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The art and science of interviews

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Abstract
Sociologists approach the study of human society in different ways. They can look at the "big picture" of society to see how it operates. This is a macro view focusing on the large social phenomena of society such as social institutions and inequality. Sociologists can also take a micro view, zeroing in on the immediate social situations in which people interact with one another. From these two views, sociologists have developed various theoretical perspectives, each a set of general assumptions about the nature of society. To help understand the beginners, these major theoretical strands could broadly be classified into two major approaches in sociology. These are the Structural approach (also called as macro sociology) and the Social Action approach (Also called as the interpretive, anti/non-positive or micro sociology).

Keywords: art, science, subjectivity, objectivity, reliability, validity

Introduction
Structural and social action approaches to the study and research of society exhibit two major differences. One involves how they conceive of society, the social world itself. In other words, they completely disagree on the question of what society is. The second question follows from the first. It concerns the question of how we are to conduct our research into the social world. That is, because structural and social action sociology have very different ideas of what society in fact is, they also have very different ideas about research method which are most appropriate to the conduct of research into social life. This is why we can say that how we conceive of society cannot be separated from the question of how we should proceed in our study of it (Thio, 2003) [6].
Thus, what methodology a researcher would adopt in carrying out his research would largely be determined by the perspective or orientation that he has towards social reality. The emphasis on the objective measurement of human social behaviour forces the positivist scholars to rely more on the quantitative methods while conducting research. While on the other hand, anti-positivist scholars who emphasise on the interpretative understanding of the social behaviour rely more on qualitative methods. It is in this larger debate centring around the nature of social reality and the appropriate method to study it that the relevance and significance of qualitative research interview is contextualized. Though, at face-value, positivists tend to reject qualitative research interview as a subjective method of research, an art exercised by the interviewer to elicit subjective responses from the interviewee on the given topic of research.

Structured and unstructured interviews
Interviews are one of the most widely used methods of gathering data in sociology. They consist of the researcher asking the interviewee or respondent a series of questions. Interviews can be classified as 'structured' or 'unstructured' though many fall somewhere between these two extremes. In a structured interview, the wording of the questions and the order in which they are asked remains the same in every case. The result is a fairly formal question and answer session. Unstructured interviews are more like an informal conversation. The interviewer usually has particular topics in mind to cover but few if any preset questions. He has the freedom to phrase questions as he likes, ask the respondent to develop his answers and probe responses which might be unclear and ambiguous. This freedom is often extended to the respondent who may be allowed to direct the interview into areas which interest him.

Data from structured interviews are generally regarded as more reliable. Since the order and wording of questions are the same for all respondents, it is more likely that they will be responding to the same stimuli. Thus, different answers to the same set of questions will indicate real differences between the respondents. Different answers will not therefore simply reflect differences in the way questions are phrased. Thus, the more structured or standardized an interview, the more easily its results can be tested by researchers investigating other groups. By comparison data from unstructured interviews are seen as less reliable. Questions are phrased in a variety of ways and the relationship between interviewer and respondent is likely to be more intimate. It is unclear to what degree answers are influenced by these factors. Differences between respondents may simply reflect differences in the nature of the interviews. It is therefore more difficult to replicate an unstructured interview but the greater flexibility of unstructured interviews may strengthen the validity of the data. They provide more opportunity to discover what the respondent 'really means'. Ambiguities in questions and answers can be clarified and the interviewers can probe for shades of meaning. In general, structured interviews are regarded as appropriate for obtaining answers to questions of 'fact' such as the age, sex and job of the respondent. Unstructured interviews after seen as more appropriate for eliciting attitudes and opinions. Interview data are often taken as indications of respondents' attitudes and behaviour in everyday life although what a person says in an interview may have little to do with his normal routines. Even if the respondent does his best to provide honest answers, he may be unaware of the taken-for-granted assumptions which he employs in everyday life.

Issue of reliability and validity

Various studies have suggested, though, that interviews pose serious problems of reliability and validity. This is partly due to the fact that interviews are interaction situations. Thus, the results of an interview will depend in part on the way the participants define the situation, their perceptions of each other and so on. Most studies have been concerned about the effects of interviewers on respondents. The significance of what has come to be known as 'interviewer bias' can be seen from research conducted by J. Allan Williams Jr. He suggests that the greater the status differences between interviewer and respondent, the less likely the respondent will be to express his true feelings. To test this proposition, Williams organized a series of interviews with 840 Blacks in North Carolina during the early 1960s. All the interviewers were female, thirteen were Black and nine White. Important differences were revealed between the results obtained by Black and White interviewers. For example, a significantly higher proportion of those interviewed by Black said they approved of civil rights demonstrations and school desegregation. In addition, more respondents refused to give any answers to these questions when faced with a White interviewer. Williams argues that Blacks often tended to give the answers they felt that White interviewers wanted to hear. He sees this as due to the nature of the power structure in the American South at the time of the research. Williams's findings suggest that when status differences are wide, as is often the case with middle-class sociologists interviewing members of the lower working class, interview data should be regarded with caution (Haralambos and Heald, 2006) [3].

Interviewer as a miner and traveller

Steinar Kvale, in his book inter views: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing, however, uses two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer – as a miner or as a traveller. In the miner metaphor, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. In other words, the knowledge is understood to be waiting in the subjects' interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The alternative traveller metaphor understands the interviewer as a traveller on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. This view looks at role of the interviewer as that of an active and curious listener who describes the experiences of the respondents in qualitative terms informed by his own subjective interpretations.

