

## **‘Temporary Non-Appearance of Memory’ Among the Interviewees: Methodology Enhancement in Qualitative Research for Achieving High Quality Data**

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**Abstract:** With mounting popularity of qualitative research worldwide, interviews have emerged as one of the foremost and widely used techniques for data collection. However, there has been little research which examines the appropriate timings for conducting an interview which results in attainment of a high quality data. To shed light on ‘when to conduct an interview for highest data quality’ was the purpose of this research. Using a grounded theory approach, this study conducted interviews with selected participants who pondered differently at different times of a day and exhibited considerable variations in their answers’ quality and extent of comprehensiveness. It finally led to development of a theory based on the findings of our research which discovered that at times, there exists ‘Temporary Non-appearance of Memory’ among the interviewees which adversely affects the quality of their responses thus affecting the final outcomes of qualitative research.

**Key words:** Data quality • Grounded theory • Interpretivist • Interview schedule • Memory • Variation in answers

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Interviewing has been considered as one of the most important methods in qualitative research to understand people’s perspectives [1-3]. From a neopositivist perspective, an interviewee responds like a truth teller; under romanticism, he reveals real life experiences and social realities; and under localism, he does not act like a reporter of external events but produces situated accounts [4,5]. Moreover, In order to be able to cull out a deeper meaning, the researcher needs to cognize the behavior in context [6].

It requires lot of skills and practice to carry out an interview which leads to generating rich data [7]. The purpose of carrying out depth interviews is to gain rich and exhaustive data which demonstrate the informant’s language, experience and perspective ‘in depth’ [7-9]. In depth can be acknowledged as getting a clear sense of how the seemingly straightforward is actually more complicated [10]. Normally, specific

information is desired from the participants [11] and a researcher therefore, expects from the interviewees appropriate answers for the questions he asks during the semi-structured interviews.

However, the interviewees may not be able to possess the depth of understanding and adequate memory in precision all the time. Distributive memory theories have revealed that memories of complex events are warehoused in different memory locations. During interviews, an interviewee answers according to his abilities to recall and passes through a memory reconstruction process in which he may fail to recollect some major events [12] which can make the answer script ominously redundant and inadequate. If the data quality is not of apposite superiority, the inclusive results of the qualitative research would be adversely impacted. This could be one of the reasons of why qualitative methods are least understood and most criticized research methods in present scenario [13-15].

Good interviewing practices have received less critical attention from the scholars. The currently available interview techniques mostly focus on how to ask germane questions and how to avoid ambiguities [16]. The existing interview techniques usually cover guidance on : Interview's meaning, objectives and its types; interview methods; sampling frame; informant's consent and ethical considerations; interview structuring and preparations; recording methods; conducting interviews and handling probable errors; analyzing interview data [17]. Though these studies immensely benefit a qualitative researcher, there are possibilities that even after following them, a researcher can come up with data of relatively poor quality. Our research aims to bridge this gap by attempting to unfold the situations which could lead to generating the interview data of poor quality. There are many books available on research methodology [18-20] which provide underpinnings on interviews but none of them discuss in detail 'when to conduct an interview?' This study therefore, is an attempt to examine the appropriate timings for conducting an interview with a purpose of achieving data of high quality.

The researcher gathers all the facts and then he inspects to find out which theory can be developed from these set of facts. The theory emerging from such data through a process of induction is thus referred to as 'grounded theory' [21, 10]. This study was embarked on to propose a grounded theory that will contribute to comprehending an appropriate timing for conducting interviews in qualitative research.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study followed an interpretivist line of enquiry and included a sampling of Universiti Utara Malaysia lecturers, doctoral students and managers of multinational companies who were selected to characterize varied perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the data collection. Following purposive sampling, 12 participants were interviewed in this research (6 lecturers, 4 doctoral students, 2 managers from multinational companies). The sample of this study was structured by descent, gender, age, educational background and work experience. All of them held a master's degree or above. Their years of work experience in their respective fields varied from 5-20 years.

Out of 6 lecturers, 3 had taught 'Qualitative Research' to PhD students in the Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Table 1: Demography features of the participants

N=12					
Descent	Gender		Age		
Malay	4	Males	8	30-40	6
Chinese-Malay	3	Females	4	40-50	4
Indian-Malay	3			50-60	2
Arabs	2				

All of the 4 doctoral students had taken courses in 'Qualitative Research' and they had work experience of more than 5 years before joining their doctoral programme. The 2 selected managers had experience of more than 15 years and they had also experience of participating in interviews conducted by students from various universities in Malaysia. These 12 participants were contacted at least twice according to a schedule agreed upon with them. 5 of them were contacted third time to validate the findings.

