'
 - Truth only found through objective method
 - Independent of content and context and not influenced by the researcher
- Intersubjective knowledge (Kvale 1996)
 - A conversation and negotiation of meaning
 - Procedures that allow similar interviews
 - Theoretical understanding of content

The Focus Group

- A method for collecting qualitative data through a group interview on a topic chosen by the researcher. A focus group typically consists of a tape-recorded discussion among 6 to 8 participants who are interviewed by a moderator (Morgan, Sage Dictionary of social research methods)



Brief history

- Originally 'focussed group interview' (Merton 1956)
- Origins in Office Radio Research, Columbia University 1941
 - Lazarsfield and Merton, mass media research
- First paper outlining the methodology
 - Merton and Kendall (1956)
- Alfred E Goldman (1962)
 - The Group Depth Interview. Journal of Marketing. Vol.26. No.3 pp.61-68
- Used more social sciences within last 20

Why use focus group interviews?

- Learn about thoughts and experiences of others
- Group share interest in topic, observe interactions, conversation
- Common background
 - Cancer sufferers, abused children, sex workers, substance abuse
- How knowledge is shared and accepted within the group
- Insights into why they think like they do

The 'Group Depth Interview'

- 'Groupness' (Goldman 1962)
 - A community of interest
 - Socio-structural or socio-psychological
 - Interaction between group members
 - Ideas accepted or rejected
 - Opportunity to observe 'group process'
 - Dynamics of attitudes and opinions
 - Greater candor in group setting



Group Dynamics

- 'Attractive, extroverted people often seen to be bright, friendly and more candid'
- 'Demographic effects'
- Cultural and racial differences
- Ideological differences

The 'Group Depth Interview'

- Interviewer versus moderator
 - Use the group to extract information
 - Non-participant, rarely participates
 - Keep discussion within 'boundaries'
 - Based upon group psychotherapy
 - Structure the roles
 - React to verbal activity, active or passive
 - Relevancy, keep the discussion on track
 - Projective methods
 - 'Calculated deception'

Focus Group Practicalities

- Size of group, 6 to 10 (Merton 1998), 6 to 8 (Ritchie & Lewis 2007)
- Recruitment
- Composition
- Logistics
 - ambience, atmosphere, seating, power relationships
- Diversity can enrich but may cause conflict
- Virtual groups
 - over the internet, teleconferencing
 - but loose observation

Structure –v- Unstructured

- Depends upon the topic
- Some topics might never be discussed if not introduced by the moderator
- Structured to meet the goals of the researcher
- Balance between the group and the research
- Discussion guide

Key phases of the focus group

- Forming
 - Guarded, worried about inclusion, acceptance
- Storming
 - Dominance, aloofness, expert roles, criticism
- Norming
 - Shared views, cooperation,
- Performing
 - Open discussion of research issues
- Adjourning
 - Death of the group

Moderation Phases

- Setting the scene and ground rules
 - Thanks, simple introduction, recording
- Individual introductions
 - Name, background, get people talking
- The opening topic
 - Introduce, promote discussion
- Discussion
 - Juggling, balancing, probing, inclusion, holding back
- Ending the discussion
 - Winding up, thanks

Common Criticisms

- No hard data
- Group members not representative
- Idiosyncratic nature of group discussion
- Unnatural social setting
- Hawthorn effects (Landsberger, 1950)
- Group think (William H Whyte, 1952)
- “Do No Harm” (Morgan, 1998)

Sampling issues

- “Focus groups are frequently conducted with purposively selected samples in which the participants are recruited from a limited number of sources. Such bias is a problem only if ignored” Morgan (1997)
 - Minimisation of sample bias
 - Strangers versus acquaintances
 - Mixed versus segmented groups
 - Gender, race, age, social class
 - Roles (mothers, fathers, teachers)
 - Mixing across status or authority lines (Morgan and Krueger 1993)

Focus group interviews

- You are facilitating a focus group discussion. How do you deal with the following:
- (a) two members of the group begin an argument;
- (b) one member of the group dominates the conversation;
- (c) several members of the group get up to help themselves to refreshments and begin a conversation in the corner of the room;
- (d) the group runs out of steam after fifteen minutes and seems to have exhausted their thoughts on the topic;
- (e) one member of the group never speaks.