
UNIT 12 INTERVIEW METHOD

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the role of interview method in survey research;
- know the types of interviews used for data collection;
- identify the steps and guidelines to be followed in interview method;
- learn the procedure to conduct interviews; and
- visualise the advantages and limitations of interview method as a tool of data collection.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Data collection is a difficult and yet very important part in survey research. Each data collection method has its own complexities as well as advantages and limitations. We cannot say which method is the best out of them. Each method should be seen in relation to the type of research to be conducted and more particularly the research problem to be investigated. Survey type research has been discussed at length in Unit 3 of this course.

The basic instruments of data collection in survey research are questionnaire and interview methods. Unit 11 of this course deals with questionnaire method. This Unit introduces you to interviewing as one of the data collection instruments.

In research the question arises how one can gain access to data required. One can access it through documents, or visiting places, like institutions, organisations, work places, or through questionnaires and interviews. Before selecting the method the researcher must know and finalise the target population, the questions to be asked, the schedule to be drafted. Because these tools help us to generate empirical data which will yield qualitative as well as quantifiable results.

12.2 INTERVIEWING

You must have witnessed many programmes on TV, which are basically interview-based. These programmes usually invite celebrities, film personalities, politicians, industrialist, etc. to get information on their life, works or they may be asked questions pertaining to some social theme or current political event. Interviewing in Survey Research is different from these interviews.

We will study some of the definitions to know the meaning of this term. According to Neuman (1991) “the interview is a short term, secondary social interaction between two strangers with the explicit purpose of one person’s obtaining specific information from the other. . . . Information is obtained in a structured conversation in which the interviewer asks pre arranged questions and records answers, and respondent answers.”

Krishan Kumar (1992) defines “interviewing is a process of personal interaction between a researcher and a respondent.” Ranjit Kumar in his book *Research Methodology* (1999) opined that “any person- to- person interaction between two or more individuals with a specific purpose in mind is called interview.” O’Leary (2004) of the view that “Interviewing a method of data collection which involves researchers asking respondents basically open-ended questions.”

In simple words we can say that survey interviewing is a face-to-face interaction with the respondents to get specific information. The questions may be pre decided. Invariably it is seen that for data collection, the interview method includes only open-ended questions.

Interviewing as a method of data collection is not just easy. You may think that it involves only jotting down questions and recording the answers. This method has its own complexities. O’Leary (2004) has suggested that the complexities may arise due to people or the target population you interview and secondly, due to complexities of communication. People are complex, complicated or may be introvert. There is no doubt about this. Getting proper answers without annoying them is a difficult task. If the interviewee and interviewer have some understanding, gathering data is assured. If there is no chemistry between them, it may hamper the interview process.

Self Check Exercise

1) Explain the role of interview in survey research.

Note: i) Write your answer in the space given below.

ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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12.3 TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Adams (1985) has compared questionnaires and interviews with the surgical tools in the medicine. He further stated that these tools are the most commonly used modes of data collection in many branches of social and behavioural sciences. We all know that these tools are very flexible and adaptable by various research scholars to different types of research problems. Interviews can be structured or unstructured. It can be for personal, impersonal or mixed type of interaction. The most important aspect here is that the social behavioural researcher must know how to prepare and use it; what type of interview will suit the particular research problem, etc. In the following sub-sections we will learn about different types of interviews. The type of interview to be chosen will definitely depend on research topic, purpose of research and population under study.

12.3.1 Structured Interview

During structured interview the interviewer asks the pre-drafted questions. Here, he/she cannot change the questions, or their sequence. No freedom is given to add new questions or delete any question. The interviewer is strictly instructed to ask the pre decided questions in verbatim and also to record them.

The interview scheduled is prepared in advance. It contains open ended as well as closed ended questions. The question schedule may be given to the interviewee in advance so that he/she can prepare the answers. There is a difference between interviewing and interview schedule. Ranjit Kumar (1999) suggested that interview schedule is a tool to collect data while interviewing is a process/method of data collection.

