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## Conceptualization of Qualitative Interview: A Reflection from the Practice

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### Abstract

*This methodological reflection on 'interview' is based on my research work on, "An Ethnographic Study into Indigenous Knowledge and Life-based Learning of Dhimal Community". The objective is to reflect on the steps that involve procedures based on personal experiences of developing and conducting the interview during an ethnographic field study. So, this reflection sheds light on how I carried out an ethnographic interview in the Dhimal indigenous community to generate data. The methodology employed in the field was an ethnography that engages the researcher as a participant who utilizes several methods depending upon the field's necessity. I visited research participants formally and informally at their homes and worksites to generate the data until were saturated. I maintained privacy and security that uphold the protection of their responses, and anonymity as an ethical consideration. The study reveals that ethnographic interviews oppose the pre-scheduled interview activities and take place through several negotiations and mutual understanding among the research participants depending on the context. Equally, the self-reflexivity of the researcher is crucial in every negotiating step to be followed, and such negotiations go beyond the formal context of the interview.*

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## **Introduction**

An interview is face-to-face interaction and is carried out to collect data for different purposes. Interview, according to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, (2011, p. 349) “It is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard”. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p.4) in this regard contend “An interview is literally an inter-view, an inter-exchange of views between two persons conversing about the themes of mutual interest”. This indicates the purpose of an interview which is a popular means to collect the data from participants by using open-ended questionnaires, specifically in qualitative research, and closed questionnaires in quantitative research that verifies hypothesis by using different kinds of devices.

Through the conceptualization of an interview, I arrive at the idea that an interview generally involves a two-way process between participants and the interviewer so that participants can freely express their views, ideas, and experiences without any constraints. It is often argued that an interview has the quality and advantage over questionnaires concerning probing information from the participants as the information is explored from the unseen experiences of the participants. Unless human subjects and behaviors are understood, the necessary and valued data collection is impossible. In this sense, the interview is a social encounter, not simply a site for information exchange, and researchers would be well advised to keep this at the forefront of their minds when conducting an interview (Cited in Cohen et al, 2011, p. 250).

The above-discussed conceptions of interview give a clear idea about why the interview is being carried out in social research. It shows

that it is a tool for obtaining pure information, recognizing potent bias and discrimination that need to be controlled, and encountering sharing different features of everyday life. In this connection, this study aims to reflect the steps that involve procedures based on personal experiences in developing and conducting the interview during an ethnographic field study. This paper, therefore, involves my realizations and insights about interviews gained through ethnographic field conduction and the selected books and journals published focusing on qualitative interviews.

## **Methods and Materials**

My methods and materials involve two major procedures – employing an ethnographic design and the review of related textbooks – in generating the data. First, this is an ethnographic interview through which I reflect on the process as to how I pursue the interviewing the participants. The discussion and the findings, therefore, reflect my experiences in the field while approaching my research participants. The second is the review of the concerned books published highlighting the importance of the interview. These reviews provide me with realizations and insight into perceiving my field and gaining experiences through a practice informed by conceptual understandings. Particularly, I apply the conceptual framework suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) which provides a clear outline for a researcher to collect the data in the field. This framework involves thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting in the interview process. Using this framework, my experiences gained in conducting the interview have been inserted according to the steps discussed in the procedure to reflect on drawing the meaning.

### **Ethnographic Field Study**

This study employs an ethnographic field study. The term ethnography, according to Creswell (2012, p. 460) "writing about groups of people." Using this qualitative design, you can identify a group of people; study them in their homes or workplaces; note how they behave, think, and talk; and develop a general portrait of the group. Flick (2005, p. 23) argues that it aims less at understanding social events or processes from reports about these events (i.e., in an interview) but at understanding social processes of making these events from the inside by participating in the processes' developments.