The interviews were conducted for around one hour every time and the information was collected on the issues like: the best day and time to conduct interviews in order to get information of highest quality commensurate with the interviewee's abilities; probable variations in the answers if the interview is conducted during different timings of a day; possibilities of other factors affecting the quality of participant's answers. Additionally, in every conversation with the same participant, these aspects were once again asked and noticeable variations were observed by the interviewer. Although, such observations supported and were in line with the objective of this research, however, researchers preferred to refer back with findings to some participants for the third time for triangulation. Verbatim transcription was done for the interviews and the data were analyzed using standard methods suggested for the grounded theory.

Initially, data consisting of each incident, idea and event were coded using open codes. Open coding is naming and classifying a phenomenon through a close scrutiny of the data. Related incidents or ideas were given same label thus permitting comparisons both within and between transcripts [22]. Thereafter, through axial coding, the data were put back together by identifying and making connections between a category and subcategories [23]. And finally, the selective coding process cohesively combined these categories to form a representative and practical theory [23].

**Credibility of the Study:** The credibility of this study was ascertained by both the appropriateness of the research process as well as by empirical grounding of the research

outcomes [23]. A detailed procedure was followed throughout the research right from sample selection to themes identification and sense making. The conceptual relationships thus obtained were tested by reexamining each interview. These conceptual linkages were presented as the factors leading to the temporary non-appearance of memory among the interviewees. Bigger picture of the interview environment in which these factors work was perceived as a setting for establishing the theory. Finally, the theory described interplay between interviewee's sound status of mind and high quality data through proper handling of the factors causing temporary non-appearance of memory among the informants. This study represented the theoretical perspectives of 12 participants and the sufficiency and appropriateness of empirical grounding was handled from a qualitative standpoint.

**Researcher-Interviewer:** The interviewer for this study was a doctoral scholar and the researchers included the same scholar and a senior academician with several years of experience in teaching and research. The interviewer's qualification included master's degree in business and a bachelor's degree in economics. He had more than nine years of experience in academics and industry in countries like India, Bahrain, Oman and Malaysia. The researchers ensured that the interviewer's possible bias has minimal

influence on this study through several brainstorming rounds conducted for selecting the sample and for other issues so that the generalizability is least affected.

## RESULTS

The aim of this research was to explore the timings to conduct an interview under qualitative research. It revolved around the people who have got high level of knowledge of qualitative research. Table 2 shows the themes, macrothemes and categories which emerged from the analysis of codes.

### Determining Most Appropriate Time for Conducting an Interview:

Usually, the interviewers fix interview schedules without much contemplating about the issues interviewees can be inflicted with. Our study explained to the interviewees the purpose of this research and explored from them their perspective on the timings and days when they will be answering to their best capacity. Also they were asked when they will not be able to answer to their fullest capacity. The coding of their answers led to identification of 3 macrothemes: 1. Nature of work, 2. Peak working hours and 3. Specific days and time. They all shared that these three aspects should be taken care of by the interviewers while deliberating to schedule an interview.

Table 2: Thematic presentation

Category	Macro themes	Themes
Determining most appropriate time for conducting an interview	1.Nature of work	1.Attention to job and other priorities 2.Important official meetings 3.Unexpectedly emerged responsibilities 4.Leisure time in the working hours
	2.Peak working hours	5.Different timing preferences as per work's peak hours 6.Regular interface timings with superiors, clients, suppliers
	3.Specific days and time	7.First day of a week 8.First few hours of a day's work 9.Weekend plans 10.Hangover from the weekend 11.Festival season slacker
Avoidance of other possibilities of getting low answer quality	4.High pressure situation	12.Job related stress 13.Family stress 14.Weariness 15.Tough financial situation during month ends
	5.Intimidation	16.Privacy worries 17.Fear of information misuses
	6.Personal hitches and preferences	18.No learning opportunity 19.No networking opportunity 20.Lack of proper communication 21.Interviewer's lack of planning 22.No motivation 23. Interviewer's sensual dressing

**David:** I have 1001 things in my mind when I come to office in the morning. I am always worried about our manufacturing plant and I really don't know how my staff might have responded last night to the communication made by our parent company in the USA. I have to also delegate the work to my employees working in the morning shift when I come to the office. In that situation, it won't be possible for me to be in proper state of mind for answering comprehensively to the questions of a qualitative researcher.