As compared to unstructured interview this type generates uniform data. It does not need any professional skill to conduct interview sessions because of listed questions. It is required from interviewer that he/she should remain unbiased. The interviewer can be biased in the case of unstructured interview. The interviewer is supposed to give only clarifications on and when it is desired. Krishan Kumar also said that it should restrict to only clarifications and no suggestions be given. This type of interview can be conducted person-to-person or through telephone or by using electronic device.

Example

- 1) Do you make use of computers in your research?
 Yes
 No
- 2) Are you aware of the concept of invisible college?
 Yes
 No
- 3) Do you communicate with other scholars to seek information for your research?
 Yes
 No

12.3.2 Unstructured Interview

During the interview when the interviewer exercises autonomy in asking questions what ever comes to his/her mind on a particular research problem under investigation, is called unstructured interview. This type of interview can be conducted on one - to- one basis or with a group of interviewees. Unstructured interview may permit the interviewee to give responses freely or it may restrict free responses. Hence, the interviewer asks the respondents only such questions, which comes under the area of research problem. There are no set typed questions. One question leads to another and so on. The main aim of the interviewer is to get personal viewpoint of the respondents on a given topic

The interviewer should keep interview guide/schedule with him/her at the time of the interview. It helps him/her to know the areas to be covered and it also provides guidelines for smooth conduct of interview session.

Interviewer is free to ask additional questions and also repeat or delete questions as mentioned in the guide. If he/she feels some questions are not very clear he/she can exercise full freedom to change or reward it. At the time of the interview if it is felt that putting certain questions or changing the sequence may yield some useful results, interviewer can do it freely. On the respondent’s side, they are given opportunity to give their views, opinion freely on the questions asked. An effort can be made during interview to encourage them to speak freely. This flexibility helps generating spontaneous, useful responses on the area of research. Unstructured interview is easy to conduct but difficult to analyse the results. Reason is that no two interviews reveal same type of responses. On same questions you may get different responses. This type of interview calls for sufficient knowledge background, good interviewing skills, command on language; and ability to convince the respondent to answer. This type of interview demands specialised training to be imparted to the interviewer/researcher to get best results.

Unstructured interview is also called in-depth interview. It is also said that this type of interview is best suited to those situations where very little is known. Such interviews aim to elicit information from the respondents which otherwise may not be procured. Kothari (2004) opined, “Depth interviews are designed to discover underlying motives and desires and are often used in motivational research. Such interviews are held to explore needs, desires and feelings of the respondents.”

Depth interviews can be projective or non-projective in nature. Projective depth interview includes such type of indirect questions, which are related to interviewee’s behaviour, attitude towards the subject of study. Both types of depth interviews can generate data, which may be useful in understanding the behaviouristic attitudes of people under study.

Examples

- 1) How do you keep up-to-date in the field of your research?

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- 2) Would you like to delegate search for information?

Yes

No

3) If yes, give reasons.

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4) If no, give reasons.

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12.3.3 Focussed Interview

Focussed interview is conducted basically to get focussed, in depth information on any given issue from the respondent. It is one of the types of unstructured interview. The main task of the researcher in such type of interview is to involve the respondent in discussion on specific topic so that the researcher gets desired information. Here the interviewer has the freedom to decide the questions and their sequence. Kothari (2004) is of the opinion that such interviews are helpful in the development of hypothesis. Here the information is gathered from the respondent’s area of experiences, effects, participation, etc. Here the interviewer is not only properly informed about the area of research but he/she also be knowledgeable and skilled to get required information from the experiences, background of the respondent which has a direct bearing on the topic under study. The selection of respondents is done on the basis of knowledge experiences of the respondents on the area of study.

12.3.4 Non-directive Interview

Interviewer in this type of interview acts like a catalyst. He/She prompts the respondents to give information on the topic under investigation. Like in focussed interview here questioning is very less. But the area(s) to be covered remains under the control of the interviewer. He/She is supposed to give free environment to the respondents so that they can express their views freely and to the point; the interviewer simply supports the views expressed by the respondent instead of approving or disapproving them.

12.3.5 Clinical Interview

This type of interview also comes under the category of unstructured interview. Adams and Schvaneveldt (1985) reported that this type of interview has been used in social care work, counselling and prison setting, and is also called personal history interview. This type covers basically the feelings, life experiences, of the respondents. The interviewer has the freedom to interact freely with the respondents to elicit the information on the given topic. This type of interview is flexible and it includes introductory questions as well. Here the respondent can also give new information on related factors and elaborate on them. It may prove very helpful in predicting, analysing, and concluding on some areas. The area under investigation, its objectives, scope are the main determinants of selection of questions and area to be covered in the clinical interview.

