

Sociology Shortcuts

M4a. Interpretivist Methods

Human Ethnography involves the study of people "in their natural setting" and Interpretivist sociology uses a range of ethnographic methods.

1. Semi-structured ("Focused") Interviews

Strengths

The issue of the researcher *pre-determining* what will be discussed is avoided since there are few, "pre-set questions" or topics.

It's possible to pick up ideas and information that had either not occurred to the interviewer or of which they had *no prior understanding*. This can be used to inform subsequent interviews with different respondents through the use of new questions, etc.

A relatively informal interview can be used as a **pilot study**, to test how people respond to particular topics, issues and questions.

By allowing respondents to develop their ideas and opinions the researcher tries to get at what someone "really means, thinks or believes" and the focus on things the respondent sees as important produces a much greater depth of information and this, in turn, potentially increases its **validity**.

Oatey (1999) also suggests "*Freedom for the respondent to answer how they wish is important in giving them a feeling of control in the interview situation*".

Within limits, face-to-face interaction allows the researcher to **help and guide** respondents - to explain, rephrase or clarify a question or answer, for example - which may help to improve overall **validity**.

Weaknesses

Semi-structured interviews are **time-consuming** to conduct and the large amounts of information produced has to be analysed and interpreted. Similarly, where the respondent largely dictates the direction of the interview, they may say things that are of **no relevance** to the research.

A lack of **standardisation** (the same questions are not necessarily put to different respondents) makes it difficult to **generalise** the research.

Interviews require certain skills of the *researcher* - to establish a strong **rapport** or to think quickly about relevant question-opportunities as they arise) and *respondent*: **inarticulate respondents** lack the skills to talk in detail about the research topic.

Oatey (1999) notes **open-ended questions** can cause confusion if the respondent doesn't understand them or the researcher can't follow the respondent's answer.

An interview is a **reconstruction**. Respondents must *remember* and *recount* events that happened in the past and this creates **validity** problems: **imperfect recall**, **selective memory** or **rationalisation** - a respondent "makes sense" of their past behaviour by justifying their actions.

Recording information can be a reliability and validity issue: a written record may disrupt the interview flow while **electronic recording** needs to be **unobtrusive**; if the respondent is too aware of being recorded it may make them nervous, uncooperative or self-conscious. Alternatively, knowledge of being filmed can make some respondents "play to the camera".

2. Unstructured (non-focused or open-ended) Interviews

Strengths

The researcher's limited input means data is more-likely to be a **valid** reflection of respondent beliefs. The lack of pre-judgments about what is / is not significant allows respondents to *describe* reality as they see it; the respondent rather than the researcher, decides what is significant information.

This type of interview, where the researcher must actively try to establish a strong **rapport** with a respondent if they are to achieve their research aims, lends itself to the exploration of **sensitive issues** - respondents decide what they will reveal and **groups**: those who may be wary of being studied.



Both of these issues came together in **Hamid et al's** (2010) study of young Pakistani women. They established a rapport with their respondents by meeting them a number of times before the research began. *"Meetings helped the participants to open up and discuss sensitive issues regarding sexuality and growing up with reference to their marriage and other related topics of their choice"*.

In addition the research can take place in settings, such as the respondent's home, designed to put them at their ease. For **Hamid et al** *"Participants were interviewed in their homes to overcome the barrier of talking about sensitive issues with the researcher. This gave the women an opportunity to expand on a range of issues that they wanted to discuss"*.

Weaknesses

Unfocused interviews require a high level of researcher **skill**, particularly to overcome the temptation to question the respondent when the objective is simply to listen and record. Respondents must be articulate and willing to talk about their life.

The researcher has little **control** over the direction of the interview and the respondent may wander into areas that prove irrelevant to the research aims. The creation of huge amounts of information is, like the interview itself, **time-consuming** and **labour-intensive**.

Reliability is low because the **unstandardised** format makes it impossible to **replicate** the interview (even with the same respondent).

As with their semi-structured counterparts, unstructured interviews can be prone to specific types of **bias** that lead to **invalid data**:

- **Unintentional** involves things a researcher can *avoid*, such as not looking bored and ensuring recording devices are not distracting.
- **Inherent** relates to the idea interviews may be **inherently flawed** as a source of **valid data**.

Any interaction process involves **status** considerations that may invalidate data. **Cohen and Taylor** (1977) argue one form of **interview effect** happens when a respondent interprets their role as one of telling the researcher what they believe they want to hear. Respondents, in effect, *defer* to the researcher and try to **please** them through their co-operation.

For **Goffman** (1959) interviews can never *"get at the truth"* because they are social processes involving:

1. **Negotiation - validity** is affected by researcher and respondent making decisions about how much or how little to reveal.
2. **Impression Management**: researcher and respondent try to manage the impression they give to each other. For the former this might involve demeanours (friendly, efficient...) designed to convey a particular impression about the research and the respondent's role. For the latter this can involve things like a willingness to "help" the researcher.

Manipulation: For Goffman this involves subtle attempts to push the respondent into revealing "the truth" about their behaviour. Conversely it can involve respondents not trying to reveal too much...

3. Focus Groups

Strengths

This method allows respondents to open-up about their experiences in the relative **safety** and **anonymity** of the group: it encourages people to **talk openly** about their beliefs.

The **naturalistic, informal** setting removes **status barriers** to communication, such as those that exist between a researcher and respondent in a structured interview. In **Morley's** (1980) research the focus group he used already knew each other through their participation on educational course. He used this method because face-to-face interviews were, he argued, "**abnormal situations**" that didn't produce valid data.

The group format generates large amounts of **detailed data** in a relatively short time. The **flexibility** of the method - the researcher can identify and explore ideas raised within the group - also means the research may uncover things not revealed by less flexible methods.

Researchers can investigate **complex issues** and behaviours, exploring what people really think about issues using in-depth discussions.

The researcher generally plays a **facilitator role** within the group, which means they can **control** the pace and extent of any discussion. They can plan a session **schedule** in advance that allows them to focus and refocus discussion. They can also intervene to ask questions, shut-down or redirect aimless discussions.

The group setting makes the use of video and audio recording equipment **less obtrusive** because participants, once involved with the group discussions, "act normally".

The need to interact within a group encourages respondents to elaborate and reflect on their beliefs. **Kitzinger** (1995) argues "*Interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences*".

Groups can be used as **pilot studies** to generate hypotheses, suggest possible lines of research, develop questions for questionnaires and interviews, etc.

Weaknesses

Running a focus group demands certain **skills**: controlling the behaviour of 5 -15 people in a way that allows them to speak freely and openly while ensuring the focus of the research is maintained. As **Gibbs** (1997) notes "*Good levels of group leadership and interpersonal skill are required to run a group successfully*".

A different kind of **interview effect** may occur with focus groups, one where people take-on a "group view" of the world - what **Janis** (1972) calls "**Grouphink**". This, for example, can simply reflect what a group or community considers *socially acceptable* rather than what individuals may actually believe.

A way to avoid this is through **focused extensions**: before the meeting each respondent completes a questionnaire that tests their personal views about a topic. The researcher can later compare these answers to their contributions in the focus group.

Morgan (1997) argues a researcher has **less control** over data produced in group situations because they have less control over group interaction. This reduces data **reliability** because the research cannot be replicated.

The problem of **agenda-setting** occurs when the researcher doesn't stop a respondent taking control of the group. By so doing they decide what the group should discuss and drown-out any dissenting voices.

The more people the researcher has to coordinate, the greater the potential problems in terms of resources - such as time, money, effort - and **representativeness**. In small sample groups the failure of even one person to appear for the interview will make it unrepresentative.

