12

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

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This chapter will give an overview of what qualitative interviews are and what kinds of research they might be used for. It will consider the different ways in which qualitative interviews are used (as a resource or a topic) and will examine some of the ethical questions raised by qualitative research using interviews.

The chapter will also provide a practical guide to preparing for and conducting qualitative interviews, including questions of sampling and access. It will also consider what kinds of questions might be asked, how interviews should be recorded and questions of analysis of qualitative interviews.

The learning outcomes of this chapter will include:

- An understanding of what a qualitative interview is.
- An appreciation of what qualitative interviews can (and cannot) tell us (epistemological questions).
- An understanding of the ethical issues involved in qualitative interviewing.
- Practical understanding of how to design and conduct qualitative interviews.

For a commentary on successful interviewing, see Box 12.1.

BOX 12.1

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWING

To interview successfully requires skill. But there are many different styles of interviewing, ranging from the friendly, informal, conversational approach to the more formal, controlled style of questioning, and good interviewers eventually develop a variation of their method which, for them, brings the best results and suits their personality. There are some essential qualities which the successful interviewer must possess: an interest and respect for people as individuals, and flexibility in response to them; an ability to show understanding and sympathy for their point of view; and, above all, a willingness to sit quietly and listen. People who cannot stop talking themselves, or resist the temptation to contradict or push an informant with their own ideas, will take away information which is either useless or positively misleading. But most people can learn to interview well. (Thompson, 1988: 196)

What are qualitative interviews?

Interviews are most importantly a form of communication, a means of producing different forms of information with individuals and groups. The interactive nature of their practice means that interviewing is a highly flexible but also somewhat unpredictable form of social research. In everyday life, there are many different forms of interviews, or conversations in which information is being elicited and/or shared with groups or individuals (see Box 12.2).

BOX 12.2

INTERVIEWS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

- Market research surveys
- Doctors' consultations
- Job or university interviews
- Immigration interviews
- Interviews to receive welfare or social security
- Journalists' interviews
- Television interviews
- Therapeutic interviews

All of us will have experienced at least some of them, and we are also familiar with reading the results of journalistic interviews, and perhaps also published 'conversations' between academics, as well as watching televised interviews. We are also familiar with conversational forms, which would not be considered as formal interviews, where we share with greater or lesser depth our feelings and views with friends, relatives, lovers and also perhaps counsellors and therapists. This experience tells us that the kind of talk we do, or information and opinions we share, varies widely depending on the context, our mood and the nature of the encounter (see Chapter 24 for an account of how to analyse conversations). It also varies depending on how familiar the form of encounter is to us – this is likely to be affected by our gender, class and cultural backgrounds. We are also aware that sometimes we listen more carefully than others. As Les Back argues, 'Our culture is one that speaks rather than listens ... Listening to the world is not an automatic faculty but a skill that needs to be trained' (2007: 7).

Therefore, in thinking about interviewing as a tool of social research, we need to be aware of the many different variables which will affect the outcome. These will include who is doing the interviewing, who is being interviewed, the location in which the interview takes place and the form of questioning. These factors need to be thought about before and during research, but they are also worth bearing in mind when reading research based on interviews. Does the researcher give you a sense of the interview content and context, have they answered these questions for you and have they taken them into account in the analysis of their interview material?

Social research interviews range from the formal, structured interviews at one end of the spectrum (see Chapter 11) to totally open-ended interviews that might begin with a single prompt such as 'Tell me about your life'. The term [illegible] generally refers to in-depth, loosely or semi-structured interviews, and these have been referred to as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, cited in Mason, 1996: 38). They are often used to encourage an interviewee to talk, perhaps at some length, about a particular issue or range of topics. This distinguishes them from the classical tradition of social survey work represented by the sort of interviews done by government social survey organisations, such as the UK Office for National Statistics, and the increasing number of telephone and street surveys conducted for marketing purposes. As you saw in Chapter 11, survey-based interviews tend to rely more on closed questions which follow a structured format in the form of an interview schedule and are designed to elicit specific information or 'facts' from the interviewees.

In a survey using structured interviews, the aim is to standardise the interviews in order to claim direct comparability between interviews with different people and to interview enough people so that the results could be held to be statistically representative of a particular population. The intention, therefore, is that the interview should be neutral (that is to say, not influenced by the words, actions or position of the interviewer) and generalisable (and therefore often quantifiable). The emphasis is on data collection and it is based on a particular epistemological position taken in the classical survey research tradition. Here, the social world is assumed to have an existence that is independent of the language used to describe it (see Chapter 2). In contrast to this realist approach, an idealist account would see interview data as presenting one of many possible representations of the world. This latter approach tends to view the interview as a process of data generation rather than collection. In qualitative interviews, the researcher is often regarded as a co-producer of the data, which are produced as a result of an interaction between researcher and interviewee(s) (Mason, 1996: 36).