12.3.6 Telephonic Interview

As the name suggests this type of interview is conducted on phone. You need a telephone connection and an instrument, a phone directory and a set of questions to be asked. It is best suited for market type of survey, poll, etc. The main advantage of this type of method is to get data very fast without wasting time on visiting the respondents. It does not require special skills to conduct the interview session. Telephone interview is a faster and cheaper method for obtaining information. Extra staff i.e., field staff is not required in this method. Moreover, it is very flexible in comparison with mailed questionnaire method. Non-response percentage is very low in telephone interview. On the other hand, long distance calls, number of calls, length of call time adds to its cost. There is a possibility of many respondents not having a connection. The voice quality or the connectivity may also pose problems. For short conversation it may be ideal but lengthy conversation may not be liked by the respondents. It is very difficult to find out doubtful information provided by the respondent. Like mailed questionnaire the personal touch will be missing in this type of interview also. If respondents do not wish to talk to the interviewer or do not cooperate it may turn a disaster for the researcher.

Self Check Exercise

2) What do you understand by clinical interview?

- Note:** i) Write your answer in the space given below.
 ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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12.3.7 Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) System

The increasing use of information technology has changed the traditional scenario of conducting surveys. It has definitely eased the efforts and enhanced the quality of research with minimising time.

Now, you can see that software companies have introduced many software programmes to facilitate data collection, analysis, etc. Some of them are mentioned here for your information sake only. They are CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing), CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing), ACASI (Audio Computer Assisted Self Interviewing) WinCati System, Wincati Mixed Mode and Sensus Web, and many more to cite here.

CATI System is used to conduct telephone interview to gather data from number of respondents scattered all over the world. In this system computers are used to automate the activities done in the formal interviewing. In simple words, computers are used to conduct surveys. They keep control of questions, data, data entry, and data analysis. It can also facilitate the status of the study whenever it is required. It also helps in interview administration and monitoring. This system requires PC, which is linked through network to server where data can be stored centrally. Telephone, head set and of course set of questions to be asked, and telephone numbers of the respondent are required in this system also. Interviewer sits facing the computer screen, reads the questions and simply record by keying the responses.

Looking at the advantages of this system we should not underestimate the importance of human touch to the interviewing. For example, the proper wording of questions, sequencing their explanations, suggestions to the questions, and more importantly, convincing the respondent to answer the questions freely and frankly definitely generate credible responses from the respondents.

This system has many advantages:

- Uniformity may be maintained.
- Questions can be stored in the computer memory.
- Responses can be recorded directly into the computer.
- It eliminates the errors on the part of interviewers or in case missed questions
- Analysis can be done very fast.
- It helps in keeping automatic records.

In this Unit our main emphasis is on traditional way of interviewing. Hence, we will not discuss CATI system in detail.

Interviews are basically structured, semi-structured or unstructured. They can be formal or informal. Formal interview follows the rules and roles associated with this method where as informal does not follow any rule of interviewing and it seems casual and relaxed form of interviewing which removes the gulf between interviewer and interviewee. Formal interview is structured and informal is highly unstructured. Interviewing can be done one to one and in groups also. Telephone interview is the best example of one to one interviewing. In-group interview the interviewees are seen as focussed group and the interviewer acts as a moderator or facilitator.

Self Check Exercise

3) What are the infrastructure requirements for CATI system?

- Note:** i) Write your answer in the space given below.
 ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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12.4 INTERVIEW PROCESS

In the foregoing sections you have learnt about the interviewing and its different types. In this section we will focus our attention to the process of conducting interview, which involves the preparation of plan of action to meet all types of contingencies, training of interviewers or field staff, preparation of interview schedule, selection of data recording system, pilot run of the interview, modifications for the final interview, conducting interview sessions and finally the data analysis.

