

Interview and Interview- Schedule in Social Research

There are so many techniques to collect primary data in social research. Interview and structured schedule are considered as the common tools. Most of the interviews are based on structured - schedules and schedules are filled by interview techniques so both tools are interrelated. In a simple meaning – “an interview is a meeting in which someone answers questions about himself or herself for a newspaper article, television show, or research etc”. In this technique the researcher (interviewer) goes in -side or observes the responses or thoughts of the interviewee.

Qualitative interviews are sometimes called intensive or in-depth interviews. These interviews are **semi-structured**; the researcher has a particular topic about which she would like to hear from the respondent, but questions are open-ended and may not be asked in exactly the same way or in exactly the same order to each and every respondent. For **in-depth interviews**, the primary aim is to hear from respondents about what they think is important about the topic at hand and to hear it in their own words. In this section, we'll take a look at how to conduct qualitative interviews, analyze interview data, and identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of this method.

An interview schedule is basically a list containing a set of structured questions that have been prepared, to serve as a guide for interviewers, researchers and investigators in collecting information or data about a specific topic or issue. The schedule will be used by the interviewer, who will fill in the questions with the answers received during the actual interview.

Advantages of an Interview Schedule

An interview schedule facilitates the conduct of an interview. Since the questions have already been prepared beforehand, it is easier to carry out and complete the interview.

It increases the likelihood of collecting accurate information or data. The questions, which were already prepared beforehand, are expected to be well-thought out and have focus, so they target the “heart of the matter”, thereby ensuring that the answers obtained are correct or accurate. According to *Lindlof & Taylor*, interview schedules can increase the reliability and credibility of data gathered.

It allows interviewers and researchers to get more information, since they can ask follow-up queries or clarifications to the questions they have prepared. Thus, the information gathered is more relevant and useful.

The rate and amount of responses are higher. Often, interviews are time-bound. Interviewers are given only a limited amount of time to ask all their questions and get the answers. If he came prepared, then he can utilize that time properly. Otherwise, he will be wasting a lot of time, thinking about what question to ask next. The next thing he knows, time is up, and he barely got anything substantial from the interviewee.

It offers flexibility and high customization, and may be used when interviewing different types of people. The interviewer can prepare it with the respondents in mind. For example, an interviewer may have prepared a job interview schedule for the recruitment of a construction worker or laborer. When he is tasked to interview candidates for a senior management position, he may also use the same schedule, but with several adjustments.

Disadvantages of an Interview Schedule

It can be time-consuming. Preparation of the interview schedule can take quite a chunk of the time of an interviewer, especially if it is for an extensive or in-depth interview. Significant amounts of research must be performed in order to be able to craft good questions.

There is a high risk that the interview and its results may suffer from the bias of the interviewer, as he is the one that will choose the questions to be asked during the interview.

Variability may be high when the interview schedule is used by multiple interviewers. This may result to unreliable information gathered during the interviews.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

There are two major types of interview schedules or guides that are widely used by interviewers.

In-depth interview schedule

This is used for open-ended interviews, which are aimed at obtaining in-depth information, often on serious topics or sensitive issues. The questions are open-

ended, with prompts provided for the interviewer to ask for clarification or further information if necessary.

The interviewee is given more room or leeway to talk about all the topics that will crop up during the interview, so he is free to use his own words and let the ideas flow out of him easily. The key characteristics of this interview schedule are listed below.

The schedule contains indications of the interviewee's awareness of the purpose of the interview and how long it will take.

The questions must be crafted to provide answers relevant to the topic or issue. For example, if it is a job interview, the questions should address the matter on whether the applicant being interviewed possesses the qualifications and credentials that make him suitable for the open position. If the interview is for purposes of research or investigation, the questions should answer the main problem or topic of the research or investigation.

All questions should be relevant, or have an impact on the purpose or objective of the interview. Remove any irrelevant questions, or those with answers that won't be of any use to you.

It takes the one-step-at-a-time approach, with each question meant to tackle only one issue, instead of addressing several issues all at one. This has a tendency to confuse not only the interviewee, but also the interviewer, and result in the latter losing control of the direction of the interview.

Instead of using questions answerable with a Yes or No, the questions are open-ended, which can be used as a starting or reference point for more questions. This way, the interviewer can go deeper in getting information he needs.

The questions are neutral, avoiding leading questions that have the potential to dictate the answer to the interviewee.

Structured interview schedule

This type of interview schedule is often compared with the format used in survey forms or questionnaires because of their similarities. The difference lies in the usage; obviously, the interview schedule is used by the interviewer during a face-to-face interaction, while the questionnaire is simply filled out by the respondent.

This interview schedule contains the questions that will be asked, and it is also where the interviewer will record the answers to those questions. Essentially, preparing an interview schedule for a structured interview is the same as preparing a questionnaire. It's just that the questionnaire will be used solely by the interviewer, and the respondent or interviewee will not get to lay their eyes on the contents.

For more flexibility, however, some interviewers combine the features of these two types when they prepare their interview schedule. It would really be up to the interviewer, and what he deems to be most effective in achieving his objectives.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE TEMPLATES

There is no single standard template for an interview schedule. Generally, the format will depend on the type and purpose of the interview being conducted, as well as the target respondents or interviewees. However, the interview schedule must have three major parts:

1. Opening

Some researchers call this stage the “warm-up”, where the objective is to create an atmosphere that will accommodate the open and free flow of ideas between the interviewer and interviewee, whether it is one-on-one or in a group.

