
UNIT 8 RESEARCH TOOLS-II : INTERVIEW, OBSERVATION AND DOCUMENTS

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 7 we studied the characteristics of a good research tool. We also read about the important tools of data collection, namely, questionnaires, attitude scales, rating scales and tests and the techniques of collecting relevant data through these tools, and their strengths and limitations.

Unit 8 here is a continuation of Unit 7. In this unit we shall discuss a few more tools of data collection such as, interviews, observations, documents and journals. Each of these tools and techniques has a specific role in the process of collecting data and has its own uses and limitations.

The interview schedule, for instance, is an oral questionnaire through which the researcher can explain more explicitly the purpose of the investigation. Observation is a technique used to classify and record in a planned manner the individual responses to real life situations. The documents describe the process of personal/group development or the occurrence of an event in accordance with legal or administrative regulations attached to that event. The documents and records are useful in bringing together data for scientific analysis from remote areas and time periods. Unit 8 will focus on these research tools.

Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to :

- define an interview,
- describe the various types of interviews,
- elaborate on the technique of interviewing,
- discuss the uses and limitations of interviews,
- define the observation technique,
- explain the types of observation, and describe the steps involved in the process of observation,
- enlist the uses and limitations of observation,
- define documents and describe the types of documents, and
- enumerate the uses of documents and journals.

8.2 TYPES OF TOOLS AND THEIR USES

Besides questionnaires, rating scales and attitude scales, interview, observations existing records and documents are other important data collection tools used in research. Let us get to know about these tools here in the following sub-sections.

8.2.1 Interview

Interview is a process of communication or interaction in which the subject or interviewee gives the needed information verbally in a face-to-face situation. In a sense, it is an oral questionnaire. In a research situation it may be seen as an effective, informal, conversation, initiated for a specific purpose as it focuses on certain areas. The main objective may be the exchange of ideas and experiences and eliciting of information. Interviews can be conducted in many ways. Let us get to know the types of interviews next.

Types of interview

Interviews may be classified according to the purpose for which they are used and according to their design and structure.

For purposes of research, an interview may be used as a tool for gathering data required by the researcher to test a hypothesis or to solve his/her problems of descriptive, experimental, survey or clinical type of research. This type of interview is called 'research interview'.

In many situations the objective of interview is to secure information about the individual's nutritional/health problems, his/her past history, health related variables. In such situations, the major purposes of interviews are diagnosis and treatment. This type of interview is called a 'clinical interview'. It is used by health/nutrition workers and psychiatrists.

Interviews may vary in design and structure. In some situations, an interviewer may interview one individual at a time. It is called an 'individual interview'. In a 'group interview', a group of individuals is interviewed at one and the same time.

Interviews are also classified as '*structured*' and '*unstructured*'. A '*structured interview*' is one in which the whole situation is carefully structured and the major areas of inquiry are mapped out. However, the interviewee is given considerable freedom to express his/her definition of the presented situation. In this type of interview, the interviewer uses a highly standardized tool and a set of pre-determined questions. '*Structured interview*' is also designated as '*directive interview*'.

'*Unstructured interview*' also termed as '*uncontrolled*', '*unguided*', or '*non-directive*' interview is one where the interviewer does not follow a list of predetermined questions. The interviewees are encouraged to relate their concrete experiences with no or little direction from the interviewer, to dwell on whatever events seem significant to them, to provide their own definition of their social situations and reveal their opinions and views as they like. Although the series of questions to be asked and the procedure to be followed are decided before hand, the interviewer is largely free to arrange the form and timing of the questions. He/she can rephrase the questions, modify them and add new questions to his/her list. Figure 8.1 illustrates a interviewer, interviewing the subjects. What are the techniques used for interviewing? Let us learn about the techniques next.



Figure 8.1: Interview

Techniques of interviewing

Although the interview as a research tool can be modified according to the needs of the research situation, there are certain techniques that need to be understood. These techniques deal with preparation for the interview, conducting the interview and recording the information gathered. Let us understand the process.