Research Methods

Plan: In this stage the researcher plans the whole interview process, which includes the training of interviewer, time to be taken in the interview and the venue of the interview. It also takes into account the cost factor, travel time and wait around time. Field staff is required when number of interviewees is more. One principal interviewer/research assistant is not sufficient for the large number of respondents. Training of field staff/ enumerator or research assistant is needed to successfully manage the interview session. In this process the interviewer will become aware of the questions and the instructions to be followed in the session.

Preparation of Interview Schedule: Interview schedule is a list of printed questions, set in some order or sequence, and the interviewer records the answers on the printed schedule during the interview session. Interview schedule is prepared in advance. People (researcher, interviewer, or simply the enumerator) who are going to take this assignment need practical training to conduct the interview smoothly. However, we cannot ignore the interviewer's bias towards the interpretation of answers. Through interview schedule the identity of the respondent is known to the researcher. The problem of low response rate is not faced in this method. However, information received from the respondent is recorded there only the ones which prove to be highly accurate. Through Interview schedules personal contact with the respondent can be established. This method can prove successful even when the target population is not educated. This method has some drawbacks also. Interviewer may be biased, if he/she is not well trained, then it will hamper the investigation and this method is not feasible when target population is geographically wide spread.

The researcher must keep in mind certain points while preparing interview schedule.

The researcher should be clear in mind regarding the objectives, scope of the research area under study.

The choice of closed or open-ended questions should be made.

Complex, emotional and sensitive type of questions should be avoided.

Format of the interview schedule should be attractive and it leaves sufficient place to enter the answers.

The sequence of questions should be finalised before conducting the interview session. It is preferable to put questions in logical order.

Relevant questions should be drafted on the basis of area of research.

Please refer to Unit no. 11 of this course to get detailed information on construction, and selection of open and close-ended questions. The Unit also discusses the relative advantages and disadvantages of both the types of questions.

Pilot Test of the Schedule: Before the actual interview process starts it is advisable to pre test the interview questions. A group of interviews should be selected for pilot study. This group should not be included in the proper study. Interviewer should request the selected respondents to give their suggestions/observations to improve the interview schedule. After getting the responses from the pilot study group the researcher should modify it accordingly. This practice is very important to get proper responses from the respondents.

Conducting the Interview: We all know that interview is an art. But for researcher it is the most difficult task. The researcher/interviewer has to manage multiple tasks at

one time. For example he/she is putting questions to the respondent, listening to the answers carefully, giving clarification, sometimes explanations, directions to clear the doubts of the respondents and recording the answers manually, or with the help of any electronic device (i.e., tape recorder). The interviewer is also keeping tap on time, the questions to be covered in the session, etc. It is a skilled job. The interviewer should be trained to undertake such job. Experience shows that this skill can be improved over time.

How an interviewer is conducting himself/herself in the interview session is very important. His/Her appearance, pleasing personality, behaviour, use of words, and knowledge of the area can make a lot of difference to the results. Body language can also affect the communication process. It may increase the level of comfort or ease of respondent.

Interviewer should not keep waiting the respondent. He/she should be punctual, polite and courteous. Before starting the actual interview session he/she should introduce the objective of the study and clearly explain the importance of contribution of the respondent in the research. The interviewer should listen more than talk. He/She should have listening skills. The main objective of the interview is to facilitate respondents to answer. So it is important that the interviewer should ask right types of questions prompting the respondent to answer and then properly recording the answers.

Guidelines for Conducting Interviews

- Interviewer should plan in an advance the venue, time, etc. of the interview session.
- He/She should have the friendly approach so that a proper understanding/rapport can be established between the interviewer and interviewee.
- He/She should have the ability to mobilise the respondent to answer freely and frankly on the subject.
- Questions should be well framed. Complex questions should be avoided. Such questions should be added which will elicit the desired answers.
- He/She should be properly trained to have proper control of the interview session. He/She should be responsible for creating a friendly atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence.
- He/She should not show any surprise or disapproval to the answers of the respondent but at the same time he/she should be supportive of the respondent answers.
- He/She should have friendly, courteous, unbiased approach.
- He/She should be non judgemental and should not try to change or influence the reactions or opinions of the respondents.
- The interviewer should not indulge in any argument, even though he/she may know that respondent's replies are not accurate.
- At the end of the interview session the interviewer must show gratitude for their cooperation. The respondent should get the feeling that they are actively participating in the research process and their views are valuable and important to research.