There are many different forms which qualitative interviewing can take. These range from interviews following an interview schedule of topics or themes to be covered in a loosely planned order, to an invitation for the interviewee to talk on whatever they feel is relevant. Qualitative interviewing may not only be one-on-one interviewing. It can also include focus group discussions that bring together a group of interviewees to discuss a particular topic or range of issues. In these contexts, the interactions between participants can generate different data than would have emerged in a one-on-one interview. Chapter 13 gives a full account of focus group research.

Whilst qualitative interviews are often undertaken as a result of a particular epistemological position taken by the researcher (as will be explored below), they are also a flexible resource which may be used in conjunction with other research techniques. So, for example, in-depth interviews may be used to explore in more detail with specially selected interviewees questions that have also been covered in a wider questionnaire-based survey. Equally, focus groups or one-on-one interviews may be used as a part of an ethnographic approach (see Box 12.3). This raises the question of why one would choose to use qualitative interviews and what they offer the researcher.

> **BOX 12.3**
>
> **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**
>
> The method is particularly useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary. Focus groups also enable researchers to examine people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network. Crucially, group work explores how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms. (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 5)

What the qualitative interview has to offer

Qualitative interviewing is particularly useful as a research method for accessing individuals' attitudes and values – things that cannot necessarily be observed or accommodated in a formal questionnaire. Open-ended and flexible questions are likely to get a more considered response than closed questions and therefore provide better access to interviewees' views, interpretations of events, understandings, experiences and opinions. They are also more open to hearing respondents' views 'in their own words', which allows for a more complex analysis. Therefore, this approach tends to be used by those who come from an ontological position which respects people's knowledge, values and experiences as meaningful and worthy of exploration. However, as we shall see below, few researchers believe that in the course of an interview, you are able to 'get inside someone's head'. What an interview produces is a particular representation or account of an individual's views and opinions.

One of the reasons why qualitative interviewing is a particularly suitable method for accessing complex issues such as values and understanding is that it is a flexible medium and, to a certain extent, allows interviewees to speak in their own voices and with their own language. Thus, qualitative interviewing has been particularly attractive to researchers who want to explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented

or suppressed in the past. Feminists, for example, have used qualitative interviewing as a way of 'giving voice' to women's experiences, and much oral history is concerned with capturing voices and experiences 'from below'. As we shall see later, this raises important questions about the dynamics of power in the interview and research process.

A further advantage of using qualitative interviewing as a research method is its flexibility in allowing research topics to be approached in a variety of ways. Issues that might be of a sensitive nature, for example experiences of violence, or which interviewees may be reluctant to talk about (or unconscious of), such as racism or other forms of prejudice, can be approached with sensitivity to open up dialogue and produce fuller accounts. This again raises questions of power and ethics in the research process (see below and Chapter 5).

Perhaps the most compelling advantage of qualitative interviewing is that, when done well, it is able to achieve a level of depth and complexity that is not available to other, particularly survey-based, approaches. The non-standardised interview enables the researcher to become attuned to subtle differences in people's positions and to respond accordingly, both at the time of interviewing and in the subsequent analysis (see Box 12.4).

BOX 12.4

TALKING TO BEREAVED FAMILIES

A study by Chapple and Ziebland on the question of whether it was therapeutic for families to view the body of a loved one after a traumatic death which may have left the body damaged is a good example of the power of qualitative interviewing. As a demonstration of the *flexibility* of qualitative interviewing, the question of viewing the body was not an important issue for the researchers at the outset, but rather one which was raised by their interviewees. Nonetheless, the research can provide importance guidance for doctors and other nurses who deal with bereaved families. The authors found it was significant *how* the bereaved talked about their dead relative (as 'him' or 'her', by name; or as 'the body' or 'it'), and found that the most important factor was that families were given a choice in whether to view or not view their loved one, and that being forced to view a body for means of identification could potentially increase trauma. The qualitative nature of the study was essential for building trust and allowing interviewees to discuss difficult experiences in their own terms

Source: Chapple and Ziebland, 2010: 340:c2032

The epistemological status of interviews

As we have seen, whilst qualitative interviewing offers particular advantages for researchers, it also raises epistemological, methodological and ethical issues for social researchers. However, it is also worth noting that many of these questions would also apply to other research methods.

