DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH METHODS

Week 4, Lesson 2: Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Development Research Methods
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What we will cover in today's lecture

1. Why do interviews?
2. What are the different types of interview?
3. Interview strategies and process
4. What are Focus Groups?
5. Incorporating focus groups into a development project

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Why do Interviews

- Interviews are the main channel of information-gathering, but interviews are also used as a starting point or background to support other forms of data collection.
- Valuable method of gaining insight into people's perceptions, understandings and experiences of a given phenomenon and can contribute to in-depth data collection.
- A qualitative research interview seeks to cover both factual and a meaning level, though it is usually more difficult to interview on a meaning level.

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Why do Interviews

- Interviews are an excellent way of gaining ‘factual’ information, such as details of NGO policies and government initiatives or for generating information such as the ways in which particular policies were devised.
- Opportunity to examine processes, motivations and reasons for success or failures.
- Provide qualitative dimensions such as providing explanations for patterns or consider attitudes and opinions.

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Types of interview

Structured interview	• Pre-set list of questions which are often standardized across interviewees. • Do not allow room for veering off the topic in question. • Questions are set in a clear unambiguous manner that is clearly understandable.
Semi-structured interview	• Interview schedule with suggested themes, there is scope for the interviewees to develop their responses. • A more flexible approach. • Issues are explored from an individualistic perspective.
Unstructured interview	• Non-directive, usually comprises themes rather than specific questions. • Opportunity to take the discussion in whichever direction the interviewees choose. • Often more 'conversational' in that they are not directed by the interviewer.

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Semi-structured interview schedule an example

This was part of a study of women's paid and unpaid work in Oaxaca City, Mexico, looking at similarities and differences between socio-economic groups and the importance of social networks within women's working lives.

1. Introduction to the research, confidentiality, taping, etc.
2. General conversation about household, house, neighbourhood.
3. **Paid work** – choice of employment, how job was secured, opinion of work, future plans, difficulties. If not in paid work at moment discuss paid work in the past, reasons for not being in paid work, future plans.
4. **Domestic tasks** – types of activity, time taken, help provided, opinions on domestic work.
5. **Community activities** – community organizations, church, work-based groups: reasons for involvement/non-involvement; nature of involvement.
6. **Socializing** – meetings with friends/family; compadrazgo (fictive kin); neighbours; feelings of belonging/isolation.
7. Other questions?

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Interview strategies

- Recruiting interviewees
- Where to do the interviews
- When to do interviews
- Asking questions
- Recording the interview
- Representativeness and accuracy

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Interview strategies- recruiting interviewees

Population

Sample

- The kind of sample the research question requires will decide who to interview
- Considering the population from which to select interviewees will be helpful in finding out about people's attitudes and perceptions

Target

Advice of 'gatekeepers'

- Need to ensure to target a diverse range of people with different opinions or perceptions based on their own experiences and context
- Recruitment of interviewees following on the advice of the 'gatekeepers' such as NGO president, village man or a community leader

Snowballing techniques

Diversity of interviewees

- The 'snowballing' technique is often used to recruit interviewees
- Try to get a great diversity of interviewees for your study

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Interview strategies- Where to do?

- **Why the location is important?**
  - Affects the material gathered
  - Influences the dynamics of the interview
  - Determines the way in which you present yourself to potential interviewees
  - Gives insights to your research
- **How to select the location?**
  - Somewhere interviewee will feel comfortable
  - Take into consideration distractions
  - Take into consideration how the location will be interpreted by the interviewee or others in the community
  - Do not select locations potentially dangerous to the interviewer
  - Take into consideration the gender aspect

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Interview strategies- When to do?

- **Why the timing is important?**
  - Convenience of the interviewee affects the material gathered
  - Timing according to the timeframe of the research is also important.
- **How to decide the timing?**
  - When it is convenient for the interviewee
  - Take into consideration distractions
  - Take into consideration social and gender aspects
  - Do not put the interviewer in potentially dangerous situations
  - Key individuals can be interviewed in the beginning of the research for reassurance. Or it can wait till you are familiar with the research material.
  - Ideal way is to interview key individuals at both the beginning and end of the fieldwork.

