Role of Interviews, Observation, Pitfalls and Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods

Benjamin Koskei (Ph.D) Student and Dr. Catherine Simiyu
Department of Educational Psychology, School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

Abstract
The main objective of this study was to discuss the role of interviews, observation, pitfalls and ethical issues in qualitative research methods. Data collection can be gathered from a number of sources, which include document analysis, observation, telephone, Internet surveys, focus groups, field notes, questionnaires, tape recording and interviews. This article focuses on interviews and observation as the methods of data collection and some of the pitfalls and ethical issues involved in conducting interviews. The researcher carried out an analytical review of relevant literature concerning the topic and came up with this piece of paper.

Keywords: Interviews, Observations, Pitfalls, Ethical Issues and Qualitative Research Methods

Interviews
Interviews are a systematic way of talking and listening to people and are another way to collect data from individuals through conversations. The researcher or the interviewer often uses open questions. Data is collected from the interviewee. The researcher needs to remember the interviewer’s view about the topic is not of importance. The interviewee or respondent is the primary data for the study. Interviewing is a way to collect data as well as to gain knowledge from individuals. Kvale (1996) regarded interviews as an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data. Interviews are ways for participants to get involved and talk about their views. In addition, the interviewees are able to discuss their perception and interpretation in regards to a given situation. It is their expression from their point of view. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) explain that the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable.

The researcher has to know and select the appropriate method for addressing the needs of the research question. Then, the researcher has to make a decision and choose the right method for that study. Data collection has its complexities and demands. This assumes that the right data collection method is interviewing, which has its own issues and complexities, and demands its own type of rigour” (O’Leary, 2004). It is the role of the researcher to ask...
questions. The questions ought to elicit valid response from respondents. Hoyle, Harris and Judd (2002) commented that questions have dual goals of motivating the respondent to give full and precise replies while avoiding biases stemming from social desirability, conformity, or other constructs of disinterest. Interviewers that have been properly trained, and play the proper role of the interviewers along with well-designed questions can conduct a good interview. Hoyle, Harris and Judd (2002) agree proper training and proper interviewer behavior can help greatly in achieving the goals.

There are many reasons to use interviews for collecting data and using it as a research instrument. Gray (2004) has given the following reasons: there is a need to attain highly personalized data, there are opportunities required for probing, a good return rate is important, and respondents are not fluent in the native language of the country, or where they have difficulties with written language. It is necessary for the researcher to prepare before the actual interview. The interview starts before the interview actually begins. This is the researcher’s preparation stage. Once the interview is conducted the researcher needs to make sure that the respondents have: A clear idea of why they have been asked; basic information about the purpose of the interview and the research project of which it is a part; some idea of the probable length of the interview and that you would like to record it (explaining why); a clear idea of precisely where and when the interview will take place (Gillham, 2000).

Also the interview needs to be effective and this is the responsibility of the researcher. The researcher ought to have the following skills and abilities: An ability to listen; an ability to be non-judgmental; a good memory; ability to think on his/her feet. An interview guide is also an essential component for conducting interviews. An interview guide is the list of questions, topics, and issues that the researcher wants to cover during the interview. The interview guide should be clear and avoid ambiguity. The researcher ought not ask personal or illegal questions and be comfortable with silences and wait for the respondent to speak.

Types of Interviews
There are many types of interviews, which include: Structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and non-directive interview.

Structured Interviews
A structured interview is sometimes called a standardized interview. The same questions are asked of all respondents. Corbetta (2003) states structured interviews are interviews in which all respondents are asked the same questions with the same wording and in the same sequence. It would be ideal if questions can be read out in the same tone of voice so that the respondents would not be influenced by the tone of the interviewer (Gray, 2004). Bryman (2001) explains structured interview entails the administration of an interview schedule by an interviewer. The aim is for all interviewees to be given exactly the same context of questioning. This means that each respondent receives exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The goal of this style of interview is to ensure those interviewees’ replies can be aggregated. Questions are usually very specific and very often the interviewee a fixed range of answers (this type of question is often called closed, closed ended, pre-coded, or fixed choice).