In addition to this Adams (1985) suggested three factors, which make an interview successful. They are:

“having a thoroughly tested questionnaire or interview form which to work;

being familiar and “wise” in the interview process;

treating respondents with trust, respect and courtesy”.

Recording the Interview: In the structured interviews where mostly the questions are closed ended, it is easy to record the responses on the interview schedule. This method is called **Note Taking method**. It is difficult for the interviewer to remember all the responses and enter at the end of the day. It is advisable for he/she to record accurately and fully whatever responses emerge after the session. In the Note Taking method no answer should be left blank if the respondent did not answer. In such situations it should be written “not responded”, etc. Some explanation should be recorded against unanswered questions Interviewer should also note the comments made by the respondent on the margin area near the questions. The explanations given by the interviewer should also be recorded separately question wise. These noting will prove highly useful at the time of data analysis.

In this method the interviewer should be extra careful. He/She should be questioning, listening, and recording the answers simultaneously. In the case of highly structured interviews use of tape recorder is not required. It may prove helpful in the case of open-ended questions.

For open-ended questions, writing the responses, which may be long, is not only difficult but time consuming also. In order to get the main substance of the answer recording of exact wordings is required. In such situation interviewer may make use of the **Tape Recording** method to have the verbatim copy of the answers. Data generated through audio recordings can be preserved and used later. The use of this method saves the time of the interviewer and the same can be utilised for further analysis and report writing. The only disadvantage of this method is that it may put respondents at unease.

At the end or in between the interview session if time and other conditions permit the respondents should be shown the marked responses. The openness, truthfulness and trust on the part of the interviewer may generate confidence in the respondent and he/she is prompted to cooperate with the interviewer. If the marked responses are not shown to them then they may get the feeling that something is being concealed from them and they may not continue the interview session. Such situations may play havoc not with the interview but with the research as such. For the case of tape recorded responses the transcripts of the recordings in verbatim should be shown to them for the confirmation of accuracy. It is expected from the respondent that he/she should not revise the answers.

Preparation of Verbatim Transcripts: After the interview the recordings are transformed into verbatim transcripts. This forms the primary material for research. Helen Finch (1990) is of the opinion that preparing transcripts is a arduous task. It is time consuming. It is better to give such task to some outside professional agency and the researcher can utilise the time elsewhere.

Analysis of Data and Report Writing: Analysing the qualitative data is a very difficult task. Same sets of questions receive diverse answers. Analysis of data and report writing will be discussed in detail in this course.

4) Enumerate different stages of interview method.

- Note:** i) Write your answer in the space given below.
 ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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12.5 ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF INTERVIEW METHOD

Advantages

- Through questioning in depth information can be obtained from the respondent.
- In personal interaction clarifications and explanations can be made.
- This is a very flexible method. Questions can be restructured to eliminate ambiguity.
- Through personal interaction complete responses can be obtained from the respondents.
- Personal information, as well as complex and sensitive information can be generated.
- Non- response percentage is very less. As compared to questionnaire method here participant rate is high.
- The interviewer may come across information, which is most spontaneous.
- Interviewer can remould the questions, change the language according to knowledge, educational background of the respondent.
- Many people do not want to answer questionnaires due to time constraints but at the same time they may very willingly face the interview session. It takes less effort and time of the respondent.
- Quarterly data can be retrieved from interview session.
- Through personal interaction the interviewer can observe the respondent’s reactions, body language, facial expressions vis-à-vis a particular question. These expressions help the researcher/interviewer to reword or remould the questions spontaneously. Some of these reactions, if observed carefully, may prove useful at the time of analysis.
- Face –to –face or group interaction gives respondent the feeling of direct participation in the research process.
- Conducting interview is an art. A properly trained interviewer can make the respondent answer even sensitive, emotional and sometimes complex questions with ease. Information gathered from this method can be supplemented to the original findings of the research.

