Expert as Interviewer – Methodological Challenges in Use of Qualitative Interviews in Maritime Research

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ABSTRACT: Interviews are a widely used method in maritime research using qualitative methodologies. Expert interviews are conducted with people who have special knowledge because of their professional position. The status of the interviewer when using expert interviews brings forth certain distinct nuances due to the specific nature of the interview methodology and epistemological considerations. A renowned and senior maritime specialist or a veteran maritime professional researching the nuances of their own field encounter methodological challenges while interviewing other experts during data collection. The paper aims to examine the impact on qualitative data collected in interviews when the interviewers themselves are experts in the field of research. The concepts from the social science research from various disciplines have been examined and discussed highlighting the methodological challenges.

1 INTRODUCTION

In social science, interviews are used for data collection in qualitative research which encompasses gathering the data or information through use of enquiry, by a series of queries and their responses that could involve two or more persons [1]. The material information that is sought by the researcher is usually solicited or collected from the interviewer by using specifically designed questions or key focus areas for discussions during the interview, covering the topic being researched.

In fact, interviews could be considered as the most commonly and widely used tool in qualitative research for data collection. They are aimed to collect information about views, insights, experiences, and beliefs of the interviewer related to a particular research question or phenomenon of interest, for analysis [2].

Interviews are also a widely used method in maritime research that uses qualitative methodologies. For example, preliminary examination of data, about the publication of articles in TransNav for last two years, reveals that almost 40 percent of articles use qualitative or mixed methods. Further, interview is the most commonly used method amongst various qualitative or mixed methods utilized in these articles, apart from document analysis.

The interviews could be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The structured interview is considered to be more quantitative and is utilized by the researchers in surveys, while semi-structured and unstructured, are used by qualitative researchers, with these interviews characterized by increasing levels of flexibility and lack of structure [3]. The important aspect of the qualitative interviews is that it can be a mutually learning experience for both the interviewers and interviewees about certain aspects of

themselves and the other person/persons, even though it may or may not be an intended part of the conversation exchange. As both interviewer and interviewee inherently carry their own versions of the concepts, ideas, theories, values, and experiences, it can also play a part during the research interaction in the qualitative interview.

Interviews can be used to collect data from a sample of population based on the research criteria and in many instances, interviews are conducted with persons having a particular domain expertise, professional or specialized knowledge, exclusive skills or experience and competence, etc. to source such data. These persons designated as experts – in their own field, are quite commonly group of persons targeted for interviews in various qualitative studies. Incidentally, these persons are usually expert in one field, which obviously is their expertise, while they could be a normal or novice person in all other fields. For example, for a research study on pedagogical challenges during maritime simulator education, the teacher or instructor imparting training to maritime students in a simulator course could be considered an expert. However, this person may not be considered an expert if the research study focuses on other aspects of maritime education.

In academic research, the researcher is usually considered to be a person who is an outsider or who does not belong to this group of experts. However, in some cases, the persons who can be classified as experts themselves in the topic being researched, become the researcher. These situations pose methodological challenges in context of qualitative research and thus need to be deliberated.

1.1 Research Question

The paper is focused on the question - What is the impact on qualitative data collected in interviews when the interviewer is an expert in the field of research?

Thus, methodical challenges and factors likely to influence data collection in qualitative expert interviews conducted by experts will be identified.

1.2 Method

The overall analytical framework applied for answering the research question is by broadly applying qualitative research strategy. Thereafter, the concepts from the social science research related to the topic have been examined and discussed highlighting the methodical challenges.

2 REFLEXIVITY – A VALUABLE CONCEPT

Before discussing the role or influence of the interviewer and interviewee in a qualitative interview, it is appropriate to recognize the concept of 'Reflexivity' which is well accepted in qualitative research and brings forth an interesting co-relationship between researcher and the researched. The awareness by the researcher, about the researcher's influence on the persons or the subject being researched, and concurrently also recognizing how the research experience is affecting the researcher, is usually termed as 'Reflexivity' [4].