This type of interview introduces some rigidity to the interview (Corbetta, 2003). For example, probing can be a problem for structured interviews. Respondents may not understand the question and unable to answer it. Moreover, respondents may not have
received sufficient information to answer the question. Bryman (2001) clarifies that problem in either situation is obvious: the interviewer’s intervention may influence the respondent and the nature of interviewers’ ability in respondent’s replies that does not reflect ‘true’ variation. The strengths of structured interviews are that the researcher has control over the topics and the format of the interview. This is because a detailed interview guide is used. Consequently, there is a common format, which makes it easier to analyze code and compare data. According to David and Sutton (2004) another strength of structured interviews is prompting can be included with the questions and if a question is inappropriate, data on why no response was made can be recorded. Furthermore, non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures can be recorded.

On the contrary, drawbacks of structured interviews are they adhere too closely to the interview guide and may be the cause of not probing for relevant information. Also, since there is a set interview guide, the respondents may hear and interpret or understand the questions in a different manner. The researcher’s verbal comments and non-verbal cues can cause bias and have an influence upon respondents’ answers.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

On the other hand, semi-structured interviews are non-standardized and are frequently used in qualitative analysis. The interviewer does not do the research to test a specific hypothesis (David, & Sutton, 2004). The researcher has a list of key themes, issues, and questions to be covered. In this type of interview the order of the questions can be changed depending on the direction of the interview.

Additional questions can be asked and some may be questions that have not been anticipated in the beginning of the interview. Note taking or tape recording documents the interview. This type of interview gives the researcher opportunities to probe for views and opinions of the interviewee. Probing is a way for the interview to explore new paths which were not initially considered (Gray, 2004). Having key themes and sub-questions in advance lies in giving the researcher a sense of order from which to draw questions from unplanned encounters (David, & Sutton, 2004). The researcher conducting semi-structured interviews is free one than conducting a structured interview in which the interviewer does not have to adhere to a detailed interview guide. The researcher recommends to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that gas been predetermined (Kajornboon, 2004).

The strengths of semi-structured interviews are that the researcher can prompt and probe deeper into the given situation. For example, the interviewer inquires about using computers in English language teaching. Some respondents are more computer literate than others are. Hence, with this type of interview the interviewers are able to probe or asked more detailed questions of respondents’ situations and not adhere only to the interview guide. In addition, the researcher can explain or rephrase the questions if respondents are unclear about the questions. The drawbacks are inexperienced interviewers may not be able to ask prompt questions. If this is the case, some relevant data may not be gathered. In addition, inexperienced interviewers may not probe into a situation. For example, if the respondents do not know how to use computers and do not want to use them in language teaching, the interviewer needs to probe and find out the reasons and ask for explanations.

110  www.jeper.org  Koskei and Simiyu
Unstructured Interviews
This type of interview is non-directed and is a flexible method. It is more casual than the aforementioned interviews. There is no need to follow a detailed interview guide. Each interview is different. Interviewees are encouraged to speak openly, frankly and give as much detail as possible. Usually the interviewer has received virtually little or no training or coaching about the interview process and has not prepared much. The interviewers ask questions that respondents would be able to express their opinions, knowledge and share their experience. This can create some problems because the interviewer may not know what to look for or what direction to take the interview. The researcher may not obtain data that is relevant to the question of the study. The interviewer needs to think about what to ask and to ask questions carefully and phrase them properly and know when to probe and prompt (Gatara, 2010).

In an unstructured interview the researcher has to be a good listener and note new or interesting data the interviewee gives. It requires good communication and facilitation skills. The strengths of unstructured interviews are no restrictions are placed on questions. It is useful when little or no knowledge exists about a topic. So, background data can be collected. Unstructured interviews are flexible and the researcher can investigate underlying motives. The drawbacks of unstructured interviews are that they can be inappropriate for inexperienced interviewers. The interviewers may be bias and ask inappropriate questions. Also, respondents may talk about irrelevant and inconsequential issues. Consequently, it may be difficult to code and analyze the data.