My field study was in Morang district, the Eastern part of Nepal, where anyone finds the Dhimal community with its distinct cultural and livelihood patterns. Particularly, the Uurlabari Municipality was the field site where I conducted my interview visiting the Dhimal people and their school children. As an ethnography does not include a prescheduled interview guideline (Cohen et.al, 2011), I utilized a flexible interview guideline to approach the participants. This means, I sometimes talked to the participants individually when I met them, and sometimes I conduct a group interview as I found more than one. My flexible interview guideline had just outlined the research questions and the possible probing that could be asked of the participants as issues were raised. Therefore, my population ranged from school children to Dhimal ethnic leaders, from ages 14 years to 79 years, educationists to politicians, and peasants to businessmen.

### **Conceptual Understanding of the Interview**

There have been several books that highlight the essence of interviews. Cohen et al (2011) give a wider concept of an interview which

includes three important understandings. As a distinctive research technique, the interview may serve three purposes. First, it may be used as the principal means of gathering information having a direct bearing on the research objectives. Second, it may be used to test hypotheses or suggest new ones, or as an explanatory device. Third, the interview may be used in conjunction with other methods in a research undertaking (p.350). Creswell (2012, p.217) argues, "In qualitative research, you ask open-ended questions so that the participants can best voice their experience unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings". As Kvale (1996, p.14) remarks, "As an interview, 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" (Cited in Cohen et al. 2011, p. 350). This indicates that the interview simply subsumes a two-way process between participants and the interviewer so that participants can freely express their views, ideas, and experiences in their ways. In Feldman's (2001, p.147) words, "The attraction of interview is that it is a two-way process in which allows you to interact with the informant(s), thus, facilitating a more probing investigation than could be undertaken with a questionnaire". In this way, the interview embeds a kind of quality and advantage that goes beyond the questionnaires while probing information from the participants. As cited in Cohen et al (2011, 350), Kitwood (1977) has contrasted three different conceptions of an interview which gives a clear understanding of the field. According to him:

The first conception is that of a potential means of pure information transfer. This conception of the interview appears to be widely

held. A second conception of the interview is that of a transaction that inevitably has a bias that needs to be recognized and controlled. The interview is best understood in terms of a theory of motivation that recognizes a range of non-rational factors governing human behavior, like emotions, unconscious needs, and interpersonal influences. The third conception of the interview sees it as an encounter necessarily sharing many of the features of everyday life.

Concerning these arguments made by Walford's (2001) remarks, 'interviewers and interviewees co-construct the interview'. It also exhibits that it is a good instrument for attaining needed information, recognizing embedded bias and prejudice, and helping to be aware of such bias and discrimination owing to one's cultural values, social condition, and hierarchy. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p.4) see, "Research interview involves the cultivation of conversational skills that most adult human beings already possess by virtue of being able to ask questions, but the cultivation of these skills can be challenging". In this sense, an interview is not simply to record, collect and disseminate the data; rather it is a complex human subject that requires specific skills to penetrate it. As Kvale (1996) highlights "The use of the interview in research marks a move away from seeing human subjects as simply manipulable and data as somehow external to individuals, and towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversations (Cited in Cohen et al, 2011, p.349).

To sum up, the review of different conceptions of interviews, it seems that it is an interpersonal

relationship that requires specific skills to understand human subjects and deal with human behaviors. Understanding human subjects and behaviors, an interview plays a huge role in displaying the inner social and cultural conditioning of participants. Cohen et al (ibid, p. 349) argue "interviews enable participants, whether they are interviewers or interviewees, to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situation from their point of view". Adding to this, Kvale (1996) further views that the interview is not simply collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, and its human embeddedness is inescapable (ibid). The following sub-points highlight the types of interviews that are more common in contemporary research studies.

### **Types of Interviews**

The review of the text and scholarly write-ups give a glimpse of several kinds of interviews. The general argument is that types of interviews depend on the nature of the data the research questions demand and the respondents who provide the data. Kvale (1996) sets the several forms of interview along with a series of continuity, arguing that interviews differ in the openness of their purpose, their degree of structure, and the extent to which they are exploratory (Cited in Cohen et al, 2011, p. 353). The number of types of an interview given is frequently a function of the sources one reads! For example, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) give six types: standardized interviews; in-depth interviews; ethnographic interviews; elite inter- views; life history interviews; focus groups (ibid). According to Patton (2002), there are four types of interviews: informal conversational interviews; interview guide approaches; standardized open-ended interviews; closed quantitative interviews. Creswell (2012) discusses different kinds of

Interviews namely, one-to-one interviews, focus group interviews, telephonic interviews, and E-mail interviews. Bodan and Biklen (1992) have proposed different kinds of interviews. According to them, structured, semi-structured, unstructured, and group interviews are common in practice (Cited in Cohen et al, 2011).

