

Exploring a Research Method - Interview

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Abstract

There are many research methods exist in the educational research. For example, the interviews, the observations, the surveys, the action research, and so on. As a researcher, he/she can select these methods in the process of the research. In this essay, I focus on one of the educational research data generation methods--- the interview. I will analyze and discuss the interview in detail. First of all, I will comment on the question "what is the interview". The definition of the interview will be described from different aspects and situations, some definitions the former researchers give us will be introduced. At the same time, my understanding about the definition of the interview will be added in this section. Secondly, the main characteristics of the interview will be discussed. The quality of the interview will be explored. Thirdly, I will analyze some key factors of the interview. Fourthly, the ethical implication will be considered.

Key words: interview; research method; exploit

THE DEFINITION OF THE INTERVIEW

As to the definition of the interview, different people have different opinions about it. They give us some definitions of the interview in former research. According to Stewart and Cash (2000), "an interview is an interactional communication process between two parties, at least one of whom has predetermined and serious purpose, and usually involves the asking and answering of questions (p.1)". Through this definition, we can see that the interview is a kind of interactional communication process, the interview is happened between two parties, and it has purpose. However, this definition neglects an important factor of the interview--- structured. According to Hunt and Eadie (1987, p.5), the structure of the pattern of the interview is important factor to distinguish the interview from routine interaction. Actually, most often the pattern of the interview is interviewer lead interview and ask question to interviewee. This point of view has been referred by Cohen and Manion, according to Cohen and Manion (1994, p.271), the interview is conversation involved in two-person, interviewer lead the interview for get research-relevant information (cited in Mills, 2001, p.292). Through the analysis above, I try to give the definition of the interview, an interview is an interactional communication process between two parties--- interviewer and interviewee, interviewer try to achieve the planned purpose through conversation---asking and answering questions, the pattern of the interview is structured.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERVIEW

The interview as a good research method has been used in educational research. I want to consider the characteristics of the interview in this part; the purpose is trying to make deeply comprehension about the interview. There are lots of characteristics of the interview. In this part, I want to analyze the unique points about the interview that are different from other research methods. In my point of view, there are two main points: the interview is an interactional communication process; there are two parties in the interview---interviewer and interviewee. The two points will help us make clearer the interview.

Firstly, the interview is an interactional communication process. The interactional means that the two parties of the interview both need to talking, listening and thinking; they should share and exchange their feelings and motives in an interview. According to Stewart and Cash (2000) said, "Interactional is an exchanging of roles, responsibilities, feelings, beliefs, motives, and information" (p.1). Through interactional each other in the interview, information and knowledge has been generated. Researchers can get useful information through communication with participants. An effective interview can make the interviewer get most useful information from interviewee; interviewer and respondent can complete furthest knowledge exchange. Communication skill is a very important factor to the effective interview. Understanding and managing the good communication skills can create more chance to make an effective interview. Like Hunt and Eadie (1987) said, "although a successful interview is not entirely dependent on good communication, by understanding communication, both the interviewer and the respondent can enhance their chance of conducting an effective interview" (p.15).

Hunt and Eadie (1987) also introduce some basic communication skills that they think useful to the good interview to us (p.15-23). For example, role playing skill, managing skills, and so on. These skills can help the interviewer or respondents to communicate with him/her partner. According to Hunt and Eadie (1987), these skills "are most useful when communicators consider the needs and attitudes of the other person when they communicate" (p.15). I want to focus on the role playing skill in following discussion.

As to role playing, the roles of interviewer and respondent can change in the interview. Interviewer is not always asking questions to respondent, and the respondent is not always answering the questions that the interviewers give. Hunt and Eadie (1987) said that "the interview is not always the one who asks all of the questions, and the respondent is not always the one who answers" (p.16). This perspective has been supported by Stewart and Cash (2000), they said that "interview parties often exchange roles of interviewer and interviewee as an interview progresses" (p.2). A good interviewer will change the roles in terms of the development of actual situation in the interview, for example, the expectations of the respondent, the development of the questions, and so on. To conduct a good interview, the interviewer should deal with the role playing in flexible attitude. As Hunt and Eadie (1987) said, "Good interviewers recognize the need for change when it occurs and adapt their role playing accordingly" (p.16).

Secondly, there are two parties in the interview---interviewer and interviewee. If the researchers want to use the interview method to plan an investigation, researchers must select the respondents for the research. In this process, the researcher is interviewer, the respondents is interviewee. Actually, the researchers will select more than one people in the interview. That is to say, there are more than two people join in the interviewing. But these respondents belong to the interviewee party; these researchers belong to the interviewer party. It is impossible to have more than two parties in an interview. Like Stewart and Cash

(2000) comment on, the “interviews may involve two or more people but never more than two parties---an interviewer party and an interviewee party. If more than two parties are involved, a small group interaction is occurring, not an interview” (p.3).

