Interview and survey: an evaluation and contrast of these two approaches to data collection

In this essay I shall be evaluating and contrasting the interview and survey approach to data collection. I shall describe each method and the circumstances in which they would be used, and look at the strengths and weakness of each method by referring to two examples of research where each method has been utilised. Interviews and surveys can take many forms and the research approach will often determine which type is used. Some researchers such as Fontana and Frey (1994) view a survey as just another form of interview, where interviews fall into three main categories; structured, semi-structured and unstructured, of which the structured is type is a survey interview. For the purpose of this essay, I shall be treating a structured interview as a survey and the semi and unstructured as interviews.

A survey is where a pre-determined set of questions is asked with a range of possible answers. Although a survey is commonly paper based, requiring the recipient to fill in the answers without the need to discuss with an interviewer, they can also be used over the telephone and in a face-to-face situation. Surveys of this type are often used for market research purposes. When used in face-to-face or telephone situations, one of the advantages is that the person asking the questions need not have any detailed knowledge

of the questions, requiring merely to record which one of the available options was chosen. Howev er, the main advantages of using surveys to collect research data is that surveys can be used to gather information from a large number of people, where interviewing large numbers would be extremely time consuming and costly. The possible answers can be p re-coded enabling a quick analysis of the collected data. However, the recipient is put in the position of aligning their answer with one of the available choices and this may not be reflective of their true position. Furthermore, the questions may be misunderstood and unlike an interview situation, there is no way of seeking clarification. The data collected from a structured interview would be used in a quantitative research project. That is a where the research data is represented in numerical and statistical form.

As well as the semi-structured and unstructured interviews, there can be different types of interview, such a one to one interview consisting of the interviewer and interviewee, and group interviews, where the interviewer acts more as a facilitator of a group. In the case of group interviews, more meaningful data could be collected, as views expressed by one person could generate further views by the other members of group, stimulating a more in depth discussion. On the other hand, the dynamics of the group could be that some people dominate and others do not express their views, or are not prepared to express them in front of others.

An unstructured interview can be viewed more as an informal chat. This approach can be used to de termine questions for a more structured interview or to find out general views of the interviewee on a particular subject. Unstructured interviews are widely used by people carrying out ethnographic research, where they want to understand the lifestyle an d thoughts of particular groups. The data collected from interviews such as these would be used in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, have some characteristics of a structured and unstructured interview and would tend to consist of pre-determined initial questions, which are aimed to find out the interviewee's thoughts and opinions. The answers may determine a follow up question. The data collected from this type of interview is useful for research projects that take a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach. That is where research data is represented not only in numerical and statistical form (quantitative), but comments made by interviewees are analysed and used to understand their experiences and thoughts and con vey these in the research findings (qualitative). The range and flexibility of interview types means an interview can be used for a lot of differing types of research. One of the advantages of the interview approach is that it can be used in qualitative and quantitative research.

For data collected by an interview or survey to be meaningful it must be accurate and the researcher has a number of challenges to achieve this. Two pieces of research which demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of surve y and interview approaches are 'Children's Experiences of Short-term Accommodation' by Aldgate and Bradley (2004), and 'Multiple Risk Behaviour and Injury: An International Analysis of Young People' by Pickett *et al* (2004). In the former, a semi-structured interview approach was taken. The research team interviewed parents, their children and social workers to understand the experiences of families who used this facility. In this survey, 60 families were interviewed before, but whilst accommodation was being arranged, and after using the service. As the aim of the research was to assess how successful the Children's Act of 1989 had been in that parents and children must be consulted over short-term accommodation and that children's wishes and feelings must be considered when planning for it. In the latter, a structured survey approach was taken, using the data from the World Health Organisation internal survey. The data used covered twelve different countries. The aim was to assess whether incidences of multiple risk taking behaviour resulted in greater injury incidents in children of 11, 13 and 15.