Kvale questions those who tend to dismiss the qualitative research interview as unscientific. He argues that neither textbooks on social science methodology nor dictionaries of the English language provide any unequivocal and generally accepted definition of science. Hence, the characterization of qualitative interviews as scientific or unscientific, therefore, depends on how 'science' itself is defined or looked at:

- As knowledge distinguished from ignorance,
- As one of the natural sciences, or,
- As knowledge obtained from the application of scientific methods.

Kvale argues that though the interview does not belong to the methods of the natural sciences, yet, it can produce systematized knowledge. He uses a broad definition of science: the methodological production of new, systematic knowledge. While making a reference to the basic assumptions of positivism, Kvale argues that for any philosophy of science that eliminates the human factor in research, the qualitative interview based on interpersonal interaction must appear unscientific. According to him,

- The interview data consist of meaningful statements
- Such meaningful statements are themselves based on interpretations
- The interview involves a continual processes of interpretations

Kvale argues that quantified knowledge is not the goal of interview research. Since the main interview findings are expressed in language, interview statements can be ambiguous and contradictory. Thus, the findings may not be intersubjectively reproducible. In conclusion, from a positivist perspective, major features of the mode of understanding in the qualitative interview appear as methodological sources of error. Hence, in a positivist framework, the interview is not regarded as a scientific method but it doesn't mean that qualitative research interview is not scientific at all.

Kvale further questions the claim that qualitative research interview lacks objectivity. He investigates the concept of objectivity and finds it to be highly subjective in itself. According to one of the definitions, objectivity is defined in terms of intersubjectivity or intersubjective agreement. Kvale argues that the lack of intersubjective consensus

testifies to objectivity being a rather subjective notion. He discusses three major conceptions of objectivity:

- Objectivity as freedom from bias
- Objectivity as intersubjective knowledge

Arithmetic intersubjectivity refers to reliability as measured mechanically by amount of agreement among independent observers.

Dialogical intersubjectivity refers to agreement through a rational discourse and reciprocal critique among those identifying and interpreting a phenomenon. (Validity)

- Objectivity as reflecting the nature of the object i.e., the quality of a research method to express the real nature of the object being studied. Kvale argues that the interview is sensitive to and reflects the nature of the object investigated, in the interview conversation, the object speaks.

Kvale concludes that the interview is neither an objective nor a subjective method – its essence is intersubjective interaction.

Charles L. Briggs in his article Anthropology, Interviewing and Communicability in Contemporary Society brings it to the attention of anthropologists to critically engage with their modes of knowledge production, specifically, on interviews. Central to Briggs' concerns are a rethinking of the boundaries of the interview, to re-theorize interviews in order to understand the working of interviews in anthropology, their production of subjects, authority, knowledge, texts and their relation to other contemporary practices.

Briggs finds that the potential power of these interviews is not its attempt to discover their narratives from other stories, instead, they detailed multiple projections of communicability as a means of exploring what they wanted to talk about. Briggs also puts forth the notion of the presence of multiple sites. The interview involves multiple stages of knowledge production that depend on various locations - at the field and at the desk. Even though the interview is contextualized at the field, it is recontextualized at the desk, during lectures, conferences, revisions etc. Briggs suggests to think of interviews not as events that take place in a particular spatio-temporal location but as dimensions of the larger set of practices of knowledge production that makes up the research from beginning to end.

Christos Lynteris and Ishita Dey, in their article on 'Pandemic Imaginary': An Interview with Christos Lynteris highlight the advantages of the email interview. Email interview is generally considered to be an asynchronous form of qualitative research method. The interviewee can take their time to form the answer, edit, and think through it carefully before hitting the send button. The interviewer too, can form the follow up questions in a similar careful fashion.

Jane Richardson, Barry Godfrey and Sandra Walklate in their article Rapid, remote and responsive research during COVID-19 highlight the advantages of rapid research methods. They argue that until recently, researchers have tended to assume that face-to-face interviews are the best option by default due to the ability to develop rapport, to see more of the context and status of the interviewee, and through the ability to use and interpret non-verbal cues. However, in recent times, researchers agree that that online interviews offer 'almost all the advantages of face-to-face interviews, including being able to conduct interviews 'in all parts of the world'. Online interview are being preferred in recent times particularly on account of their ability to overcome problems of time and space, and in being able to contact hard-to-reach groups.

Conclusion

To conclude it may be argued that despite some limitations, interviews do have certain advantages. They are less costly and time consuming and can cover much larger samples. Interviews can fill in the picture by providing data on the respondent's past and his activities in a range of contexts. Further, the response rate of the interview method is high, particularly when compared to mailed questionnaires. Most importantly, the validity of the information can be checked. Since the respondent's confidence can be sought through personal rapport, in-depth probing is possible. Interviewer can explain difficult terms and remove confusion and misunderstandings. Interviewer gets opportunity to observe the non-verbal behaviour of the respondent and hence enables him to record the responses in the right perspective.

Thus, to view qualitative research interview as an art or science is based on how one defines what science is. Kvale's definition of science suggests science to be constituted of 'the methodological production of new, systematic knowledge'. As per Kvale, then, there is an underlying scientific approach within this art of subjective interplay between the interviewer and the interviewee.

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