

# **Piloting for Interviews in Qualitative Research: Operationalization and Lessons Learnt**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Qualitative interviews offer rich and detailed information in understanding people's experiences. However, qualitative inquiry might be difficult for inexperienced researcher to adequately perform the interview. Piloting for interview is an integral aspect and useful in the process of conducting qualitative research as it highlights the improvisation to the major study. This article discusses the importance of pilot study, the methods undertaken and the lessons learnt throughout the process. The pilot interview was conducted with two offshore catering employees, as preparation for a dissertation in developing a job satisfaction instrument for offshore catering employees in Malaysia. The useful functions of pilot study are described and in highlighting the advantageous of pilot study, this paper describes the modification made for the major study as a result of the pilot work. These comprise (1) criteria for selecting potential participants, and (2) improving the interview guide, particularly the interview questions.

**Keywords:** *Qualitative, Pilot Study, Interview, Job Satisfaction, Offshore Catering*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Numerous studies employed qualitative approach to investigate people's subjective experiences, opinions and beliefs that cannot be measured statistically (Percy, Kostere & Kostere, 2015). In all forms of the paradigm, most data are collected using interviews and necessary to allow the researcher to understand the phenomenon from the person's account (Merriam, 2016). Unlike quantitative study, researcher is the primary instrument in the data generation (Paisley & Reeves, 2001) and interview questions are at the heart of interviewing. Moreover, an in-person interview is widely acknowledged as a suitable technique for qualitative inquiry to seek insights of those who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Thus, piloting for interviews is crucial to test the questions and to gain some practice in interviewing.

Pilot studies are commonly associated with quantitative approach to test of a particular research instrument. Apparently, the importance of pilot work has been expanded to qualitative inquiry where it is carried out as preparation for the major study. Pilot studies are useful procedures as preparation of a full-scale study, regardless of paradigm (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). It can be employed to address potential practical issues in the following research procedures (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002) and trying out the questions. Moreover, in Castillo-Montoya's (2016) pilot study, she found that interview protocols could be strengthened through piloting the interviews. It can help identify if there are flaws, or limitations within the interview design that allow necessary modifications to the major study (Kvale, 2007). Nonetheless, pilot work was inadequately reported in the literature (Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, & Graham, 2001). Harding (2013) stated that the need for qualitative interviews to be piloted is not relatively obvious because as the interviews progressed, the quality of the interview guide improved. However, he mentioned that it is distinctly helpful to pilot the interview questions and adjust the interview guide accordingly before embarking into major study. The interview guide is an important aid that keeps the researcher with needed consistency (Krauss, Hamzah, Nor, Omar, Suandi, Ismail & Zahari, 2009). Based on the recommendation, therefore, researcher decided to pilot the interviews.

It is important to note that this is a methodological article, where researchers do not discuss the findings from the study, as it will be presented elsewhere. Researchers believe that incorporating the discussion of the findings would be more diverting rather than informative. The background of the current study is presented, however the focus is mainly on the operationalization of the pilot study and lessons learnt throughout the process.

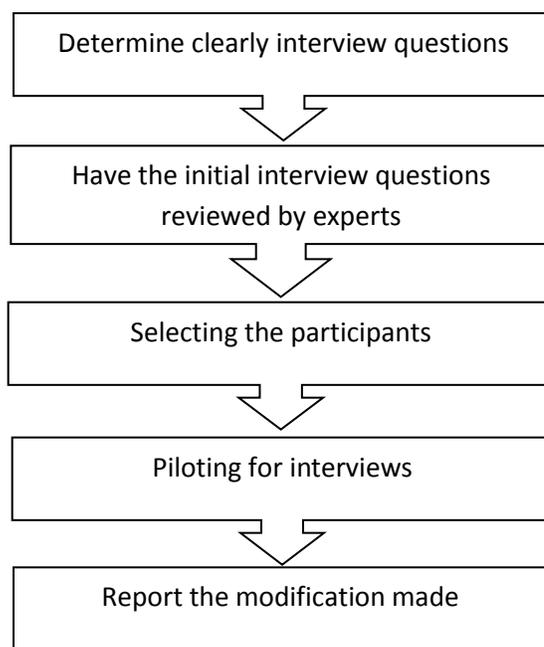
### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Over the past years, a range of job satisfaction instrument have been developed and applied in various contexts. Despite the prevalence of research on job satisfaction in various areas and measures to assess employee's job satisfaction, there is unlikely a specific instrument for offshore catering and little is known about how working in offshore catering sector affect employee's job satisfaction (Majid, Othman, Mohamad & Lim, 2016). The simplest method to measure job satisfaction might be asking people whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with their job, nevertheless, such approach is inappropriate to capture the essence of the specific attributes of a particular phenomenon (Sarris, 2008). Furthermore, using existing instruments without properly reflecting the cultural differences might affect the validity of the instruments used (Özpehlivan & Acar, 2015). Thus, the present study is taking an effort to develop and validate a bespoke job satisfaction instrument for offshore catering employees, specifically in Malaysia.

The present study is crafted based on exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2013), signifying that the study is divided into two phases in which begin with qualitative phase and followed by quantitative phase. For the current paper, it was conducted at the initial stage of qualitative phase as part of an ongoing dissertation in developing job satisfaction instrument for offshore catering employees.

## METHODS

This paper explains the steps carried out that help researcher to obtain necessary information to address the aim of the study. Figure 1 describes the process undertaken. Each step assists researcher to develop an appropriate interview guide for the major study and each step therefore, is discussed.



