

Lecture 9: Interview, Observation and Focus Group Discussion Methods

Slide 1

In this lecture we will discuss the various methods used by researchers to collect data. As such, these methods are not unique to population research. Population researchers use all those methods which are developed and used by anybody in social research.

SURVEY

Population surveys produce objective data from a sample of respondents on biographic details of the respondents, concepts of health, knowledge and misconceptions, attitudes and beliefs, practices, fertility, mortality, migration, health seeking behaviour, and affordability of treatment, etc. To conduct a survey one has to define:

- Purpose of the study
- Specific objectives
- Sampling methodology
- Interview schedules, i.e., exact questions to be asked in the interviews with fixed wordings and order
- Field operations
- Analysis plan
- The structure of the report

Since it is not always possible to collect data from the entire universe, researchers have to depend on sampling. They are, however, aware that the results of the sampling survey are subject to sampling fluctuations. Therefore, along with means, proportions and other advanced statistics such as regression coefficients, estimates of standard error and confidence interval of these of statistics should also be given. This tells them how reliable their statistical findings are.

Slide 2

The main advantage of the surveys is their objectivity. Here an attempt is made to make all steps of research independent of the understanding of researcher. For example, simple random sampling is preferred over purposive sampling so that the decision to identify sampling units is taken on unbiased basis.

In analysis plan, the researcher must decide in advance what statistics, graphs, charts and models would be required to interpret data so that the objectives of the study are achieved. We have found that this has often helped us even in adding items to interview schedule or deleting some from there. Interview schedules with all close ended questions are called structured interview schedules and those with some close ended and some open ended questions are called semi-structured interview schedules. Lastly, deciding about the organization of the report in advance also helps. The report must be divided into a number of chapters. The first chapter presents the statement of the problem. It may also cover the review of literature, conceptual framework of the study, objectives and hypotheses. The second chapter may present the methodology and methods. The third chapter may present the characteristics of the sample. This is followed by two or three chapters of major findings. The last chapter is devoted to discussion. It should include the limitations of the study and suggest some problems for future research.

KEY RESPONDENTS INTERVIEW

There are some people in the field who know a lot about subjects relevant for the study. They may be defined as key respondents and they may be contacted to learn more about the subject. For example, police officials can tell a lot about cases of domestic violence, rape and other crimes against women in the area and also relate them to social structure and value system of the region. Doctors can tell a lot about pockets of vulnerability under their jurisdiction, causes of STI/RTI and HIV/AIDS, general health beliefs, and social class variations in risk. Schoolteachers can tell a lot about variations in and causes of school drop out. Migrant workers can tell about the causes of migration, routes that migrants follow, and life and risks at places of destination.

Slide 3

We conducted a study of post-partum haemorrhage among women (a risk that may lead to maternal death in some cases). Our key respondents were: ASHA workers, anganwadi workers, NGO functionaries working in the field of health, medical officers working in health facilities from block level to district hospitals, in-charges of reproductive and child health programmes, and block level programme managers. These people know a lot about the causes of maternal deaths in the field and also about what steps need to be taken to improve the situation. This helped in identifying several intervention variables.

EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

Experimental data can be of used for testing specific hypotheses regarding policy initiatives. Usually this implies:

- comparison of control and experimental groups; or
- comparison of baseline and end line data

The idea is to test whether something (experiment or intervention) has an effect. If the data are collected using appropriate scales one may also use the analysis of variance and covariance techniques for analysing data.

The logic of having control and experimental groups is simple. Sometimes the outcome may actually not be due to the intervention or independent variable. It may be due to historical and environmental factors, biographic characteristics of the subjects or other factors. Therefore to ensure that the dependent variable is explained by the independent variable we need to compare results of intervention in experimental group with changes in the dependent variable in one another group which is similar to the experimental group in all respects except that intervention is not made there.