1) Preparation for the Interview

It is necessary to plan carefully for an interview. The interviewer must decide exactly what kind of data the interview should yield, whether the structured or unstructured type of interview will be more useful and how the results of interview should be recorded. It is advisable to try out the interview on some persons before using it for actual investigation. This is helpful in revealing the deficiencies or shortcomings that need to be corrected before the interview is carried out. The interviewer must have a clear idea of the sort of information he/she needs, and may accordingly prepare a list of questions in the form of a “schedule”. Interview schedule is a device consisting of a set of questions, which are asked and filled in by an interviewer in a face-to-face situation with the interviewee. Since it is administered personally, it provides the researcher an opportunity to establish a rapport with the respondents. This helps the researcher to explain the nature and purpose of investigation and to make the meaning of the questions clear to the respondents in case they misinterpret a question or give incomplete or indefinite responses. The schedule also economises time and expenses of investigation. The procedure of constructing a schedule is same as that of a questionnaire about which we have already discussed earlier in Unit 7.

2) Conduct of Interview

In the conduct of an interview, a harmonious relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is most essential. A good rapport helps the interviewee to feel at ease and express himself/herself willingly. In order to establish a good rapport, the interviewer should greet the interviewee in a friendly manner so as to get settled in a relaxed manner. As an interviewer you should observe the following rules in order to elicit effective responses :

- i) Ask only one question at a time.

- ii) Repeat a question if necessary.
- iii) Try to make sure that the interviewee understands the questions.
- iv) Listen carefully to the interviewee's answer.
- v) Observe the interviewee's facial expressions, gestures, and tone or voice so as to derive meanings from his/her body language.
- vi) Allow the interviewee sufficient time to answer the question, but do not let the interview drag on and on.
- vii) Avoid suggesting answers to questions.
- viii) Do not show signs of surprise, shock, anger, or other emotions if unexpected answers are given.
- ix) Maintain a neutral attitude with respect to controversial issues during the interview.
- x) Take note of answers that seem to be vague, ambiguous, or evasive.
- xi) Use tact and skill in getting the subject back to an area of inquiry if he/she has strayed too far from the original question.
- xii) In the unstructured interview, ask additional questions to follow up clues or to obtain additional information.

The interviewer should try to redirect the interview to more fruitful topics when he/she feels that the required information is not sufficient. He/she should wind up the interview before the interviewee becomes tired.

3) *Recording of the Interview*

The recording of the interview is obviously an essential step in interviewing. The interviewer may use a schedule, a structured format, rating scale or a tape recorder to record the responses of the interviewee. The use of a tape recorder during the conduct of the interview not only eliminates the omissions, distortions, elaborations and other modifications of data usually found in written interview responses, but it also provides an objective basis for evaluating the adequacy of the interview data in relation to the performance of the interviewee. The use of a tape-recorder also permits the interviewer to devote full attention to the interviewee and save much of the time which he/she would otherwise use in writing down the responses during or after the interview. However, if a tape-recorder is not available, the interviewer has to take notes to record the responses.

Now that we are familiar with the process involved in the interview let us examine the uses and limitations of interview as a research tool.

Uses of the interview

Interview serves as an important research tool in many ways. These include:

- i) An interview provides an opportunity to the interviewer to ask questions on various areas of inquiry. It permits greater depth in responses which is not possible through any other means.
- ii) An interview is not an entirely independent tool of research for gathering information pertaining to feelings, attitudes or emotions. It is supplementary to other tools and techniques. A combination of interviewing, observations, and statistical techniques often yield the best results, but the balance of emphasis shifts with the frame of reference and objectives of the study. Since an interview is a highly flexible tool in the hands of skillful interviewers, it allows a more liberal atmosphere than in the use of other techniques of investigation. Questions not readily grasped by interviewees can be rephrased or repeated with proper emphasis and explanations when necessary.

- iii) An interview is an effective tool for a social scientist in the study of human behaviour. Through this technique, a researcher can secure very intimate and personal knowledge about the subject of his/her study.

Limitations of the interview

In spite of many uses of the interview method, it is not without limitations that jeopardise its value, even when it is used as a supplementary research technique.

- i) Interview is a time consuming technique.
- ii) The effectiveness of the interview depends greatly upon the skill of the interviewer which everyone do not ordinarily possess. It takes time to master this skill.
- iii) There is a constant danger of subjectivity on the part of the interviewer.
- iv) An interview is very difficult to employ successfully because even in the presence of a skilled interviewer some interviewees do not respond freely, frankly and accurately.
- v) Since memory and retention are highly selective processes, interviewees generally provide accurate and vivid accounts of the most recent or intense experiences, or of situations that they encounter most frequently. Painful or embarrassing experiences are forgotten or consciously avoided by the interviewees. In such cases the responses lack accuracy.

