

EuroHESC training course: “Interviewing Informants”

Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS),

University of Twente, Netherlands, 5-6 July 2010

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1. Background and aims of the workshop

All four EuroHESC CRPs will use qualitative interviews for obtaining data about social situations and processes. These interviews can be distinguished from other types of qualitative interviewing by the particular role of the interviewee. Interviewees are ‘research instruments’ rather than ‘research objects’ because the aim of the investigation is not to explore or explain the social experiences, constructions and actions of the interviewees but a larger social situation or process in which the interviewees participated, and about which they have specific knowledge. People are interviewed because of their knowledge about a situation or process. Their own attitudes and actions are of interest only insofar they influence the empirical object of the investigation, and are only part of the information that needs to be collected in the investigation.

In the Anglophone literature, this specific variant of qualitative interviewing is usually described as ‘interviewing informants’ as opposed to ‘interviewing respondents’ (for an early reference to this distinction see Zelditch 1962). In the German literature, it is referred to as ‘expert interviews’ (Hopf 1993, Gläser and Laudel 2009a, b). It is rarely treated explicitly in methods courses, if covered at all. Therefore, the EuroHESC researchers who conduct interviews are unlikely to be equally well prepared for their tasks of empirical data collection.

In at least two of the CRPs, researchers from the sciences, social sciences and humanities will be interviewed as informants. This group of informants poses additional problems because interviewing requires an understanding of the life-worlds of the informants (see e.g. Briggs 1986: 39-60, Zuckerman 1972), which in the case of researchers is quite esoteric. Fully competent participation in the life-world of researchers of a particular specialty requires years of formal training and continued participation. This makes the understanding of the informant’s life-world a task that is both critical to the success of the interview and exceedingly difficult (Laudel and Gläser 2007).

The proposed workshop has two aims corresponding to the two problems of informant interviewing. First, it will provide an opportunity to learn, practice, and exchange experiences about the method of informant interviewing. It is thus targeted at all EuroHESC researchers tasked with interviewing informants, and aims at maximising benefits by both providing systematic training for newcomers to the method and drawing on the experiences of researchers who are already experienced in this kind of research. Second, it will provide an opportunity to learn, practice and exchange experiences about the ‘informed interviewing’ of scientists.

Thus, the main purpose of the workshop is to enable the participants to prepare and conduct interviews with informants, either in their role as researchers or in other roles. It is targeted *at people who need to apply this method of data collection in their project*. In order to learn a method it is very important to practice it; therefore, practical exercises will be a substantial part of the workshop.

2. Workshop programme

Monday, 5th July

9.00 -13.00

Part I Semi-structured interviews

1.1 Discussion of experiences with qualitative interviewing

1.2 Translation of research questions into interview guides

Research questions for which informant interviews can be used, conceptual frameworks as a basis for qualitative interviewing, empirical research questions as links between conceptual frameworks and interview guides, construction of interview guides (content, forms and functions of questions).

14.00-18.00

1.3 Conducting interviews

Selection of interviewees, contacting and meeting interviewees, defining the interview situation (email-, internet-, phone or face-to face interviews, one or two interviewer, recording interviews), ethical considerations, rules for interviewers, special situations in interviews, special interviewee behaviour, common interviewer errors.

Tuesday 6th July

Part II Interviewing researchers (half-day)

9.00-13.00

2.1 The role of research content in semi-structured interviews with researchers

Research questions for which the content of research needs to be included, information that can be collected when research content is made an interview topic.

14.00-18.00

2.2 Preparing and conducting interviews about research content

Analysing a researcher's 'research biography', using publication databases, websites and publications, negotiating the academic level of communication in the interview.

References

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