Creating Qualitative Interview Protocols

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript describes a technique which facilitates the documentation of research participant stories interpreting their experiences in response to a research question. From a Narrative Inquiry approach interview protocols were developed based upon the exploration of a research question. The technique may be applied when gathering qualitative data in one-on-one interviews. Each interview protocol provided consistency across a number of interviews; but also allowed for flexibility of responses by the research participant within their respective interviews. This document provides a description of a technique which addresses the conundrum of consistency and flexibility. Four different research projects are described in this manuscript. The specific interview protocol is presented and it is shown how the protocol serves to address the project’s research question. This document concludes with a description of how these techniques may be employed, in general, to contribute to the exploratory investigation of a research topic in business and management studies.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, Interview Protocol, Long Interview Technique, Narrative Inquiry, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Researchers who want to investigate a relatively new subject area should adopt an approach which facilitates the exploration and identification of emerging constructs. Within the context of a research question data should be gathered employing a technique which will support subsequent analysis. Emerging themes may be identified based upon the data which, in turn, could be employed to develop constructs relative to the research question. Thus, the data gathering technique must be employed consistently across a number of data gathering incidents. In contrast to this consistent technique, it also must allow for flexibility so that the research participants are relatively free to respond in their own way to the research question.

This document provides a description of a technique which addresses this conundrum of consistency and flexibility. The technique is applied when gathering qualitative data in one-on-one interviews. From a Narrative Inquiry approach interview protocols are developed based upon the exploration of a research question. Each interview protocol provided consistency across a number of interviews; but also allowed for flexibility of the research participant within their respective interviews. Four different research projects are described in this manuscript which employed this technique to facilitate the documentation of research participant stories.
interpreting their experiences in response to the research question.

The remainder of this manuscript is organized, according to Figure 1, in the following manner. The next section presents an overview of qualitative research. Within this qualitative perspective the concepts of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) are presented. The presentation is then focused on Narrative Inquiry (Scholes, 1981) and the Long Interview Technique (McCracken, 1988) for conducting qualitative one-on-one interviews. At the most detailed level an interview protocol is described which has been developed for each of the example research projects. The emphasis of the example projects is on the process of gathering the appropriate data and identifying the relevant issues.

RESEARCH ROAD MAP

Qualitative Perspective

Qualitative research is an interpretive approach to investigating subjects within the context of their natural surroundings (Myers, 2009). Qualitative researchers thus spend a great deal of time in organizations focusing on the interpretations of personal experiences held by individuals. The researcher works closely with specific individuals and may come to regard them as partners in the investigation or research participants.

The researcher usually conducts the interview one-on-one with the research participant. The interview may or may not be confidential depending upon the topic. But, it is a time for the research participant to tell a personally experienced story. Within the context of the investigation topic the research participant should be allowed to freely recite the story.

In the interview the researcher will attempt to document the interpretations held by a research participant. The research participant must be allowed to respond to a research question without influence. The context of the response must be solely that of the research participant. However, the recitation must be guided some-what by the researcher in order to be able to subsequently compare themes that emerge from across a series of interviews. A method which addresses a consistent approach while allowing flexibility is described in this manuscript.

The researcher must be open-minded and prepared to reflect upon any differences in perspectives between the researcher and the research participants. This attitude becomes especially important when conducting international or cross-cultural research. The adopted approach should facilitate grounding the discussion within the personal experiences and culture of the research participant.

There are some major issues that arise when conducting cross cultural research. One issue relates to the competing hypotheses of convergence and divergence (Ronen, 1986; Webber, 1969; Yang, 1986). The convergence hypothesis suggests that cultures are becoming similar; while the divergence hypothesis suggests that individuals resist changes to their culture and strive to retain their distinctiveness. Evidence of convergence is supported by the international use of common technologies such as the Internet and the internationalization of education. Evidence of divergence is shown by the continued existence of groups promoting their original culture while living in another.

Another issue relates to the development of cross-cultural research constructs. Originating in linguistics (Pike, 1954; Berry, 1990; Headland et al., 1990) the research may take an emic or etic approach. In an emic approach constructs are developed in one culture and then an attempt is made to investigate another culture given the original constructs. In an etic approach universal constructs are developed based upon data gathered from many different cultures. Further, a “pseudo-etic” (Triandis, 1972) approach attempts to develop generic constructs based upon a limited number of different cultures. Whichever approach is adopted, the researcher must clearly support the decision.

Yet another consideration when conducting cross-cultural research relates to whether or not to employ a framework about cultures in general. For instance, in a series of investiga-
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