In the next sub-section we shall focus on the study of observation as an important research tool.

8.2.2 Observation

Let us begin our study, by first understanding the concept of observation. Observation may be defined as *a process in which one or more persons observe some real-life situation process/event and record pertinent occurrences*. It is used to evaluate the overt behaviour traits of the individuals in controlled and uncontrolled situations.

There can be different types of observations as highlighted next.

Types of Observation

Observations may be classified into two types :

- a) Participant observation
- b) Non-participant observation

Let us get to know these two types of observations.

Participant observation: In the process of 'participant observation' the observer becomes more or less one of the group members and may actually participate in some activity or the other of the group. The observer may play any one of the several roles in observation, with varying degrees of participation, as a visitor, an attentive listener, an eager learner, or as a participant observer.

Non-participant observation: In the process of 'non-participant observation', the observer takes a position where his/her presence is not felt by the group. He/she may follow closely the behaviour trait of an individual or characteristics of one or more groups.

Observations may also be classified into the following two categories :

- i) Structured observation, and
- ii) Unstructured observation.

Let us understand these two categories.

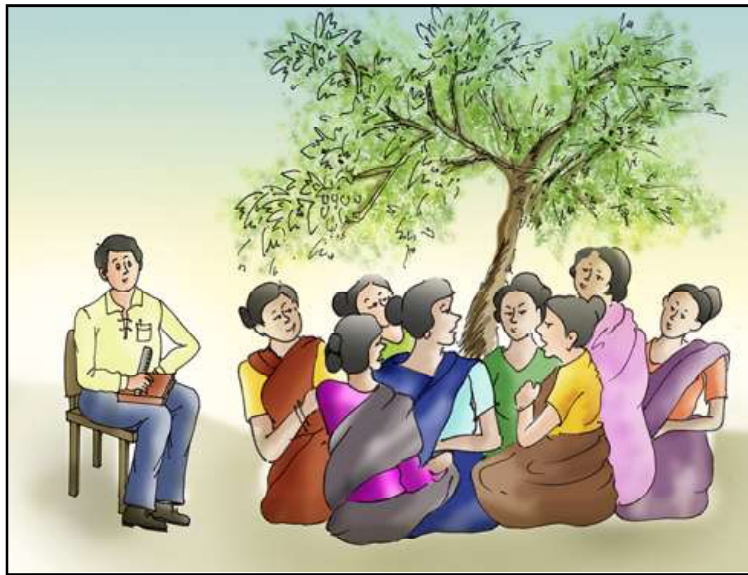


Figure 8.2: Observation

Structured observation: Structured observation is formal in character and is designed to provide systematic description to test casual hypotheses. It is executed in controlled situations like home or, laboratory settings. This type of observation starts with relatively specific formulations. There is not much choice with respect to the content of observation. The observer sets up in advance the categories of behaviour/traits in terms of which he/she wishes to analyze the problem, and keeps in mind the time limit within which he/she has to make the observation.

Unstructured observation: Unstructured observation is associated with participant observation and is often exploratory exercise. In unstructured observation, it may not be possible to categorize behaviour/trait before the observation. The observer considers aspects of behaviour in terms of their contexts or situations of which they are a part.

Now that we are familiar with the types of observations let us get to know the process involved in using observation as a research tool.

Stages in the process of observation

As a good research technique, observation needs proper planning, expert execution, and adequate recording and interpretation. These stages are explained herewith.

i) Planning for observation

Planning for observation includes definition of specific activities or units of behaviour/traits/attributes to be observed; the nature of groups of subjects to be observed; the scope of observation – individual or group; determination of the length of each observation period; and deciding about the tools to be used in making the observation and recording.

ii) Execution of observation

The expert execution of observation includes:

- a) proper arrangement of specific conditions for the subject or subjects to be observed,
- b) assuming proper role or physical positions for observing,
- c) focusing attention on the specific activities or units of behaviour/trait under observation,
- d) proper handling of recording instruments to be used, and
- e) utilizing one's training and experience fairly effectively in terms of making the observation and recording the facts.