It is recognized that the 'researcher' will have an influence on the 'researched'. Therefore, the researcher is encouraged or urged to explicitly analyse and examine all aspects related to the research by recognizing this process of 'Reflexivity'. This will include evaluating researchers influence specifically due to the agenda of research, its assumptions, location of subject, any beliefs, personal views and emotions, and how these influences enter into the research analysis [5].

So, in general, any researcher as an interviewer, whether being an expert himself or not, will have an influence on the interviewee, though reflexivity debate is more related to the bias of the researcher than any other methodological challenges. However, the issue has been introduced here only to contextualize the question about influence of not only the perceptions of the researcher as interviewer but also his intellectual or professional status and position. Thus, it is evident that all interviews will be subject to the influence by the researcher, however, this paper brings out those influences which are in addition to the general 'Reflexivity' debate, and introduced in specific situations when the interviewers are experts themselves.

3 STATUS OF RESEARCHER IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW

In order to study the influences of the expert as interviewer, it is prudent that another important aspect during the interview interaction, related to power dynamics between the participants be also examined. The typology of these power dynamics will also be a major component within the overall influence and may complement or supplement, and in some cases- may discount, the balance of power.

As a typical view about the interactions in qualitative interview, it has been noted by various scholars that there is a power asymmetry between the interviewer and the interviewee. The research interview cannot be considered as an open democratic dialogue between equal unassuming participants as the interviewer (the researcher) controls a much larger role. It involves conceptualizing and outlining the interview situation, determining the interview topic, asking questions and then deciding which responses need to be followed up with more questions, and finally deciding when to finish the interview [6].

This dominant power relationship of the researcher has further been explained by Kvale by highlighting that the researcher uses the interview as an instrument for promoting own research interests and thus, it may be a manipulative dialogue which pursues a hidden agenda of interviewer, obtaining information without any knowledge by the interviewee. However, due to this control by the researcher about how the statements of interviewee are interpreted, the interviewee may sometimes withhold information or talk around the subject.

However, this position is a generalization of the interview method and the power dynamics in an interview, between the researcher as the interviewer and the interviewee as the subject, is not always tilted towards the researcher as brought out by Kvale.

There could be many other factors influencing the power dynamics in a research interview. The status of the person in terms of socioeconomic position or educational and professional standing, and personal characteristics in terms of gender or ethnic identity, of either the interviewer or the interviewee can also determine the power during an interview [7].

In certain situations, the research interest of the interviewer can also be altered or corrupted by the interviewee, apart from distorting or perverting the theme of the research itself.

The power dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee may also change during various stages of the interview and it could happen during data collection as well as in analysis.

This change in power dynamics, however, also enables a thorough understanding of the finer aspects of the data being gathered, and promotes in-depth research process, through more information about both the researcher and interviewee.

A comprehensive examination to bring out various shifts in the positions of the 'researcher' and the 'researched' during the qualitative research through six empirical studies was conducted, which used different types of interviews, e.g., in-depth, focus group, etc [8]. Efforts to establish an anti-authoritarian relationship between researcher and researched, negotiation of who actually 'rules' the research agenda, and experiences of shifts in 'inferior' and 'superior' knowledge positions emerged as central and intertwined themes throughout the studies. The dual role as both insider and outsider, characteristic of qualitative approaches, seemed to lead to power relations and researcher vulnerability which manifested in tangible ways. Thus, it highlights that the researcher position is not always privileged in an interview and the power balance is not always tilted towards the interviewer.

The researchers – which may or may not be expert themselves, are influenced by these power dynamics and thus, it also influences the quality of data collected during the interviews.

After bringing out the concept of Reflexivity and power asymmetry during the interview, which are generally applicable for all researchers, let us now focus on the specific cases when the interviewers are themselves experts.

3.1 Expert Interviews

The status of the interviewer when he is using expert interviews brings forth certain distinct nuances due to the specific nature of the interview methodology and epistemological considerations. Expert interviews are conducted with people who have special knowledge because of their professional position.