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Interview strategies- Asking questions

- **Before starting the questions, make sure that**
  - The interviewee knows that the research is about
  - The interviewee is assured confidentiality
  - The interview knows how long the interview is going to take
  - The tape recorder (if used) is turned on
- **Asking questions**
  - Remember that the interview is not an interrogation and be as unthreatening as possible while asking questions
  - Do not launch into complicated and sensitive questions at the start of the interview
  - Even if you have a pre-set list of questions, give the interviewee chance to develop their ideas and also to ask for clarification if necessary
  - Engage with the process and listen to the responses carefully
  - At the end of the interview, provide the interviewee with an opportunity to ask you questions

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Interview strategies- Recording

- **How to record?**
  - Depends on interviewee preference, logistics and language ability, as well as the nature of your research
  - Possible forms of recording are using a tape/mini-disc recorder, taking notes throughout the interview or writing up notes after the interview
- **Benefits of direct recording**
  - Allows you to concentrate completely on the interview without having to worry about taking notes or remembering points to write up later
  - Allows you to check the meaning of words and phrases that you may have missed during the interview
  - Direct recording is also very important if your research is examining forms of discourse. By having the actual words and forms of expression, you will be able to have much greater source material for this form of analysis.

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Interview strategies- Accuracy

- **Issues of representativeness**
  - When using a small selection of interviewees to discuss wider trends in a group or community, researchers need to consider how representative the interviewees are of this wider group.
  - If there are obvious biases, then these should be identified in the writing up of the research.
- **Issue of accuracy**
  - Issues of whether interviewees are telling 'the truth' or whether they are telling the interviewer what they think is the 'right answer' hence the researcher's positionality and the way it will be interpreted by interviewees must always be considered.
  - Aspect of accuracy relates to household interviews. Interviewers should not assume that all household members know about the activities of the other members.
  - It is important to realize that there is no one correct response. All answers are partial and reflect the context in which they are given.

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The interview process

Developing the interview schedule

- Schedule is determined by the structure of the interview, the nature of the research and objectives of the study
- Short unambiguous questions which directly concern the main focus of the study
- Include probing questions.

Conducting the interview

- One-to-one interview
- Relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is important. Active listening is an important aspect of the role of interviewer
- Verbal and non-verbal messages shapes the social interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Analysis of interview data

- Data reduction, data display and verification
- Software packages such can be used for data analysis.
- Analyzing qualitative data is not linear and is influenced by the aims of the research and methodological underpinnings of the study

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The interview process-2

Issues of rigour

- Rigour refers to the concepts of credibility, transferability and dependability
- The accuracy of data collected varies according to how structured the interview is
- Necessary for the interviewer to be aware of the bias issues

Ethical considerations

- Protection of participants' rights, issues of informed consent and anonymity and confidentiality
- Necessary to ensure interviewees understand the study and to obtain written consent

Interviewing in challenging situations

- May require a rethinking of strategies to collect data
- Comfortable surroundings are vitally important
- Challenges in dealing with seriously ill participants, emotive issues.
- Ethical issues need to be carefully considered

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FOCUS GROUPS

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What are Focus Groups?

- Group based interviews typically lasting from one and half to three hours and are conducted with around six to eight participants.
- Focus groups represents a prime research tool of approaches of qualitative research.
- Widely used in the social sciences since 1960s. A well-established history of application in the field of development.
- One of the main processes for engendering public participation and facilitating the use of non-verbal techniques.

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Focus groups as a methodology

- Offer an excellent tool for exploring group behaviours, interactions and norms.
- A part of a mixed economy of social research, one component in multi method strategies, where multiple methods are themselves an emblem of methodological rigour.
- Commonly used to ascertain information on collective views of social issues, such as a community's perceptions of HIV risk.
- Important for in-depth interview as well as for understanding 'ways of doing'.
- Play an important role in participatory development process.
- Provide an opportunity for 'retrospective introspection'.