All the participants showed their work related heavy occupancy during certain timing of a day which differed from one to another. Due to their nature of work, some participants were heavily occupied in mornings, some in evenings and some in the afternoon. Some even expressed that even if they give an appointment to an interviewer, they still have much of their attention on work due to unexpectedly arisen responsibilities.

**Avoidance of Other Possibilities of Low Answer Quality:** Participants were also asked to contemplate over other factors which can lead them to offering answers of lower quality which is not commensurate with their experience and expertise. The coding of their answers once again led to identification of 3 macrothemes: 1.High pressure situation, 2.Intimidation and 3.Pesronal hitches and preferences.

**Abdulla:** I can't be fully open to an interviewer if I am under stress or I feel that I have no opportunity for learning something new. Also, I can't be giving full information if I have a fear that such information can be utilized improperly by the interviewer.

After conversing with all the participants, many more possible reasons were identified for the poor quality of answers coming from those experts.

**Ahmed:** If an interviewer does not talk well over phone and also in the interview, I lose interest. I sometimes also ask some questions from my interviewers and if they can't answer then my motivation gets lost. In such interviews, I just try to give some quick answers and want the interviewers to go as early as possible. But obviously I don't ask them to go quickly. Basically, interviewer should communicate well and come prepared.

Some even opined that the sensual dressing of interviewers divert their attention and make the situation challenging for answering.

**Temporary Non-Appearance of Memory (TNM) Theory:** The problem of this research was to identify appropriate timings for conducting interviews in qualitative research. The results arising from the coding led to development of the oretical categories and macrothemes which further provided a structure for development of a theory termed as 'Temporary Non-appearance of Memory Theory' as shown in Figure 1. The term 'Temporary Non-appearance of Memory' refers to a situation when an expert does not really seem to talk like an expert due to certain reasons even though he has significant experience and proven expertise in his field. After analysis and theory development, when the participants were shown back this theory for validity purposes, they clearly expressed their consent saying that an interviewer can be highly benefitted by taking these points into account while fixing interview schedules.

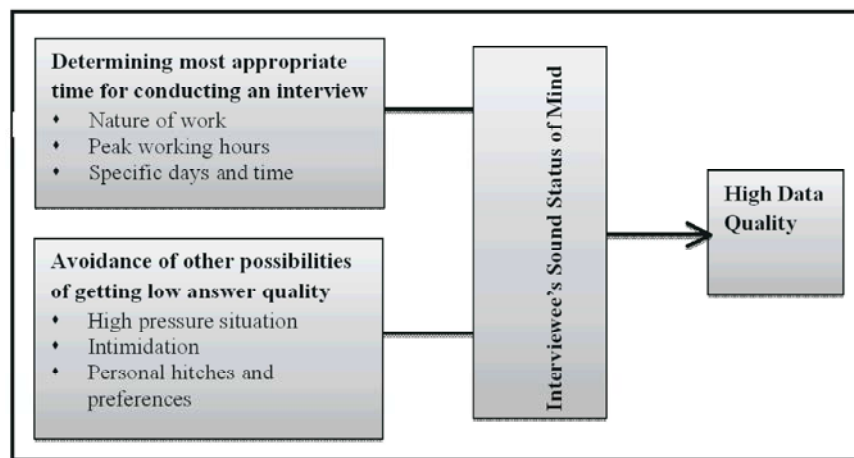


Fig. 1: Temporary Non-appearance of Memory (TNM) Theory- A process for fixing interview schedule for high data quality

This theory highlights the process of fixing an interview schedule through an interconnected set of categories and macrothemes grounded in the data which occurred from the analysis procedures. The process addressing 'when to conduct interviews' was discovered to have sensible links with temporary non-appearance of memory among the participants. It was found that the interviewees possess a temporary no-show of memory and at times they do not answer fully in proportion with their expertise. Consequently, the interviewer has to struggle latter and he has to compromise on the richness of data. Temporary non-appearance of memory emerged as the core category which was further explained by the two theoretical categories: 1. Determining most appropriate time for conducting an interview and 2. Avoidance of other possibilities of getting low answer quality. When an interview is to be scheduled, an interviewer can ensure that he does not choose a schedule when the interviewee might be having a momentary absence of memory. As per our findings, for determining appropriate interview times, interviewers can take into consideration the interviewee's nature of work, peak working hours, specific days and time. Interviewers can also avoid other possibilities like interviewee's high pressure situations, any kind of intimidating forces and his personal hitches and preferences as shown in Table 2 which can lead to achieving low data quality. This theory highlights that due consideration of the aforesaid two theoretical categories leads to achieving an interviewee answering with a sound state of mind during the actual interviews which further leads to achieving a data of high quality.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our study was conducted with a purpose to explore the issues which interviewers need to consider before finalizing interview schedules for an enhanced data quality. The 'Temporary non-appearance of memory theory' developed from this study explains the factors which have influence on an interviewee's sound status of mind thus affecting the quality of data that will come out from their answers.