Epistemological questions raised by qualitative interviewing centre around the status of the material produced:

- What can interviewees tell us and what do they not tell us?
- How do we assess and analyse the interview data?

Box 12.5 looks at what qualitative interviews can offer.

BOX 12.5

WHAT QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS CAN OFFER

- Access to attitudes, values and feelings.
- Flexibility.
- Exploration of suppressed views.
- Sensitive issues can be broached.
- Achieve depth.
- Reflect complexity.
- Allow respondents to answer 'in their words'.

How we answer these questions depends largely on where we stand on the distinction between data collection and data generation mentioned earlier. In a realist approach, where the social world is assumed to have an existence independent of language, accounts given by interviewees are assessed according to how accurately they reflect this real social world. Thus, in this classical tradition, interviews are expected to act as a resource, providing real 'facts' about the social world. Thus interview data are scrutinised for bias – for the extent to which they present a distortion of the truth. In contrast, the idealist position takes the interviewee's account as one possible version of the social world. Here, the interview tends to be treated more as a social event in its own right, as a topic rather than a resource. In this approach, the researcher might be interested in analysing, for example, how the speaker uses various rhetorical strategies in order to achieve particular effects, or how the speaker is using particular discursive repertoires in their account (see Box 12.6 and Chapter 23).

BOX 12.6

DISCURSIVE REPERTORIES OF WHITENESS

Ruth Frankenberg interviewed white women in the United States in order to explore their experiences of living in a racially hierarchical society. She identified different 'discursive repertoires', or ways in which race was spoken and written about in the United States. The dominant discourse was one of 'colour-blindness', or what Frankenberg named 'colour evasion': a way of thinking about race which 'asserts that we are all the same under the skin; that, culturally we are converging; that, materially, we have the same chances in US society; and that – the sting in the tail – any failure to achieve is therefore the fault of people of color themselves' (Frankenberg, 1993: 14).

Thus, Frankenberg was interested in identifying when her respondents were using this kind of discourse, as where interviewee Ginny Rodd said:

> To me, they are like me or anyone else – they're human – it's like I told my kids, they work for a living like we do. Just because they are Black is no saying their food is give to them [*sic*]. If you cut them, they bleed red blood, same as we do. (1993: 143)

(Continued)

(Continued)

Frankenberg contrasts these kinds of statements with those who she saw as drawing on a discourse of 'race cognizance', as in the words of interviewee Chris Patterson:

> When I look back, I think of myself as such a naïve white girl. Not even just naïve – naïve by isolation, by separation. Also coming from the white, privileged class ... Means you don't have to look at anything else. You are never forced to until you choose to, because your life is so unaffected by things like racism. (1993: 161)

In practice, researchers are often using interview material both as resource and a topic. Interviews are often analysed both for *what* interviewees say about their lives and experiences (the interview as *resource*) and for *how* the information is communicated and the accounts are told (the interview as *topic*). Therefore it is not always possible to completely sidestep issues of 'truth' and reliability. Analysis of accounts is likely to need to consider some notion of how accurate the account is. If, for example, something is being misrepresented – a number or period of years being over-estimated – why does this happen? Why are certain things remembered more than others? Why is it more difficult to talk about certain subjects than others? As Luisa Passerini argues:

> There is no 'work of memory' without a corresponding 'work of forgetting' ... So often forgetting indicates suffering, be it of the woman who 'does not remember' her housework because she has never been allowed to consider it important, or the silences of those who do not want to speak about the daily oppression of fascism and the massacres of Nazism. (1991: 194)

This 'work of forgetting' may be more interesting to the researcher than what is remembered, but interviews can only ever offer a partial view into the process. Of course qualitative interviews, by their nature, are reliant on people talking; however, some issues may be difficult to talk about. As Kathy Charmaz writes, reflecting on her experience of research with people with chronic illnesses:

> [N]ot all experiences are storied, nor are all experiences stored for ready recall. Silences have meaning, too. ... Certainly, silences derive from what people forget or do not know, understand, or take into account. Other silences occur when people grope for words to say something on the edge of awareness that had been unclear and unstated. And some silences result from people's awareness of and actions toward their situations. Such silences may either be intended or imposed: Some people are silenced. (2002: 305)

Questions of power, difference and ethics

The interactive nature of the interview process can be the basis of many of its advantages as a research tool in that it allows for flexibility: the researcher can adapt in response to the reactions and responses of the interviewee. Whilst the nature of communication means that we can never be sure that two people's understandings of terms and concepts is exactly the same, the qualitative interview offers the possibility of exploring the interviewee's understanding in a more meaningful way than would be allowed by a less flexible survey questionnaire. However, the nature of interaction during interviews also raises some of the most critical questions that need to be dealt with by qualitative researchers.

Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoglu characterise interviews as 'stylized social events' and argue that 'differences such as age, class, gender, ethnicity and religion impinge on the possibilities of interaction and interpretation, and so on how the social world is known' (1994). This underlines the need to acknowledge and address difficult questions of reflexivity. Reflexivity involves critical self-scrutiny on the part of researchers, who need, at all stages of the research process, to ask themselves about their role in the research. Reflexivity involves a move away from the idea of the neutral, detached observer that is implied in much classical survey work. It involves acknowledging that the researcher approaches the research from a specific position and this affects the approach taken, the questions asked and the analysis produced. In the immediate context of the interview, reflexivity involves reflection on the impact of the researcher on the interaction with the interviewee.

Feminist researchers have been particularly alive to these questions. Ann Oakley wrote an influential critique of traditional standardised, structured interviews where these were based on the idea of a detached and neutral researcher who maintains control of the interview. Instead, Oakley argued that it

> becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people is best achieved when the relationship of the interviewer–interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship ... Personal involvement is more than just dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (1981: 41, 58)

Thus Oakley advocates the proffering of friendship and exchange within the interview process. However, this may not always be possible or even desirable for either party involved. As Jane Ribbens points out, in some situations, the attempt of the researcher to place herself and give personal information may be seen as an imposition rather than as a welcome offer of friendship: 'After all, is not part of the research exchange that I have expressed an interest in hearing about the interviewees' lives?' (1989: 584). In addition, there is a risk that it is assumed that only women researchers should interview women respondents if they are to gain authentic accounts (see also Chapter 3). This overlooks other differences which may influence the interaction, such as age, social class and ethnicity. Thus in her article 'When gender is not enough: women interviewing women', Cathy Riessman contrasts her experience of interviewing middle-class Anglo women with that of interviewing working-class Puerto Rican women. Riessman found that in the interviews between an Anglo researcher and Puerto Rican interviewees, the interview 'was hindered by a lack of shared cultural and class assumptions' (1987: 190).

Some might therefore argue that there should always be 'race', gender and class matching between respondents and researchers. However, exactly matching all the characteristics of respondents and interviewers is likely to be very difficult and would restrict many research projects. Ann Phoenix, reflecting on her research experience on two studies – one on young mothers and the other on social identities in young people – argues that

> prescriptions for matching the 'race' and/or gender of interviewers and respondents are ... too simplistic ... If different types of accounts about 'race' and racism are produced with black and white interviewers this is in itself important data and may be good reason for using interviewers of both colours whenever possible since it illustrates the ways in which knowledges are 'situated'. (Phoenix, 1994: 49, 66)

Reflexivity in research requires that the impact of *both* similarities and differences on the research processes be examined. The impact of the social positioning of the researcher needs to be thought through and will be more significant to some research topics than others. For example, it might be more important to match gender when interviewing women about domestic violence. Questions about racism are likely to produce different responses depending on the racial identity of both interviewers and interviewees; being aware of when matching occurs or does not occur might be important in interpreting responses on such a research study.

The research relationship raises other ethical questions that need to be addressed (see also Chapter 5). Thus it is important to protect respondents from harm in the research process as well as to consider questions of disclosure, consent and anonymity. Informed consent should be obtained from interviewees wherever possible. This can be verbal, but should ideally be written, where interviewees are able to keep a copy of the agreement they have signed, including a statement about any questions of the copyright of the interview. It should also be clear to interviewees that they can stop the interview at any point if they want to. Depending on the research subject, it might be important to consider the extent to which interviewees are capable of giving informed consent. Do they understand the concept of research and what you are doing? Are they able to think through the implications? Should a third person be giving consent for them? This is particularly relevant to conducting research with children, but may also apply to others.

It is usual to offer anonymity to research respondents. But ensuring anonymity is not always a straightforward process. This is particularly true when dealing with in-depth biographical material which might be recognisable to friends and family unless some details are changed. Measures may also need to be taken in the recording and labelling of data to ensure that anonymity is preserved. Researchers need to think about where and how they will record and store their data during the research and writing-up process. It is important to separate the interview material from the real names of the interviewees at an early stage, for instance on the labelling of tapes and transcriptions.