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Strengths and limitations of using focus groups in field research

Strengths	Limitations
Excellent data on group views, beliefs and reasons for collective action	Groups can evoke misguided notions of a collective or community consensus
Participatory and empowering as participants find strength in numbers and feel in control of the process	Groups can be subject to peer pressure and dominated by powerful 'voices'-controversial views can be silenced
Good for discussing sensitive topics among people whose lives are influenced by the same issue	Not good for understanding individual motivations
Can lead to collective action as a result of people sharing their experiences	Recruitment can be difficult, time-consuming and unsuccessful
A good platform for using PRA/PLA techniques such as rankings, mapping and other visual methodologies	Moderation/facilitation is a skilled technique and requires practice
Can generate rich and abundant data	Data can be difficult to analyze
Accessible to people who have difficulties with literacy, such as children	

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Incorporating focus groups into a development project

Phases of a research project	Characteristics
Gaining background information on a research topic.	1. Frequently used in pre-pilot studies to explore issues. 2. Used to explore differences in the use of language and vernacular terms. 3. Used for in-depth interviews.
Encouraging a reflexive capability	1. Explore issues in-depth. 2. Excellent tool for gauging public attitudes to events, campaigns, policies, etc.
Engender co-public participation as part of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) or Participatory and Learning Action (PLA)	1. Used to facilitate public and community participation in development projects. 2. An effective tool in communicating research agendas.

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Logistics and realities of using focus groups

Planning a focus group in the 'field

- Selection, recruitment and organization of the groups
- Process can be lengthy and complicated experience

Group composition

- Carefully consider the social composition of the group.
- Issues of power and social status must be considered.
- Methodological considerations are paramount to the success of focus group research.

Recruitment and incentives

- Focus groups can consist of strangers or of pre-existing social groups
- Ensure research ethics and guidelines are adhered to.
- Offering an incentive
- Consideration must also be given to where and when the groups will be held.

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Logistics and realities of using focus groups-2

Conducting focus groups

- Discussion guide can be structured or informal
- Moderator should start by briefly outlining the purpose and ethical considerations
- Focus groups are often taped
- Begin with ‘how’ questions then move on to ‘why’ questions
- Summarize the discussion

Analyzing focus group data

- Analysis of data should draw on established qualitative methods
- Need to transcribe the taped data from the group
- Speech should be transcribed as it was spoken
- Identify themes and locate materials in the transcripts.

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Summarizing the Key steps

STEP 1: Select a field team

- **Moderator**: The moderator/facilitator should have knowledge and experience or skills in leading FGDs, and at the least, understand the importance of assisting all members to speak at some point, be able to manage dominant group members, and have an ability to ask open questions and follow up with relevant additional questions to stimulate conversation and reflection. It is not desirable to run them as a question / response, question / response exercise. In that situation, people are more likely to respond what they think the interviewer wants to hear.
- **Interpreter**: Make sure the FGDs are conducted in the local language or in the language the participants feel most comfortable in, and if needed, use interpreters that have been trained/or train them in their role as translators in FGDs. (They need to translate directly and, as far as possible, not get involved themselves in the discussion, then translate back an edited version).
- **Observer/recorder**: It can be effective to have two people conducting the focus group – one asking the questions (the moderator) and one writing and observing expressions, body language etc, which can give clues about sensitivities etc. When using an interpreter, however, the moderator might be able to do both given the lag time for translation.
- **Other staff**: There needs to be a clear motive if any other staff is to be present during a FGD.
- Make sure that none of the field staff are biased to the subject at stake (i.e. no personal or organizational interest) or have a role that might obstruct participants to speak out freely.