The role of the researcher or interviewer who is interviewing an expert could become entirely different due to various categories of interaction situations in expert interviews which are a manifestation of arrays of specific competence and power ascriptions or assertions [9]. The authors specify that the interviewer could be considered by the expert being interviewed, as a co-expert or expert from a different knowledge culture, as a lay person, as an authority, as an accomplice or as a potential critic. Interestingly, these potential roles are usually a consequence of the mutual interactions and are not exclusively dependent on the interviewer and interviewee themselves. Thus, it is evident that the interviewer here does not yield asymmetrical power in a similar dominant way as in the traditional interview settings.

The expert interview is sometimes designated as a talk between the expert and a quasi-expert [10]. The relatively exclusive special knowledge of the expert, usually developed during a long (secondary) socialization process, needs to be tapped or accessed by the interviewer, as much as possible, through determined and systematic approach. The acquisition of a high degree of thematic competence on the part of the interviewer before he conducts the interview is constitutive for an expert interview.

However, the interviewers typically at best achieve the status of a quasi-expert, in as much as they interact unfettered by responsibility for the development and provision of problem solutions and thus with the essential difference of being free from the burden of action.

The discussion of the status of the interviewers in an expert interview in this section is primarily focused on the assumption that they themselves are not an expert in the same field or a peer of the expert and just a researcher with an interest in the researched field with recognized academic competence.

4 RESEARCHING YOUR OWN PEERS

The methodological problems and processes to overcome them when a researcher is involved in researching his own organization highlight some of the challenges being examined in this context. While the notion of impartiality and objective neutrality is obvious, the issues of friendship, vulnerability, and power along with a precarious balancing act between 'strangeness' and 'familiarity' presents challenges to the researcher [11]. Though, these reflexivity and ethical challenges highlighted by the author may not be directly contextual to our topic - experts themselves researching their peers or other experts, she also brings out certain other interesting aspects which are relevant to our case.

The willingness to speak freely by the interviewee, participants expecting the researchers to be their spokesperson for getting a message across as they considered them 'one of us but with flexibility to report freely', degree of 'edginess' in interviewees about outcomes of research subsequently being negative due to the researcher being insider, and peer relationships sometimes even influencing the researcher's inquiry - being protective of their own intellectual and professional competence in front of

peers, could very well be also relevant to the settings of experts interviewing experts.

In academic texts related to interviews, it is usually assumed – though implicitly, that the interviewee is not a peer of the researcher or interviewer and is from a different social group. Further, the experience of interviewing the peers demonstrates that the topology of the interview and relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is quite different in these situations than the traditional research interviews, which in turn, affects the nature and outcome of the interview [12].

There are distinct characteristics in the peers relevant in the context of comparison with normal interviewee, which could impact the interview. The peers are usually social equals – rather in a broad sense, equals in role-specific sense, share similar background, knowledge and cultural considerations, and they are also members of same community or group.

Some of the challenges while interviewing the peers encountered by the researcher or interviewer include access or sharing of intimate or confidential information, pre-supposition of background knowledge by both the researcher and the interviewee considered 'general knowledge' and the predicament of judging a colleague though both recognizing each other equal in status. For example, a professor engaged in research about curriculum design or student's behaviour in maritime education, may encounter such challenges when interviewing colleagues from same faculty. The data could be corrupted by the interviewees through incomplete answers – presuming the interviewer catches the meaning or idea, vague responses – to avoid being judged, and insinuations – to be cautious.

Thus, the situation discussed in this paper about expert interviewing another expert may, in some cases, be considered as a subset of researching own peers, if the researcher exactly fits or could belong to the sample of the population being studied in a particular research study. The nuances of the methodological challenges in such a scenario will not only comprise of those related to the peer research but also supplemented with other problems encountered due to these specialized circumstances.

5 IMPACT OF DOMAIN EXPERT BECOMING A RESEARCHER

Let us now discuss the challenges when the researchers are domain experts in their own field. They are not a novice researcher with general knowledge of the researched subject as envisaged in previous paragraphs. For example, a renowned and senior maritime specialist or a veteran professional researching the nuances of own field. It could either be a senior professor conducting research about maritime education - interviewing junior teachers & other senior professors, senior maritime safety auditor conducting research on auditing quality - interviewing junior & other senior auditors or a senior governmental legal adviser on maritime law

conducting research on maritime regulations - interviewing junior & senior legal officers.