The structured interview shows that the contents of the interview are structured and arranged in such a way that intends to limit the response of respondents. Equally, it is fixed in number and time, and the respondent is allowed to answer the structured question according to the pre-determined schedule of the interview. According to Cohen et al (2011), the structured interview is one in which the content and procedures are organized in advance. This means the sequence and wording of the questions are determined by employing a schedule and the interviewer is left with little freedom to make modifications.

Unlike the structured interview, an unstructured interview provides flexibility in responding to the questions. According to Creswell (2011, p. 218), "It allows the participants to create an option to the questions". This reflects that there is great flexibility in responding to the questions and the respondents are free to give their views without any restrictions. Supporting this, Cohen et al (2011, p. 355) argue, "The unstructured interview is an open situation, having greater flexibility and freedom". The unstructured interview, in comparison to a structured interview, maybe longer as there is great flexibility and openness allowed to the respondents. In this regard, Feldman (2001, 148) views, "This type of interview is likely to take longer than those based on a series of closed questions". However, as Kerlinger (1970) notes, although the research purposes

govern the questions asked, their content, sequence, and wording are entirely in the hands of the interviewer (Cited in Cohen et al, 2011).

The non-directive interview as a research technique derives from the therapeutic or psychiatric interview as proposed by Karl Rogers. Rogers's argument is to give the freedom for the participants to express his/her feelings and emotions on the issues to be studied. According to Cohen et al (2011, p. 356), "The principal features of it are the minimal direction or control exhibited by the interviewer and the freedom the respondent has to express his/her subjective feelings as fully and as spontaneously as s/he chooses or is able". Thus, compared to the above-discussed two types of interviews, this interview seems to be participatory, and flexibility and freedom are given to the participants to choose and decide the subjective issues to be discussed in the interaction. However, a little bit of control is exhibited by the researcher.

The focus group interview is useful to capture the expression, interest, emotions, ideas, and views on the issues to be discussed for generating the data. Discussing the benefits of initial group discussions, Feldman (2001, p.150) emphasizes "Initial group interviews of this nature can give you broad coverage and generate a lot of information and perhaps new ideas". The researcher from the initial group discussions can penetrate the issues to be further discussed and could be clear about what is the most important subject that is to be asked in the next group discussions. According to Cohen et al (2011, p. 356), "The distinctive feature of this type is that it focuses on a respondent's subjective responses to a known situation in which he or she has been involved and which has been analyzed by the interviewer before the interview".

Reflecting upon the above-discussed context and the types of interviews, I have prepared to conduct the unstructured interview which is ethnographic in nature. An open-ended interview, unstructured in nature, will be an appropriate method of capturing people's meanings and perceptions. As Patton (2002, p.405) discusses that "A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience, not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee". The open-ended interview will be conducted with the key informants who are the community leaders, activists, old age people, members, or chairpersons of cultural or community organizations. In its purest form, according to Fife (2005, p. 101), unstructured interviewing is best thought of as a virtually invisible part of participant observation. Unstructured interview partly is complementary to participant observation. Therefore, utilizing the unstructured interview for key informants, who could provide their perceptions, experiences, skills, and knowledge as well as their practices embedded into their community for years. Based on these conceptual understandings of an interview and the process I employed helped me to gain insight as experiences have been discussed in the next title.

## **Results and Discussion**

My interview procedures based on the discussed conceptual understanding of the interview conducted are consistent with ideas discussed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015). According to them, thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting are the major steps to be followed while planning interviews in my study.