iii) *Recording and interpreting the observation*

Recording of the observation data should take place either simultaneously or soon after the observation. In the former case, the observer goes on recording his/her observation data simultaneously with the occurrence of the phenomenon observed. In the latter case, the observer undertakes to record his/her observations not simultaneously with the actual event, but immediately after he/she has observed for a certain period of time while the details are still fresh in his/her mind. In viewing, classifying and recording behaviour, the observer must take utmost care to minimize the influence of his/her biases, attitudes and values on the observation report. The observer should know what he/she is looking for in a given situation and should carefully and objectively record the relevant data. Subjectivity on the part of an observer may partly be due to his/her emotional involvement, his/her selective perceptions and memory. In order to overcome these biases, various mechanical instruments are used to obtain a more accurate records of events. The use of cameras, tape-recorders, stop-watches, binoculars, audiometer, one-way vision screens, mirrors, etc., allows behaviour to be measured to a degree of accuracy which cannot be achieved by the unaided human observer. It is worthwhile to develop an “observation schedule” like a question schedule for making and recording observations. The specific behaviours to be observed and recorded should be listed in this schedule.

Now then having reviewed the types and the process involved in observations certainly you have a good insight on this topic. With your understanding on this topic, now can you list the various uses and limitations of this research tool. List your responses and tally them with the uses/limitations enlisted herewith.

Uses and limitations of observation

Uses

- i) Observation provides a direct method for studying various aspects of human behaviour trait. Indeed, it may be the only effective way to gather data in a particular situation e.g., behaviours of a mother/woman in actual home setting.
- ii) Observation enables the researcher to record behaviour/attitudes at the time of occurrence.

Limitations

- i) A subject may intentionally attempt to exhibit artificial behaviour when he/she knows that he/she is being observed.
- ii) It is time consuming and costly.

Take a break here and answer the questions included in check your progress exercise 1.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) In what respects is an interview less useful than a questionnaire? Answer briefly in about 50 words.

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- 2) List the various types of observation and the steps involved in them.

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Documents are records which normally come to the researcher ‘ready-made’. They may describe a process of personal/group development, or the occurrence of an event/disease. Some other person, either a participant in a social situation or process, or the originator of a system of recording, has already determined the form/type of data. These data are reviewed in terms of the research problem before they are actually used by the researcher. Since the data comes ready-made as the content of the document, they do not depend on a specific investigator or research team’s accessibility to the field. The data obtained through observation, tests and questionnaires, and interviews are gathered for a specific purpose and are only drawn from universes in space and time where researchers are sent by the formulators of that design. Documents, on the other hand, bring together data of remote periods and places for scientific analysis. There can be various types of documents as highlighted next.

Types of Documents

Documents may be classified into three categories on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are the ‘expressive documents’ specifying the process of social interaction and at the other end are those like hospital/clinic records, official histories, and proceedings of commissions. In between are newspaper stories, recountings, etc. which rarely yield sufficient details of the interactive process. Another important type of document is journals. In this section, we will discuss different types of documents.

i) *Expressive Documents*

Expressive documents include the following categories:

Case Studies/Reports

Case study as you may recall studying earlier in Unit 3 is a research tool used to look at individuals or a small group of participations. It refers to the collection and presentation of detailed information about a particular participant, event, institution etc. frequently including the account of subjects themselves. Here emphasis is placed on exploration, observation and description.



Figure 8.3: Searching for the documents

Accounts of Small-group Processes

Accounts of small-group processes is another category of expressive documents. Since such accounts are so hardly written spontaneously, they are not of much use in any large investigation.

The data obtained from expressive documents are recorded with the help of ‘document schedules’. In order to secure measurable data, the items included in this type of schedule are limited to those that can be uniformly secured from a large number of case studies and other records. For example, for a study of the records of drop-outs among the distance learners enrolled with a particular study centre of IGNOU items such as the age, the study centre, financial position of the family, academic performance during the period of enrolment are necessary. A scrutiny of a large number of records vis-à-vis the above items shall yield sizeable results and an adequate number of records can be ascertained.

Let us study about the uses of expressive documents.

Uses of Expressive Documents

- i) In certain cases, where the researcher needs to understand the “definition of the situation” of a particular group of participants, expressive documents constitute an invaluable source of scientific information.
- ii) Expressive documents are useful in giving the researchers a “feel” for the data and thus produce “hunches” with respect to the most fruitful way of conceptualizing a problem.
- iii) Expressive documents are useful in not only identifying the significant variables of a problem but also in suggesting the hypotheses embodying these variables and the verification of the hypotheses.