In an interview situation there is the need to establish the trust of and a rapport with the interviewee and their questionings must be clear and not lead the interviewee into a particular answer. In Audio

Band 4 Aldgate stresses the importance of asking open questions.
She states:

> "So I wouldn't say to the children 'Do you think
> your parent ought to visit you in foster care?' I
> would say, 'What do you think about parents coming
> to visit their children in foster care?'"
> (Audio Band 4 pp 07:49 – 08:27)

In Aldgate and Bradley's research, it was important to understand
the feelings of the children and they took the approach to have a set
of questions they wanted answered, but which they could then
explore in more detail and therefore a survey approach would not
have been suitable. It is also true in a survey that the questions
should not be written as to lead the recipient to answer in a
particular way.   There is the danger that an interviewee may
mislead the interviewer, either intentionally or unintentionally.   They
may give an answer they think the interviewer wants, particularly if
they feel in awe of the interviewer or if they perceive a power
imbalance.   If the culture or language differs there may also be
misunderstandings as to what is being asked. This is also true in a
survey. Thus interviewing requires skill to recognise suc h situations
and offer or seek clarification. This would not be possible in a
survey. In Audio Band 4 Pickett tells how in his research, all the
survey questions were written in English and then translated into the
language of all the participating cou ntries. This did result in some
slight change in meanings. He also points out that with a large

number of countries taking part you are potentially dealing with hundreds of different cultures, rather than, in his research, 12 different countries. For these reasons, in both surveys and interviews, it is important to pilot the questions to be asked so they can be refined and questions rephrased to prevent misunderstandings and offence.

Additionally, how the data collection is recorded has to be carefu lly considered in the interview situation. Whereas in survey, where a highly structured approach is taken, it can be enough to tick the answers to the pre-determined and pre-coded question. For less structured interviews, the interviewer has a number of options; note taking, tape recording or videoing. Each have their own advantages and disadvantages. In note taking the interviewer has to be able to take notes whilst listening to the interviewee. If the interview is recorded or videoed, whilst the inte rviewer is free to concentrate on the interview, the issue of transcribing can be very time consuming and problematic. This can be particularly true in a group situation, determining who said what, what is audible and how the approach is perceived by the interviewee. .   In order to analyse the data, the researcher not only needs to transcribe the information but categorise it into themes or topics.   In all cases there are ethical issues to consider and where interviews are used as research covering children, the issue of establishing trust and rapport is not just with the children, but with their parents. In Aldgate and

Bradley's research they addressed this by showing the interview questions to the parents first to ensure they were happy with them. They also gave the parents the opportunity to be present whilst their children were being interviewed. Additionally, they used the fact that they recorded interviews to enable those being interviewed to have more control over the interview by stating that they could stop the recording at any time and also they could play back the recording and have deleted anything they were not happy with.

However, the amount of work in interviewing and transcribing video or tape recording would make it very difficult to expand Bradley and Aldgate's research to cover a much wider range of participants. Although to widen participation a survey approach could be taken with a smaller sample having follow up interviews. However, the fact that the research included interview s with young children, would mean that developing a survey that they were mature enough to understand would be difficult and likely to lead to children not being able to participant or misleading answers. In Pickett *et al's* research, using the survey app roach included around 50,000 children. It would have been very expensive and time consuming to interview that number of children. A further advantage in using the survey approach is that Pickett was able to use data already collected as part of a larger survey. Although, this in itself meant that he had to get permission from the various countries involved not only to use the data, but that they were happy with his approach to

analysing it, and that the survey data available did not always cover the areas he was interested in as some countries had not recorded it.

The most important part of determining a data collection approach what the research aims are and how they are to be presented. A key element of Bradley and Aldgate's research was to find out how the children felt about going into foster care and this would be very difficult, if not impossible, to assess from a survey.   In order to present the anxieties felt by children and their parents it was also important to include actual comments made as well as grouping similar comments to show statistical evidence. There is also an onus on the researchers to ensure that comments are representative of the research and not biased to any particular view they may have.   In Pickett *et al's* research they were able to use the survey data to see if there was any correlation between types of risk behaviour and increased injuries via statistical evidence.

In conclusion, interviews and surveys are valuable methods of data collection in research. A survey enab les a large number of people to participate in the research but the level of depth is limited as further probing is not possible. Surveys are useful for research looking at correlations between causes and effects and reporting quantitative research. Inte rviews can be useful for both quantitative and qualitative research. Semi -structured interviews enable further

probing into the participants' experiences and unstructured interviews can draw out initial topics for further research.   Both interviews and surveys have strengths and weaknesses and the choice of which to use should be driven by the aims of research project and how it is to be reported.

(Words: 1985)

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