SOME ISSUES ON THE INTERVIEW

The situations which the researcher should use interview

The interview is not strange term for most people. Many people have the job interviewing experience. As a way of gathering and generating knowledge, the interview has been used in the process of research frequently. There are some situations which we use the interview, for example, we want get information from smaller number of people, we have enough time and money for research, we want to make in depth investigation, and so on (cited in handout of Research Method in Education). As a research method, the interview is very effective way to gather people’s idea and activities. According to Allport (1942), “if you wanted to know something about people’s activities the best way of finding out was to ask them” (cited in Brenner, Brown and Canter, 1985, p.2). May (1997) point out the interview is the most effective way to apperceive participant’s experiences, opinions, feeling, attitudes, and so on (cited in Mills, 2001, p.291). According to Powney and Watts (1987), “Interviewing is a particularly useful way to gather people’s view as one formulates research hypotheses (p2)”. So the interview has been widely used in many situations which try to get people’s idea.

The Limitations and the advantages

Like other research methods, the interview has limitations and advantages. Compare with questionnaire, the interview is more difficult to get reliable information, because the interview is not anonymous, the respondent will have pressure to answer the sensitive questions, then maybe give us not assuring information. Like Phillips (1973) comment that “when respondents feel sensitive about topic raised in the interview, the answers are likely to be invalid” (cited in Brenner, Brown and Canter, 1985, p.4). Another limitation is that the interview need lots of preparation work for collection of the information, it will cost more money and time than questionnaire (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p269). This point has been support by Scott and Chanlett (1973), “the cost of assembling and training a field staff to do the interviewing are much greater than many people would anticipate” (cited in Brenner, Brown and Canter, 1985, p.4).

Interview also has some advantages. Firstly, it is the action of face to face, so the information has been collected in time. Like Brenner, Brown and Canter (1985) said, the advantage of the interview that “it gives rapid, immediate responses” (p.3). At the same time, the misunderstanding of the interview can be checked by interviewer and interviewee immediately (Brenner, Brown and Canter, 1985, p.3). Secondly, the interview gives respondents more appropriate speed to think about the questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p269). Thirdly, as an interactional conversation process, the interviewer can get more deep information from respondents. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) point out the interview “allow for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection” (p.269).

Validity of the interview

As a research method, we must consider the validity, reliability and generalizebility of the information from the interview. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), comparing interview measures with other measures can improve the validity of the information of the interview. Another effective way is avoiding the bias as much as possible. Some aspects of the

bias should be considered, for example, the attitudes of the interviewer, the misperceptions on the respondent words, and so on (121).

The data Analysis of interview

There are seven steps to conduct the interview: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting (Kvale, 1996, p.88, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.274). When we complete the collection of the interview data, analyzing is next step for our investigation. According to Stewart and Cash (2000), the analysis is an action that “makes sense of the data you have obtained” (P.166). Powney and Watts (1987) comment on the analysis “is the detailed examination of the database that ensues from single or multiple interviews” (p.161). Mills (2001) provides a very useful comment about the nature of analysis, “the process of analysis was reflective and cyclical in that it aimed to expose and track particular themes as they arose from the original research question” (p.288). Coding is used most often in the process of analysis. According to Kerlinger (1970), coding is the action of translating and categorizing the question that respondent give the researcher for the aims of analysis (cite in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.283). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) point out every response can be translated by objection way. The researchers should give the abbreviations to every response; these abbreviations should be understood immediately by the researchers.

Ethical implication in interview

Researchers must consider ethical issues before they conduct the research. Gorden (1975) provide that the ethics is “the application of social values to concrete behaviour” (cite in Morton-Williams, 1993, p.14). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) said, “Social researchers must take into account the effects of the research on participants, and act in such a way as to preserve their dignity as human beings” (p.56). In interview method, we should take into account some ethical implications. For example, as an interviewer, they should respect the private right of the interviewee when they make interview questions and manage the process of the interview. At the same time, the interviewer should keep the information about the interviewee without the consent of interviewee (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.61). I agree with this point, the ethical issue is very important for a good interview.

CONCLUSION

As a research method, the interview is very important method for people who want to explore the people’s experiences, opinions, feeling, attitudes, activities, and so on. It is necessary for researchers to have a comprehension on the definition of the interview and the characteristics of the interview. In addition, some issues about the interview have been discussed: the situations which the researcher should use interview; the limitations and advantages of the interview; Validity of the interview; the data analysis of the interview. Finally, some ethical implications have been considered.

From this article, we understand that the interview methods are very important to us in educational area. They can help educators to make the depth investigation for their research as well as develop education itself.

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