
Oral History: The Use Of Qualitative Techniques From Sociology

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This paper examined the semi-structured interview technique that is being used in qualitative research in sociology. It is obvious that many interviews have been conducted by historians, however, the interview has not been a primary research tool in either history or sociology. It is common for people, including researchers, to adopt perspectives which fit their conception of things. The principal benefits of this research tool are that the outcomes of research are not anticipated before the research is conducted, and the results are not shuffled into predetermined categories as can easily happen with other forms of research. The semi-structured interview was shown to be a method which allows the respondents to express their own views about the social reality they have constructed. This approach to interviewing may produce more complete and accurate material than can be or has been derived from other types of interview procedures.

A theoretical perspective from sociology was explained. In particular, it was shown how the social processes contribute to a dynamic and moving evaluation of the social setting, rather than one that is static and unchanging. The two theoretical perspectives, one from research methods and the other from sociology itself, represent the philosophical positions of existentialism and realism, respectively.

Greater emphasis was placed on interview guides and how they should be prepared. A method for wording questions was offered in light of the theory underlying the interview method. Open ended questions, probes, and the value of silence were discussed. The interview setting and the actual conduct of the interviews were discussed as they might

influence rapport and the quality of information gained from the interview. Also, gaining access to interviews was shown to be an important consideration. The importance of conducting research using sound ethical procedures was pointed out. In particular, the need to leave the interview situation for others who may follow was stressed. The paper was concluded with actual examples of some of the problems and surprises encountered in research. Examples of possible research in sport and physical education were offered using several retired physical educators as respondents. Researchers in sport history were encouraged to consider this form of research where it is applicable remembering that David K. Brace said: "No one tool will fit all tasks. Special tools must be made for special jobs."