Non-directive Interviews
The structured and semi-structured interviews are somewhat controlled by the researcher who has set the issues and questions. In non-directive interviews there are no preset topics to pursue. Questions are usually not pre-planned. The interviewer listens and does not take the lead. The interviewer follows what the interviewee has to say. The interviewee leads the conversation. The interviewer has the objectives of the research in mind and what issues to cover during the interview. The interviewee is allowed to talk freely about the subject. The interviewer’s role is to check on unclear points and to rephrase the answer to check for accuracy and understanding (Gray, 2004). The interviewer does not know which direction the interview will take. Non-directive interviews have their origin in dynamic psychology and psychotherapy with the objective to help patients reveal their deep-seated and subconscious feelings (Corbetta, 2003). The strengths of non-directive interviews are to find the deep-seated problem and the subconscious feelings. On the other hand, the drawbacks are that there are no directions or issues to explore which can cause some problems in coding and analyzing the data.

Observations
Observation is a tool that provides information about actual behavior. Direct observation is useful because some behavior involves habitual routines of which people are hardly aware. It allows the researcher to put behavior in context and hereby understand it better. Observation can be made of actual behavior patterns. It is of three forms i.e. participant, structured, and unstructured observations (Gatara, 2010).
Participant Observation
The investigator becomes an active functioning member of the culture under study. An investigator participates in any activity appropriate to the status which is assumed. Respondents become more comfortable with the researcher. It gives the researcher an intuitive understanding of what is happening in a culture (Gatara, 2010).

Characteristics
a) Physical or face to face proximity with those being studied.
b) This physical proximity should extend for some period, and the circumstances under which it occurs must vary.
c) There tends to develop intimacy and confidentiality between the researcher and subjects.
d) One normally gains access to the activities of one’s subjects and is thus in a position to gather the needed information.
e) Eventually, the researcher is able to collect detailed information about the subjects.
f) Field data is quantifiable and is no less rigorous than data collected under laboratory situation.

The Purpose of Observation
a) Observation entails accurate description of behavioral patterns. This allows constant field review of the technique, as well as high degree of receptiveness when analyzing the subject’s conceptions.
b) It takes investigation of phenomena outside the laboratory settings.
c) It allows for some degree of representation of subjects in the study as well as the representation of the events.

Unstructured Observation
Here the observer does not impose his/her structure or the situation but instead attempts to provide an analysis of the true nature or a given social setting. A deep and comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation is gained. The unstructured approach, however, leaves deep concerns about reliability, statistical analysis of data, researcher biases and ethical issues related to the invasion of privacy.

Structured Observation
This is the observer is aware of what group activities are important for the study purposes and can therefore make elaborate plans for collection and recording of data.

Basic Approaches to Observation
The investigator should make every effort to carry out the following:
   a) Select the setting of observation with care in order to facilitate maximum participation and data collection.
   b) The method of data collection should be unobtrusive and should not amount to physical or psychological harassment of subjects.
   c) Much preparation of stationery is needed to record information, this should be done to facilitate immediate data recording on reaching the field.
   d) On reaching the field, it is important for the researcher to identify a private spot from which one can record information. No attempt should be made to rely on memory.
It is recommended that the researcher remain alert so as not to miss important observation and happenings. He/she should deal with as few people as possible at any one moment.

f) Findings should be well organized and recorded and later given a proper description. Sociological concepts should be used in such description as far as possible.

Advantages of Observation

i) It is flexible and allows a lot of innovation and creativity.

ii) It allows the observer to gain access to the setting under study.

iii) Observation of phenomena that are usually inaccessible to other forms of studies are amenable to participant observation.

iv) Allows for a lot of unexpected information to be gathered.

v) It is less expensive than surveys.

Disadvantages of Observation

i) It is time-consuming.

ii) It is not always a rewarding approach, since one must always be on the scene when the phenomenon is taking place.

iii) It is possible for the researcher to introduce biases in the process of observation.

iv) One cannot control events and must wait for them to occur.

v) Sometimes being present in a group can be demanding on the part of the observer e.g. taking deviant behavior.

vi) Neither the past behavior nor the respondent’s motives and intentions are observable.

Interview Pitfalls

The most important steps in landing your next job is the job interview. The job interview is literally the doorway to the job you want. It's your best chance to show just how much you have to offer. It's your opportunity to demonstrate by your sparkling personality, knowledge of the industry and great communication skills that you are the perfect match for the job. With so much pressure to be, say and do just the right thing, it's understandable that some otherwise sterling job candidates might crack under pressure. Most managers and interviewers agree, there are certain "red flags" they look for when interviewing prospective job candidates. With a little practice and a lot of preparation, you can be ready for even the toughest interviews. Don't fall victim to one of these big interview blunders and lose your chance to land a great job.