**Figure 1:** Steps in conducting the pilot study

### **Determine clearly interview questions**

The interview was guided by open-ended questions on issues related to motivation, job experiences and job satisfaction. Initially, the interview framework was devised based on the work of Schriesheim and Tsui (1980), Andrews and Withey (1976) and, Taylor and Bowers (1974). For the purpose of this article, the main question was: *“How do you generally feel about your current job?”* Basically, researcher focused on ensuring the interview questions are constructed to answer the research question. This process can increase the effectiveness of the interview questions and ensure its significance to achieve the aim of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). It is important to ensure that researcher has included questions necessary to measure the concept (Dikko, 2016). The interview protocol encompassed open-ended questions and then was emailed for expert reviews.

### **Have the initial questions reviewed by experts**

Subsequently, the supervisory committee members reviewed the interview questions pertaining to its language, wording and relevance. At this point in the process, one question was modified accordingly due to leading question. Following the initial reviews, the questions

comprised of seven central questions were tested in the pilot work and researcher used probing questions to explore the participants' views that require further clarifications.

### Selecting the participants

Permission sought to engage the employees from one offshore catering company located in Klang Valley, Malaysia. A formal letter was sent to the organization's representative personnel and an approval letter was obtained. In pilot interviews, Turner (2010) suggests that the participants should share as similar criteria as possible to the group of participants for the major study. Likewise, Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) also share similar notion. Researcher had given the inclusion criteria of participant beforehand and the offshore catering employees were identified by referrals from the respective organization. It signified that the participants were selected based on purposive sampling and willingness to participate. An effort was made to interview two male employees of different positions. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1:** Offshore catering employee profiles

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Approximate no. of trips involved</b>
1	Mark	40	Male	Diploma	Western	More than 10
2	Karl	31	Male	High school	cook Asian cook	More than 10

### Piloting for interviews

To begin exploring the offshore catering employees' experiences, pilot study was conducted in March 2017. The interviews were conducted in available room at the company's office. Letter of informed consent was given to each informant and researcher obtained approval from both informants. The interviews were recorded using digital IC recorders. The interviews ranged in time between approximately 32 and 37 minutes. The interview should not exceed 90 minutes to consider other commitments of participants (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Including the social conversation, it was noticed that each session did not exceed the recommended time frame. The aim of the pilot study was to test the appropriateness of the questions and to provide researcher with some early suggestions on the viability of the research. Besides, it also facilitated researcher to obtain experience in conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and to build rapport with the informants. Importantly, the pilot study assisted researcher to learn the skills in interviewing and the flow of conversation.

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) suggest that building a good rapport with the participants could facilitate better responses. Thus, interviewer began with social conversation before the interview. Although the general issues were deeply discussed, the purpose was mainly to develop good relationship with the participants. Both participants were given opportunity to discuss freely based on the questions asked and researcher used probing questions to elicit

further in-depth information. During the interviews, both participants were asked the same set of questions. The interviews were carried out in Malay language with infrequent use of English, as it was more casual for both interviewer and interviewees to have comfortable discussions. However, the interviewer did not ask the questions in orderly form but rather the flow of the discussion. At the end of the session, the researcher asked pseudonyms that the participants would like to represent them. Importantly, through the pilot study, the researcher learned that it was almost impossible to determine precisely how the participants were going to answer the questions. There were times where the answers were meant for subsequent questions, or it added to the point mentioned earlier in the previous discussion. That is to say, each interview incorporated a unique way to probe, thus, the researcher could improve the interviewing skills and further probing in important areas.

### **Report modification made**

After the pilot study has completed, the researcher had the opportunity to transcribe verbatim, manage and code the data with two PhD course mates. The lessons in transcribing and managing the data enabled the researcher with some knowledge on how to summarize the transcripts and identify codes. Without a doubt, the significance of the pilot study assisted the researcher to refine strategies before embarking into the major study phase. There were two modifications made as a result of the pilot study. First, the researcher identified that the selection criteria of participants need to be improved, as highlighted by Mark. He was saying,

“...that was the most challenging. But, after three or four trips, I felt comfortable, no problem. At first you might have a difficulty to mix around with other crews.”

Karl also pointed out that he had the similar difficulty to mix with the group of employees at the beginning of his recruitment and mentioned one would get a general sense of the job after 3 or 4 trips. Meaning that, those who are newly recruited might have difficulty with some aspects of the job and have less feel of the environment. Adding criteria of participants who have involved in more than 4 trips are crucial. Therefore, to ensure quality data generation, the researcher decided to add this particular reason as one of the criteria for selecting participants for the major study to ensure familiarity with the job and job environment.

Second, the pilot study helped the researcher to improve the interview guide. Additionally, some changes e.g. some questions were rephrased and sequentially aligned, and topical probes were made due to the issues that emerged during the pilot study. As a result, the interview framework was revisited and additional three central questions were added to the interview framework to allow quality of data and deeper responses from the participants. Therefore, for the major study, ten open-ended questions would be included to increase the utility of the interview questions in understanding the lived experience of the participants.

### **CONCLUSION**

A limitation of this pilot study is the small number of participants, indicating that the data saturation was not reached. This small-scale pilot study was carried out to investigate the appropriateness of the interview questions in order to seek information on the context this study hopes to

explore and as preparation to the major study. Importantly, the pilot study allows the researcher to practice the interviewing techniques and the modifications and suggestions included in this paper derived from personal experiences with interviewing. It is hope that, this article might provide some guidance for further qualitative research in the related context. Furthermore, it is suggested that future investigation could bring different cultures in order to extend the scope of the study.

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### **Author's Contributions**

The first author took part in the data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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