The important point to note here is that they are either equally or sometimes more qualified than the experts they are likely to interact with as part of research. This totally changes the power dynamics in the interviews when used as a data source. Even if they may not be direct acquaintances, they are part of a larger social group of professionals with extensive expertise and experience in the same field and it may certainly influence not only the interviewee but also the interviewer. It further complicates the settings as the interviewer plays two roles simultaneously – the researcher and the researched, due to the prior knowledge and understandings of the group being studied or researched, and at the same time, also belonging to that group [13].

The influences of an expert interacting with an expert provide different settings and dimensions in an interview which may not be available in a normal situation where the researchers are not expert themselves. M. Pfadenhauer quotes Schütz (1972) that normally, the experts share a communicative universe amongst themselves, which is unique and comprise of elements easily comprehended in their own group [10]. It may be characterized by thematic focus, utilizing specialized terms, speaking professional jargon and use of indexical language. However, while communicating with non-experts, the experts tend to supplement their language with explanations using metaphors and analogies, to highlight or play down or dramatize the events. They could sometimes also adopt a paternalistic or self-legitimizing conversational behaviour.

When the researcher plays the role of the insider in an interview, it leads to greater and wholesome acceptance of the research and the researcher, by the interviewees and therefore, comprehensive and detailed data could be collected as they are more open and welcoming to the researcher [14].

The interviewees are more enthusiastic and keener about sharing their experiences due to perceived shared understanding with the interviewer which offers them higher level of trust and openness. In such scenarios, it is also feasible that the interview is steered and directed by the experience and views of the researcher rather than the interviewee.

The research in health sector also brings out interesting aspects affecting the expert-expert interaction in qualitative interviews [15]. The interview is perceived as an examination and as a test of factual knowledge by the participants where their knowledge is under scrutiny as the researcher/interviewer is also an expert. Sometimes, it was also considered as an educational process where the participants looked forward to feedback on their knowledge & performance and asked professional questions to the researchers treating them as an expert resource to update their own knowledge and skills. Interestingly, some informants aligned themselves with the interviewer, and expressed the camaraderie of both being expert professionals. In some cases, the informants expressed a form of solidarity in the face of potential criticism of the profession - which was common between the researcher and the participant. Thus, these interactions managed to bring out new

orientation and power dynamics to the interviews than the conventional settings.

Similar findings have also been highlighted in the context of higher education research [16]. The experts did not perceive the researchers as evaluators in the sense that they saw them as representatives of a superior authority, charged with assessing the subject of research, however, the participants perceived them as a potential risk, who might pass on information to the 'wrong' people and in this way endanger its future.

Interestingly, the time taken to develop a rapport amongst the participants in an interview may decrease substantially due to pre-existing relationships, which facilitates in converting the interview quickly into a shared discussion about experiences [17].

It was also found that the interviewees could potentially provide a lot more information, sometimes revealing more than they intended – which they may regret subsequently, as a result of the higher levels of trust due to accustomed friendship or work affiliation.

The power dynamics in an interview could also shift due to the site or location selected for the interview and the control may swing from the interviewee to the interviewer and vice versa because of different locations.

6 EXPERT-EXPERT INTERACTIONS IN RESEARCH SETTINGS - SPECIAL CASES

Let us also deliberate on some special situations in the expert-expert interactions in research settings.

6.1 *Elite groups*

In specific cases of studying-up or researching-up while interviewing the members of the elite groups, the imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewee has been brought out by many scholars and strategies to decrease the same have also been propounded. However, the focus of discussion here is not about challenges when a normal researcher has less power than an elite, but on cases when the researcher is close to or part of the elite group.

Elites are sometimes defined as those from higher management and board-level hierarchy in organizations or members of the senate, etc. [18]. However, in some cases, the term ultra-elites is also used for most highly placed members of an elite – the tiny set of persons possessing highest influence, abundant power and remarkable prestige in an institutional sphere, for example, the term was used in a study, when many Nobel laureates were interviewed for the qualitative research [19].