At the start of the interview, the interviewer should welcome the interviewee and make an effort to put him at ease. If the respondent is relaxed, the interview is likely to go smoothly. The interviewer will then proceed to inform the interviewee of the following:

Objectives of the interview. The interviewee deserves to know why the interview is taking place, and why he is involved. In case of a job interview, the applicant being interviewed already knows why he is in the same room with the HR personnel, but it should still be spelled out to him.

The topics or points that will be discussed in the course of the interview. This is to further make the interviewee comfortable, since you are giving him something like an ‘advanced warning’ on what will be asked later on in the conversation.

The estimated length or duration of the interview. The interviewee does not want to be kept guessing throughout the course of the interview when it will end, or if he will have to spend all morning talking to the interviewer.

The interviewee would like to feel that he will benefit in some way from this interview, so it would definitely help if you give him motivation to answer the questions properly and accurately. If you don't, he may not be inclined to answer the questions, much less give good answers.

This part of the interview schedule may be formatted in such a way that fits the interviewer's personality, and even that of the interviewee.

2. Body

We come to the "core discussion". This contains the meat of the interview schedule: the topics and the questions to be asked. Again, the content will depend on the topic and the type of interview. The main thing that you should never overlook is that the questions should fulfill the objective of the interview.

Instead of an interview outline, which includes only a list of topics and subtopics, a typical interview schedule also contains major questions, as well as follow-up questions designed to probe or clarify the answers to the previously asked major questions.

When preparing the body of the interview schedule, it is important to leave more than enough space where the interviewer may write down the responses or answers of the interviewee.

3. Closing

The interview is about to be wrapped up. The reason that it is included in the interview schedule is to ensure that the interview will not end abruptly, which may come across as rude to the interviewee.

The closing will cover the main points, in summary, that were talked about during the interview, followed by a brief discussion on the next steps that will be taken after the interview.

You may check out this template for an example of an interview schedule to be used in talking with a university classmate. This other template of a simple interview guide also provides cues on what the interviewer should say during the interview, aside from the questions that he will ask.

In some cases, an interview schedule may be so simple as to contain only the salient points, such as the purpose of the interview, the date, time and location of the conduct of the interview, and the names and contact details of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Take a look at this job interview schedule as an example.

Fortunately, there is a wealth of resources of interview schedule templates that you can find online that you can tweak and adapt to your needs.

TIPS IN PREPARING AND USING AN INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The main concern in the preparation of an interview schedule is on the questions. What should be asked, and how should they be asked? But that is not all. Even the order or sequence of asking the questions also matters, which is why it should also be reflected on the interview schedule.

Remember the following tips when preparing the guide that you will use for the interview.

Do not start the interview with a question probing into any personal information of the interviewee (unless the purpose of the interview is to talk about his personal life). If it's a job interview, it would be better to get him to talk about his skills, qualifications and work experiences, since that is his comfort zone. If it is a research interview, you can start things off by asking the interviewee about his expertise in the field that you are interviewing him about. Do not ask him personal questions about his family or similar topics.

Start with the "lighter" questions, or those that will not immediately put the interviewee or respondent on his guard. The interviewer should be able to answer the question easily, then you can move on gradually to the more sensitive or difficult topics. If you start it with a controversial question, or something that will make the interviewee uncomfortable, that will set a grim tone for the rest of the interview.

The general rule is for you to group the questions in a logical manner. You can start with general questions, and work your way toward the specific questions later on. Of course, you may have to be flexible at times, especially when a general question must be followed by a specific question in order to clarify something.

For variety and a more natural flow, if you are using both open-ended and closed questions, it would be a good idea to mix them up, instead of asking all the closed questions first and then the open-ended ones in the latter half of the interview. Another suggestion is to adapt the funnel or inverted funnel sequence. The funnel sequence will have you starting with open-ended questions, and gradually but naturally easing into the close-ended ones. The inverted funnel sequence orders the questions in reverse.

Keep the respondents or interviewees in mind when preparing the questions. You should know about their background, at least, so you can prepare questions that will resonate with them. If you are going to interview candidates for a supervisory engineering position, you can frame the questions so that the candidates will be able to prove whether they are qualified for the job or not. If you are interviewing a person of interest regarding a recent incident, you should at least find out why he is considered to be a “person of interest”, so you can come up with the proper and relevant questions.

The wording of the questions must be clear. Avoid using complicated and highly technical terms, unless you are completely sure that the interviewee is familiar with them. Try using simple language and layman’s terms to avoid confusion. Stay away from colloquial terms and jargon, especially when there are better – easier to understand – alternatives that you can use. Sentence structure is also important. Questions structured into long and run-on sentences may confuse you both, and the interviewee may miss the main point that you are asking about. As earlier mentioned, as much as possible, each question should address a single issue. Avoid placing too many questions in a single sentence, to be read in one breath.

Provide adequate space where you can record or write the answers or responses to each question. There is an option to use a recorder during the interview, in case there are some points that you fail to record on the interview schedule. If you are going to use one, you have to inform the interviewee about it at the start of the interview, and get his consent to record the interview.

As interviewer, you have to familiarize yourself with the interview schedule. You want the interview to flow naturally, and you definitely don’t want to sound stilted when asking the questions or, worse, as if you rehearsed it. Well, you probably have, but you don’t want to make that apparent to the interviewee. You have to exude confidence; after all, you are the one asking the questions. Once you have prepared the interview schedule, you have to know it inside out.

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