The first step in planning my interview, as discussed by Kvale and Brinkmann, is thematizing which is a basic outline that gives

a theoretical basis for the study regarding why the interview approach is chosen. In this stage, the broad aims and goals are translated into more specific objectives so that they could produce the right kind of data. According to Kvale and Brinkmann, (ibid, p.128), "Why and what of the investigation should be clarified before the question of how-method-is posed". In this step what I learned was we need to translate our underlined objectives into practice. I often made them an umbrella while approaching people. I translated these objectives into flexible questioning forms so that the needed information could not be lost and could support the participants that I was requiring the information. Most of these objectives were derived from a theoretical backup of the study, so they all guided me to pick up the right information. In this stage, I thematized the issues informed by my objectives and directed my research questions to explore the experiences of the participants. Thus, my careful formulation of objectives based on the broad aim of the study and clarification of themes to be investigated as questions to answer the research questions were set before the interview starts.

The second step I followed was to translate the research objectives of the study into the questions, but my questions were flexible, and they were more sequentially oral. Kvale and Brinkmann (ibid, p.128) contend, "Designing the study I'd undertaken concerning obtaining the intended knowledge and taking into account the moral implications of the study". In this step, therefore, the different variables were written down to be dealt with and questions were formulated in such a way that reflects what the researcher was looking for.

In the third stage, the researcher selected the research subjects and thoroughly reviewed all the interview procedures to be adopted before

conducting the interview. After this revision, the researcher then conducted the interview based on the prepared interview guideline. Kvale and Brinkmann suggest, "Interview with an interview guide and the reflective approach to the knowledge sought" (p.28). This gave me a focus on what my research participants experienced on the issues, and how they gave meaning to their experiences.

In the fourth stage after generating the data, another step I pursued was to transcribe the interview from oral to written text. According to Kvale and Brinkmann, it requires preparing the interview material for analysis, which generally includes a transcription from oral speech to written text. It was essential to know to transcribe the data collected and there was a need to be a careful judgment about the exact data translated from the recordings. This means, for example, the meaning should not be distorted, the personal bias of the researcher should be neutral, and possible risks to the respondents should be avoided. This in practice was my reflexivity in which I was aware of being biased and prejudiced because of my socio-cultural backup, values, and motives.

The fifth stage involves a certain form of coding; scoring, categorizing, and thematizing the data to be analyzed. Kvale and Brinkmann propose to "decide, based on the purpose and topic of the investigation and of the nature of the interview material, which modes of analysis are appropriate for the interviews". However, the types of data analysis depend on the type of research the researcher has carried out; whether it is quantitative or qualitative research should be followed the modes of analysis. In this backup, all the procedures I pursued were based on qualitative research, mainly concentrated on thematization as the

main idea to be conceptualized for a better analysis of the data.

The sixth stage is the validity and reliability of the interview data which are the crucial issues to be considered in the research. It is because unless the validity and reliability of the interview data are ensured, the findings of the study and its value are always questionable and doubtful. There are different ways of the data validation process in both qualitative and quantitative research. In my study I carried out to verify the data from interviews by employing thick description, triangulation, member check, and negative case analysis which are important in the qualitative data validation process (Cohen et al, 2011).

The final stage is the reporting of the interviewing data. it depends on the data we receive to some extent from the types of interviews. Specifically, in a quantitative study, a close or structured interview provides numerical data that could be reported in graphs, charts, tables, and diagrams in a precise way to draw meaning. On the opposite to it, I focused on the data received from the unstructured interview, their keywords, unique narration, and the findings based on the themes that emerged from the data reported. The reporting in a qualitative study reflects the researcher on data in the process of meaning-making and meaning-giving to the issue to be proposed.

## **Conclusion**

Even though these all are a practice I made based on the theoretical and methodological premises, there are lots of ways while generating data practically, and it could be different from individual to individual. The methodological review suggests that in an ethnographic study, the unstructured or open-ended interview is flexible, and

there is no pre-determined tool for data generation in an ethnographic study to be carried out for data generation. It is because different settings and times determine the nature of the research subjects to be studied, and the research problem to be selected. Approaching the participants is a challenging effort since it takes much time to get access to the community and to break up the ice for carrying out an interview. This happened to me and on many days, I just roamed here and there to enter the community and developed a rapport with the community people. The realization of rapport is the main thing that develops many times through the continuous consent-making process and negotiations with the participants.

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