Sloppy Appearance

It has been said that many interviewers make up their mind about a perspective job candidate with in the first 30 seconds of the interview. If this is true, your appearance will be the major factor in that first impression. No matter how casual the work environment, don't make the mistake of dressing sloppily. It gives the impression you don't care and are not taking the job interview seriously. You may not need to wear a Brooks Brother's suit, but you should dress a step nicer than the current employees. Do some research to find out what the work environment is like. People hire people like themselves, so the more you can show how well you will fit in, the better your chances of getting a job offer. Don't forget to shower and attend to all issues of personal hygiene. This includes brushing your teeth, using deodorant, shaving, and maybe even getting a haircut. Avoid wearing too much perfume or cologne. In fact, with scented laundry detergents, body washes and shampoos, you can probably do
without additional scent altogether. Also, resist the urge to wear a comical tie, too many chains or rings, and remove all facial piercings.

**Poor Attitude**
One of the biggest pitfalls in interviewing can stem from the very real need to sell yourself. There is a fine line between appearing arrogant and confident. Know the difference because appearing too timid will also be a big turn-off to a prospective employer. Avoid speaking negatively about anything, especially a former boss or co-workers. No matter how horrible it was, you will never come off looking good when you trash your last job. A little practice and role play ahead of time will help you practice what to say when you are asked about your previous employment. Focus on the positive things you learned. Avoid discussing your personal life, unless asked specifically about it. If you are asked about yourself, stick to interests and hobbies that would increase your ability to perform the job. Finally, do not tell off-color or racist jokes.

**Weak Communication**
It's important to show that you are an effective communicator in an interview. Keep answers to questions succinct and relevant. Use proper grammar and avoid slang and foul language. Role playing with a good friend will definitely help to prepare you for showing your communication skills, especially if you are easily flustered and have trouble speaking off-the-cuff.

**Shabby Social Skills**
Show that you are confident and comfortable doing the right thing in a given social situation. To do otherwise could be the kiss-of-death for your chances getting a job offer. Don't eat during the interview unless you have been invited to do so. Don't comb your hair or clip your nails. Don't interrupt your interviewer and do not try and tell him or her how to do his job. Definitely turn off your cell phone during an interview, and if by chance you forget and it rings, do not, under any circumstances, take the call. Simply turn it off and apologize. Do offer a firm handshake and smile. Make eye-contact at all times, and if you are being interviewed by more than one person, be sure to make eye-contact with each one. Sit up straight and compliment the office environment, neighborhood and surroundings. If you are offered a cup of coffee or water, take it. Even if you are not thirsty, taking it will show that you are a team player. It will also be a nice way to buy time while you think of answers to questions. Take a sip and think while you swallow.

**Lack of Integrity**
Employers are looking to hire people they can trust and who will give an honest day of work. Your interviewer may never know whether you were honest or dishonest, since integrity is more about who you are and what you do when people aren't watching, but there are certain no-no's that will tip off a future boss to a job candidate's lack of integrity. Don't lie on your resume, especially about your education. It's one of the easiest things to check on and lying about it will say a lot more about who you are than the fact that you are a few credits short of graduation. If you have lied to your current employer to get time off to interview, don't share this information with your interviewer. This will portray you as someone who would lie to them too in order to satisfy your personal needs. Honesty is always the best policy and an invaluable trait to offer a prospective employer. Practice and prepare before you set foot in
your job interview and you will be less likely to fall victim to one of these common interview mistakes.

**Ethical Issue in Interview**

**Privacy and confidentiality**

Interviews can delve into areas unanticipated at the outset. Furthermore, there is a danger of voyeurism and the temptation to focus on the most sensational elements of a study (Brinkmann & Kvale (2005). There is a particular issue with “dyadic” inquiry, as in the case of using interviews to study issues between careers and those they care for and of using interviews to study family relationships Here privacy is threatened when the interviewer probes into areas that at least one interviewee would prefer to keep private. Confidentiality is threatened when the interviews reveal details between the pair that were previously secret. Confidentiality is the most common threat identified in this writing up. Whilst individuals may not be identifiable to the general public, they may well be identifiable to, say, the peers also involved in the study. Some papers discuss instances when a researcher ought to breach confidentiality in the public interest. Others consider the related issue of researchers’ legal or professional duties when protecting confidentiality where a crime is reported or witnessed (Cashmore, 2006).