No method is fool proof. There are some inherent weaknesses, limitations associated with this method. Some of them are mentioned below:

- It is a very time consuming as well as very expensive method especially when the target population is big in number and widely spread over a geographical area.
- There is a possibility of biased analysis, interpretations from the side of researcher or interviewee. Biased reactions can also be received from the interviewee. Age, class, race, gender, social status, etc. can play crucial role in generating biased opinions from both the sides. Biased reactions, analysis and interpretation can hamper proper research results.
- If the interviewer/ researcher is not skilled, trained in the art, he/she may not able to conduct successful interview session with proper control.
- There is a possibility if majority of the target population consists high and top-level management groups, executives, therefore this method may not prove approachable to such clientele. Getting information from such people is not under the control of interviewer.
- Proper training, selection and supervision of the interviewer are very essential to this method.
- Getting free, frank responses from the target population is not a easy task. Establishing proper rapport with the target group is very difficult requirement.
- Information received from this method is difficult to analyse. Same set of questions may receive diverse responses.
- Interview method may call for some errors, which are difficult to eliminate.
- The use of computers in data collection has its own set of limitations. Infrastructures, connectivity, knowledge to operate such system are some of the essential requirements. Without them the system may not run.

Interviews vary in form and purpose. Each type has its own advantages and limitations. However in any given situation one type of interview may yield excellent results and it may not prove fruitful in some other situation. We all know that interview is an important tool of survey research. In the following section we will learn the inherent advantages and limitations of this method. Adams has rightly said, “It is a most sensitive device for the acquisition of reliable valid data.”

12.6 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have studied the interviewing as a tool for data collection. This method can be useful when it is combined with questionnaire, observation, case study method and especially in user studies will definitely add qualitative analysis to the interpretation of results. Interviewing in one of the methods of getting data under primary sources. Each method of data collection has its own merits and demerits. The success of interviewing method is dependent upon the target population, trained/skilled and knowledgeable interviewer. Like other methods this method also cannot generate 100% accurate results. This Unit elaborates in details different types of interviews, the process of interviewing, the guidelines to be followed and finally the chief merits and limitations of this method. The construction of research instrument is the key aspect in conducting the research. This tool will generate the primary and quality information for analysis.

This instrument may be designed keeping in view the target population, the objectives, and scope of the research.

Interview is an expensive as well as time consuming tool but at the same time it can be used as an excellent mode of communication between interviewer and interviewee. Personal, complex, confidential types of information can easily be gathered from the respondents.

Busha and Harter (1980) have said that some investigations give more weight to the interview method than questionnaire method. The reason they likely give that the former generates more complete answers.

Interview is a data-gathering device, which elicits answers or information from a respondent to the already printed questions or spontaneous questions from the interviewer. Interview may be structured, unstructured, and telephonic or computer assisted, consisting of open or close-ended questions. Any type of interview is basically to get information from respondents on information on themselves, their experiences, their views, expressions, attitudes, etc. The purpose(s) for which interview method is used differs considerably. Use of interview method in survey research signifies its utility and flexibility. The presence of researcher and respondent and interaction between them has a great influence on both the quality and quantity of response(s) generated from respondent.

12.7 ANSWERS TO SELF CHECK EXERCISES

- 1) Interview method is a very common tool of data collection in survey research. One author has equated this tool with the surgical instrument in medicine. Through this method qualitative data can be collected which will supplement the research findings.
- 2) Clinical interview is one of the types of unstructured interviews. This type is being used in social work, counselling and prison setting. This is also called personal history interview. This interview is used to get data on the personal feelings, life experiences of the respondents.
- 3) For CATI system one requires PC which is linked through network to server, telephone line connection, head phones set of questions, list of respondents to be interviewed.

- 4) Stages of Interview Method are:

Planning the interview process, construction of Interview Schedule, pre testing the schedule, recording the answers, preparing the transcripts, data analysis and finally, the report writing.

12.8 KEYWORDS

Personal Interview : It is a face – to face interaction between researcher and respondent.

Interviewer : It is the person who is asking questions. He or she may be a research assistant or a researcher himself/herself.

Interviewee : It is the person who is being asked questions on a particular research problem under investigation. He or she may be called respondent or target population.

CATI : It stands for Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing. In this system computer is used to conduct interview.

Interview Schedule : List of printed questions for seeking answers from the respondents. Interviewer records the responses on it.

12.9 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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