However, the impact of situations where the researchers themselves are distinguished experts or even a member of the elite group, have been less researched in literature. This may be primarily due to extremely rare occurrences of such situations in research settings. Incidentally, a Nobel laureate interviewing other Nobel laureates for his research

using qualitative interviews as a method, may surely encounter special methodological and other challenges which will be uncommon to normal cases.

In maritime context, it could be IMO Secretary General interviewing former Secretary Generals for research about maritime issues or challenges in functioning of IMO. In rather more practical terms, former Directors of National Maritime Authorities or Departments and former Heads of National/ International Maritime Research Institutes involved in research, may also face similar challenges when the sample includes ministers, heads of institutions, etc.

6.2 *Privileged Access Interviewing*

It is also appropriate to briefly discuss a specialized technique called Privileged Access Interviewing (PAI) as it also relates to a form of peer-to-peer interaction and in some cases, could be considered an expert to expert interaction based on the research settings.

PAI is a very commonly used method while researching a topic concerning persons involved in illegal or criminal activities such as illicit drug users. Such populations may remain hidden due their non-availability for research, which is either not accessible to a normal researcher or poses serious challenges in effectively collecting authentic data from the interviewee due to fear of prosecution, social norms and ostracization.

In this PAI approach of data gathering, the 'insiders - those belonging to the same privileged group, that is being targeted for research' are used by the researchers, to conduct the interviews for them. These insiders or sometimes called privileged access interviewers, are utilized to conduct interviews with persons in their own network and linkages. For example, during a study on drug addicts, former addicts or drug users themselves can conduct the interviews, as they may have first-hand knowledge of the drug supply network, information about drug users in community, acquaintances in the population of drug users and better acceptability by the drug users' community for asking questions.

While comparing the PAI with traditional interviewing methods, it was found that PAI team received more truthful answers to the sensitive questions [20]. Though this method does not pose any explicit similarity to the expert interviews, however, it is interesting to note that it also demonstrates outcomes where the participants consider the peer researchers as 'one of us' and develop more trust to share sensitive information with them, which presumably they have reservations in sharing with anyone else.

In maritime context, research on piracy related issues may use former pirates themselves interviewing existing or former pirates, as it is likely to reveal much more sensitive information than using a normal outsider as a researcher.

Therefore, this is similar to the findings discussed in the preceding paragraphs when the experts are interacting with the experts. It demonstrates that these nuances affect all such situations where the

participant and the researcher are from the same peer group.

In general, it is obvious now that the researchers being experts in their domain affects the interview, especially with experts, for qualitative research. One of the solutions for such challenges could be the standard methodology of triangulation. The mixing of the qualitative interviewing with other methods or using another researcher without an expert background to contrast the findings of the interview are some of the strategies which could be considered.

7 CONCLUSION

Interviews are a widely used method in maritime research using qualitative methodologies. Further, in many instances, maritime experts as a researcher use interviews as a qualitative data source for researching their field of expertise with samples drawn from the pool of other experts in the field.

Though expert interviews are adequately covered in literature, it is primarily focused on presuming that the expert interviews are conducted by researchers who are not experts themselves. Thus, it was found that the methodological implications of an expert researcher interviewing professional peers or other experts are under-explored in the literature, however, they are potentially important in qualitative research.

The examination of the related research from various disciplines of social science subsequently revealed that the challenges in researching own organization by a researcher, the peers or contemporaries and the common social groups could both be positive and negative. While it may facilitate in building rapport with the participants and gaining access to sensitive & privileged information due to increased levels of trust, it may sometimes result in the interview being hijacked by the participant and discussions on unnecessary issues not connected with research.

Further, when the researcher himself is an expert and is conducting an interview with other experts, pre-judging him as an evaluator of participant's knowledge and fear of negative findings impacting the participant will result in data corruption as participants will reserve themselves from exposing to the researcher. In addition, the inquiry by the researcher himself could be affected as he is also influenced in not exposing his research approach or perceived less knowledge in a particular topic due to peer pressure.

It was also found that specialized expert-expert interactions between members of elite groups in research settings and Privileged Access Interviewing are also less explored topics in terms of methodological challenges. However, there is a need for further detailed research on these issues to bring out methodological challenges in expert-expert interactions with an increase in the number of expert maritime professionals taking up academic research.

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