**Informed consent**

Informed consent is extensively examined. The issues of privacy and confidentiality are identified as reasons for its particular importance in interview research. Whilst it is desirable for the participant to know the privacy and confidentiality “rules” before agreeing to the interview, the privacy issue suggests that this cannot be entirely assured. Therefore, some authors recommend a model of continuous or process consent, where the researcher Ethics reaffirms consent throughout the research process. In an interview this requires judgment: “Is it alright if we talk a little more about that?” This model of consent has been discussed in other contexts and is not without problems. For example, there is a danger of participants being drawn into the research on partial information and then feeling obliged to continue. The process model of consent is used in at least one case. Some papers identify the difficulty of obtaining informed consent where the interviewees are from vulnerable groups (Byrne, 2001).

**Harm**

Many interviews concern issues that are sensitive; this can make interviews emotionally intense. They might potentially harm both interviewees and interviewers. Bereavement research is a particular example. A more prosaic (but important) potential harm is to physical safety, particularly in some contexts such as interviewing homeless youths or research into domestic violence. Many researchers set potential harm against possible therapeutic benefit they have either noted or systematically investigated. However, other studies raise doubts about this therapeutic benefit. Sinding and Aronson (2003) point to the danger of exposing interviewees’ self-perceived failures in, for example, providing end-of-life care. Their discussion brings out two important issues. One is the desire of interviewers to minimize hurt through, what they term “consoling refrains”. The other issue is more political: as feminists, the researchers say they have a desire to “unsettle the accommodations” women have to make in their lives; they want their research to expose problems and be part of the movement to change society. The issue of “consoling refrains” is discussed by a number of researchers. There may be tension here: if interviews have the potential to harm or be therapeutic, and if
researchers generally desire that they are the latter, then researchers may be tempted to switch from research to therapy when conducting interviews (Sinding & Aronson, 2003).

**Dual role and over-involvement**

Just as interviews may have a dual end of information and therapy, so the researcher may take on a dual role as scientist and therapist. At its simplest, the researcher wants to protect the participant from harm. She may, therefore, try to bolster his self-esteem or put a positive interpretation on described events. More ambiguously, the researcher wants to obtain good quality material. In doing this she may use the techniques of counselling in order to draw out the participant. Finally, the researcher may have another role, such as social worker or nurse. She may find herself drawn into that role and away from that of researcher during an in-depth interview. Aside from this, the researcher may simply find herself over-involved with the participant, although the researcher who reports having sex with a participant must surely be an extreme case. By contrast, Tillmann-Healy’s discussion suggests that at least some degree of involvement, she says friendship, is desirable, perhaps necessary, in this type of research. Tillmann-Healy goes on to ask, though, how can one develop such a relationship with a participant whom one dislikes or even one who seems morally reprehensible example of a murderer.

**Politics and power**

At the outset, the participant may feel obliged to take part in the interview because of the relationship he has with the interviewer. For example, during the interview, the interviewer has some power over the direction of conversation. The participant may be drawn to discuss issues he would rather have kept silent about. Furthermore, he may be misled by the apparent counselling methods of the interviewer; as such, he may, for example, feel disappointed by the lack of therapeutic intent revealed later. In the later stages of the research process, the interviewer usually has control of which quotes are used, how they are used and how they are interpreted. Participants can feel misrepresented perhaps especially where interpreters are used. Comments on the politics of interviews are sparser, although it is an issue identified by feminists who often refer to Oakley’s work as a precursor. In following Oakley, the feminist researcher would seek to be on the woman’s side in the interview; this position would contrast with someone who viewed the interviewer’s role as neutral and related to data-collection only.

**Conclusion**

This paper discusses interviews, observation, pitfalls and ethical issues in qualitative research methods. Interviews and observations are ways of collecting data and to gain knowledge from individuals. The type of interview to conduct will depend upon the objectives of the research. Four types of interviews are discussed in this paper: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and nondirective interviews. Also types of observations were discussed in details. Some examples are given as well as the strengths and drawbacks of each type of interview. Lastly, pitfalls and ethical issues were also also examined.

**References**