Usually, a qualitative researcher aspires to get an opportunity to interview his participant at any time convenient to him without contemplating much about the freshness of a participant's mind. A structured approach is not always followed to ensure that the time set for interview is free of any flaws in terms of participant's weariness or other tensions. In this study, participants were asked about appropriate timings for a depth interview. They were first explained the purpose of depth

interviews. When their answers were coded, it appeared that an interviewee is not able to answer during his stressful situations or when he is heavily loaded with the tasks related to his job. The participants expressed that there are various situations when they need to give full attention to their job and the to-do notes for that day. There can be sudden announcement of official meetings which requires due preparations. Sometimes there are unexpectedly arisen responsibilities which need servicing on priority basis leaving everything behind. Different participants had different leisure time in a day during which they feel they are a little relaxed from the heavy work. The managers of multinational companies believed mornings as their most demanding work hours and after noon little less hectic. Again in evening when they get ready to report to their superiors, the pressure starts to build. Participants in other profession had other peak hours. Almost all of them believed that the first day of a week is quite busy and demanding. Some of them even felt that they usually make plans for weekend and therefore on the last day of week they get additional responsibilities of organizing petty logistics for those plans. Some of them opined for festival seasons when the mood is fully towards celebrations. In these situations, they felt they can't offer their best answers in detail. These responses support the study which says that traditional face-to-face interviews have several drawbacks which can be related to the difficulties involved in arranging and conducting those interviews [24, 3].

Findings of this study reveal that there are several other factors which can play critical role in getting high quality data through interviews. Job related stress was found common whereas some participants even mentioned family stress as one of the reasons for the participants' improper status of mind in context of answering in depth interviews. Keightley [25] as cited in Keightley [26] found in her study a participant speaking in fragmented and confused sentences recounting her traumatic experience. In some instances, a tough financial situation was identified by few participants as another factor causing them to talk and behave stressfully. Some participants believed that, some phone calls made to them for interview appointments actually give them privacy worries and they get a sense of fear that their organization's secrecy can be at stake. In such situation they speak cautiously and try to finish the interview quickly. Lack of learning and networking opportunities were also seen as reasons which make some participants lose interest and motivation for an interview. One participant even expressed that a badly written mail can make him lose interest. All of these

factors can guide a researcher in conducting aptly timed interviews. The responses however didn't reflect noteworthy differences due to demographic features of the participants.

Interviewees' responses have great impact in shaping the final outcomes of qualitative studies. As such, it becomes important to conduct interview in a time when the interviewee can think and answer properly according to his full capacity. In that context, the TNM Theory offers to suggest factors that interviewers in future can consider while planning and scheduling their interviews.

### CONCLUSION

The analysis of responses to factors affecting the quality of answers in qualitative research interviews highlights several stressful and demanding situations when an interviewee is not able to talk fully according to his proficiency and knowledge. The study argues that the nature of work necessitates people to be more involved at times. Different occupations have different peak working hours which can be useful to consider while fixing interview schedules. For some informants, the starting as well as last day of a week also showed considerable influence on their status of mind. Moreover, high pressure situation can lead them towards not being able to offer appropriately detailed answers. Sometimes, few intimidating forces make them speak in a skeptical manner. Personal hitches and preferences were also seen to be playing a detrimental role in their willingness to answer freely. Our study clubbed and coded all of such possible reasons together coming up from the participants and came up with a theory grounded on these data. It was termed as 'Temporary non-appearance of Memory (TNM) Theory' which sought to highlight the process of obtaining a high quality data from an interview when the interviewee possesses a sound status of mind. The theory suggests that an interviewee's sound status of mind is evidently possible when the factors leading to temporary non- appearance of his memory have been taken into account and have been handled appropriately by an interviewer. Our study seeks to play a vital role in assisting a qualitative researcher when he aspires to fix time for an interview. The researchers of this study welcome suggestions for adding new themes or factors to the TNM Theory. This study was conducted with highly qualified participants currently working or doing research in Malaysia. Future studies can consider participants working in other countries. Also, our study

focused on individual participants and therefore we suggest future studies focusing on collaborative or focus groups.

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