Slide 4

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Focus group discussion (FGDs) comes under qualitative methods. In this method the researcher forms groups of 8-10 people and discusses with them the issues of research interest. It may help if two researchers conduct FGD. One of them would ask questions and the other person would note down the answers. Care must be taken that no single person in the group dominates the discussion. FGD differs from group interview in the sense that in FGD we do not ask direct questions as we do in group interview. We raise certain issues and the group discusses them. Here both the outcome of discussion and the way the group arrives at the outcome are important. This method is of great help in developing narratives. Sometimes researchers fail to see the distinction between survey questions and checklists prepared for the focus groups. Survey questions have a degree of fixity about them. However, checklists are only guides and are flexible. Moreover, while in survey questions are normally directed to elicit life and views of respondents, in FGDs checklists are prepared to develop themes and hypotheses. As far as possible, in FGDs direct and personal questions should be avoided. Efforts should be made to understand the cultural context and patterns of behaviour and social representations.

I benefited immensely from use of FGD in training needs assessment of elected representatives (ERs) of gram panchayats in Himachal Pradesh. I called the ERs at a particular level – district, block and village – to sit in groups and discuss among them what all competencies are required to function effectively as ER, what importance they attach to various activities and tasks, and how competent they feel to carry out these activities and tasks. These groups were arranged by the administration at district and block levels. I could identify various needs of the ERs and develop a training programme and a training module on that basis. I also made recommendations about the composition of trainees etc. which were found to be quite useful by the government. Obviously, there were challenges.

Slide 5

The biggest challenge in this work was how to make participants feel that we are not evaluating their individual competence or performance. The purpose is not to judge them whether they are working effectively or not but to understand the problems faced by them in working as ER or PS. Government or any NGO is not giving them any reward or punishment to their district/block/village or to them for the work done by them. We want to help ERs and PSs to work better and, therefore, we want to know what problems they face in performing different activities and tasks. We also want to understand that in the field out of all the activities and tasks assigned to them which ones are more important to them.

Secondly, when you conduct FGDs among members of ZP and Block Panchat you find that they are very frustrated people. They did not cooperate initially, certainly not so much as the members of GP. We have to involve them, listen to their woes, and give them time to express their frustrations. When they fought the election they thought that they are fighting for a post higher than gram pradhan. After getting elected they found that there is no role for them. They have no power to intervene in the programmes anywhere and they are not even respected by the village pradhans. Once you listen to them they get ready to participate in the study. Thirdly, particularly at the district and block level, you have more problems from men. Women have the same power and funds but they look more enthusiastic than their men counterparts. This was because most of them have come out in the field first time and even small role for them in society makes them more enthusiastic and confident. They are less complaining, more confident and more cooperative.

Lastly, we should give the subjects the impression that this exercise is being done because this is useful to them in some way. In the above case it was told that government wants to help the ERs and PSs through better training. Government want our suggestions regarding nature of training, place of training, content of training and related issues. Thus we are not doing only an academic exercise. What we learn in the sessions will be communicated to the government and action will be taken.

Slide 6

OBSERVATIONS

Observation method also comes under qualitative methods. It is common to divide observations into two broad types: participant observations and non-participant observation. The latter differs from the former in the sense that in the former the researcher takes part in the community life, lives for substantial period of time in the field, becomes one of them, and then writes about them and their ideas. In non-participant observation method research simply observes their behaviour and ideas as outsider.

CONCLUSION

There is no simple way to decide which method should be used in a particular study. The choice depends on a number of factors: objectives of the study; past traditions; preferences and competence of researchers; current methodological fashions in the community of researchers; time, money and other resources at the disposal of the researcher; and facilities (such as computing facilities) available. It is always good to discuss your research design with experts in the field. They may give you suggestions some of which may be quite useful. In general, however, if the purpose is to test a hypothesis we go for quantitative methods (experimental method or survey) and if the purpose is to collect in-depth and rich data we go for qualitative methods. Some people suggest that in exploratory (first time studies) qualitative methods may be preferred. They will help in generating hypotheses which may later be tested in quantitative studies.