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STEP 2: Determine what types and number of groups needed

- **In each location**, there should be interviews with elderly women, elderly men, adult women, adult men. If it does not inhibit conversations, age groups or gender could be mixed when it would be inconvenient to them to be separated, as long as the topic does not relate to or isaffected by gender or age stereotypes, and as long as there is some possibility of also gaining disaggregated information.
- **Interview adolescent girls and boys** if the moderator is trained or experienced in interviewing young people under 18. Be particularly careful in interviewing younger children and consult with UNICEF or experts in child protection for assistance.
- Ensure, wherever possible, to **target specific groups** with disabilities and attempt to meet with indigenous or other minority groups.
- **Group size**: the ideal size is 8-12 persons, however smaller and larger groups can work well and oftentimes judgement must be made quickly on the spot so as not to offend or inconvenience people. If the space available is noisy, try to make the groups smaller to facilitate hearing.
- Make every effort to ensure that **non-participants are not present** or within hearing distance, particularly as this can give rise to protection risks.
- Try to ensure that people such as **community leaders or representatives are not mixed** in amongst the groups, as they may well discourage others from speaking freely. If such people are present, it is best to interview them separately.
- The nature of this kind of work is that all the best laid plans are likely to disappear out of the window when the team arrives at the venue, and **quick thinking and flexibility** is required to manage the best outcome in what is likely to be chaotic circumstances.

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STEP 3: Prepare for the Individual FGD

- **Location for FGD**: Try your best to organize the meeting in a private, safe and comfortable environment (e.g. not direct under the sun), and that it is accessible (especially to persons with disabilities, older persons, and women). In the current conditions, be prepared to compromise and check with the group that the compromise works for them.

- **Date and time for the FGD**: ensure mobilization of participants before the meeting as far as possible, and inform community leaders in advance of the discussion so they are aware of it. If a local agency is facilitating your access to communities, ask them to explain the purpose of your visit and to the extent possible, prepare the groups to reduce time lost in confusion.

- **Plan with your team beforehand** how you will divide groups between you. You want to aim for as much consistency of approach so that results are comparable.

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STEP 4: Conduct the FGD: Introduction

- **Introduce the focus group** by explaining the reason for the visit. It is important to explain the rationale to avoid raising expectations. Explain what you will do with the information, and be very clear that when asking about needs, there is no guarantee that things will change, however to the extent possible, you will pass on their feedback to relevant authorities.
- The discussion might touch upon some sensitive issues such as security and violence. Ensure participants there are **no requirement to respond if the question causes discomfort**. Participation is completely voluntary and participants are free to answer or not, or to leave at any point.
- **Reassure participants that confidentiality** will be kept throughout in that no names or personal information will be disclosed or used in any publications/reports.
- **Explain that you will be taking notes** during the interview to help you remember what was said, but that these are for your own personal use and will not be shared with others.
- **Make sure that your notes reflect as closely as possible what was said**. When it comes to analyzing the outcomes, the more detail captured the better, and the more likely you are to have quotable passages which can be very powerful. Scant notes can render the exercise useless.
- **Ask if there are any questions before starting the interview** and make sure to take some notes about the demographics of the group.
- **Be mindful** that these are people who have suffered great loss and trauma and are also all individuals who have their own stories. Without spending all the time set aside building rapport, and without getting too personal, it is advisable to spend some time showing genuine interest in the people to whom you are speaking, to learn a bit about them and to put them at ease. You might like to ask people what they did before the typhoon, and in our experience, people also don't mind telling a bit of their experience of the typhoon. Use your judgement and be a bit creative.

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STEP 5: Tips for the facilitator, observer and interpreter

- Notice body language and expressions as relevant.
- Make sure to listen to participants, non-judgmentally and intervene if others are judging them, reminding them of the respect for other opinions.
- Encourage that only one person talks at a time, and remind people and the interpreter not to go too long in between translation, as you will lose a lot of the detail.
- It can be helpful sometimes, especially in one on one interviews, to put a question in the form of a role play. For example, you might say something like, “imagine I’m the head of (insert local authority or aid agency), what would you say to me?”
- Use neutral comments and encourage the quieter people to contribute – “Anything else?”, “does anyone else have something to add?”, “How about this side of the group?”
- Explain to interpreters the importance of translating sentence-by-sentence and not summarizing what people say. Interviewers should help interpreters by asking only one short question at a time and by reminding them about confidentiality of the discussions.

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For a comprehensive literature on the topics covered in this lecture it is also suggested that students go through the reference list of the above cited papers.