Next, we move on to yet another data collection tool used in nutrition/dietetic and health related outcome research i.e. records.

ii) ***Official Records***

Official records provide useful information about the time and occurrence of an event in accordance with legal administrative regulations attached to that event. Such data cover a very wide range comprising extensive records of events, namely, births deaths, marriages, divorces, institutional attendance (school, college, distance education centre etc.), performance in psychological and educational test, registration, voting, social security payments and benefits, illness/hospital data, production/business records, membership, census data etc. Almost all hospitals and clinics maintain a purly good record of the patients served by them. Civil registration system may have records of births and deaths along with cause of death. Then there are records of adhoc surveys by different agencies that are done for specific purposes. Official records include legislative, judicial and executive documents prepared by central or state governments, municipalities, panchayats or other local bodies, such as laws, charters, policies, the data preserved by missionaries and other organizations, the information complied by central or state health departments, special commissions, professional organizations, reports of committees and commissions, administrative orders, educational surveys, annual reports, budget, pictorial records viz. photographs, movies, micro-films etc.

The official records are useful in knowing and understanding past events and trends so as to gain perspective on the present and the future. Records are the cheapest source of getting data. A demerit of the records is that they tend to be incomplete and not sufficiently focused on the topic of interest of a study.

Finally a word about Journals.

iii) *Journals*

Information about new ideas and developments often appear in journals long before they appear in books. There are many journals currently being published covering nutrition/health. In fact, they are the best sources for reports on recent researches in the area of study. Journals provide updated concepts to current questions and issues. They also publish articles of local interest that never appear in the book form. Journals are the best sources for determining contemporary opinion and status, present or past.



Figure 8.4: Consulting journals

All those engaged in research in the area of nutrition/health/dietetics should become acquainted with research and professional journals in these areas and they should also learn to use the indexes to these journals. Knowledge about the editor of a periodical, the names of its contributors, and the associations or institutions publishing it serve as clues in judging the merit of the journal. Abstracts are also available which include brief summaries of the contents of the articles. They serve as one of the most useful reference guides to the researcher and keep him/her abreast of the work that is being done in his/her own field and other related fields.

8.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed interviews, observations and documents as tools of research.

- An interview is a process of interaction in which the subject (interviewee) provides the needed information verbally in a face-to-face situation. Preparation, conduct and recording are the main steps in a interview. It may be structured or

unstructured. A structured interview is one in which the whole situation is carefully structured. It is also designated as directive interview. In an unstructured interview also designated as “non-directive interview”. The interviewer does not follow a system or a list of predetermined questions.

- Observation refers to a technique in which one or more persons observe what is occurring in some real-life situations. It is used to evaluate the overt behaviour of individuals in controlled and uncontrolled situations. As a good research tool, observations needs proper planning, expert execution and adequate recording. Observations may be either participant or non-participant, structured or unstructured.
- Documents are records which provide ready-made content from remote periods and places to the researcher for scientific analysis. They may be classified into three categories on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are “expressive documents” specifying the process of social interactions and at other end its are such documents (official records) as hospital/clinic records, official histories, etc. In between are such types as newspaper stories et., which rarely yield sufficiently detailed statements about the interactive processes.
- Journals provide information about new ideas and developments much before they appear in books. They publish articles of temporary, local and limited interests that never appear in the book form.

8.4 GLOSSARY

Interview	:	a technique for assessing ability, personality etc. in a face-to-face discussion between the interviewer and the interviewee.
Structured Interview	:	an interview in which questions are framed with a view to limiting the variety of responses made by the subject (interviewee).
Unstructured Interview	:	an interview in which the interviewer does not follow a system or list of predetermined questions.
Observation	:	a technique for studying overt behaviour by watching activities of individuals in different social setting by talking to them, or by studying their constructive or creative, etc.
Structured Observation	:	studying to individuals in controlled situation.
Documents	:	records which provide ready-made content of remote times and places.

8.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) As compared to a questionnaire, an Interview has the following limitations:
 - It is time consuming.
 - It requires effective communication skills on the part of the interviewer.
 - The interviewer may often be subjective.
 - It is not always possible to extract free, frank and accurate information from the interviewees.
- 2) Observation types
 - i) Participant observation
 - ii) Non-participant observation (structured and unstructured)

Steps in the process of observation:

- (i) Planning; (ii) Executing; (iii) Recording



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