British Sociological Association (BSA) guidelines on the ethical conduct of research studies state that:

> Sociologists have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. (www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm)

It should be clear that research should not inflict harm on interviewees, but in some cases the subject matter may be such that it is difficult to predict what is going to cause distress, and how much distress will be caused by taking part in an interview. Discussing violence, trauma, accidents, illegal activity and mistakes might all cause distress to interviewees. Researchers should ask themselves at all times if they are pushing too far in the questioning. In addition, they need to be aware that the interviewee might be saying too much – or things that they will regret disclosing. If you build up a good rapport with your interviewee it may start to feel like a counselling session, a role which the researcher is not necessarily trained to undertake. Where it is possible to predict that interviewees might become distressed by the interviews, it would be useful to have already researched the contact details of resources that might be available to them, such as support groups or sources of counselling which you can pass on.

Box 12.7 gives an example of ethical issues in interviews.

BOX 12.7

ETHICAL ISSUES IN INTERVIEWS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

In one study of the experience of sexual abuse, the researcher, Catherine Kirkwood, asked her respondents what they felt about the interview process. Of the 16 interviewed, three felt that the interviews pushed them too deeply into the emotional responses to abuse, leading to nightmares for two of them and the third being unable to finish the interviews (Kirkwood, 1993: 34–5).

Some people are clearly more vulnerable than others and some subjects more difficult to deal with, and careful consideration should be given to the likely impact of interviews on respondents.

Doing qualitative interviews

This section will examine some basic questions that need to be addressed when undertaking research using qualitative interviewing. These include:

- Who do you interview (including how many people and how you contact them)?
- Where do you interview them?
- What do you ask them?
- How are you going to record the interviews?
- How will they be analysed?

Answering all of these questions requires forward planning and in particular will depend on establishing a clear sense of *why* you are conducting the interviews in the first place.

Why interview?

Before you can plan your research, you need to have as clear a sense as possible about why you are proposing to undertake the research in a particular way and what you hope to achieve by it. This involves having at least a preliminary idea of how you will analyse your material (although in qualitative research this will often be a flexible process and subject to change). You can ask yourself:

- Is your aim to use the interview as an exercise in data *generation* or data *collection*? Related to this is the issue of whether you will be treating the interview as *topic* or *resource* – or both.
- Are interviews the best way of conducting the research or are there other sources which would be more efficient ways of getting the information? Perhaps you should be pursuing the interviews in conjunction with other sources for your research.
- Is your aim to test or develop theoretical propositions?
- What kinds of comparisons are you likely to want to make?

The different answers that you have for these questions should help you frame both *who* you should interview and *how* you plan and conduct the interviews themselves.

Who do you interview?

Qualitative interviewing is, by its very nature, relatively time-consuming compared to survey interviewing. Tom Wengraf argues that semi-structured interviews are 'high-preparation, high-risk, high-gain, and high-analysis operations' (2001: 5). The time involved limits the possibilities for covering large samples, and this is one reason why few attempts are made to achieve *random* or *probability* samples in qualitative interviews, although they may be conducted in conjunction with wider representative samples (see Chapter 9 for a discussion of this kind of sampling). So whilst the aim may not be statistical generalisation, there is still the need to consider who should be interviewed in

order to achieve a good understanding of the issue under research.

As with more stringent versions of sampling, you need to begin by identifying the wider population from which you will select your interviewees. For instance, are you interested in researching the experiences of black women under 20? Of football supporters? Or of social workers who work in fostering and adoption? Or the whole population of people who live in a particular area of a large city? What is your particular interest in this population and how does it relate to your research? You will then need to make a selection of research participants or interviewees from this broader population. In order to do this, you need to establish a relationship between the selection and the wider population. There are several different types of relationship that can be established. These are outlined in Box 12.8.

BOX 12.8

THREE POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SAMPLE AND POPULATION

1 A *representative relationship* (as in *probability* sampling). This requires the selection of a sample which is representative of the total empirical population that the study refers to. It requires knowledge of the nature of the total population – so that proportions of social characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, class in the wider population can be mirrored in the sample. This requires the use of statistical conventions to enable you to argue that the general patterns discovered in the sample are representative of the wider population. As mentioned above, whilst this approach can be used in qualitative interviewing, it is not common.

2 A relationship designed to provide a close-up, detailed or *meticulous view* of a particular experience. This could be as narrow as selecting the life and narrative of a particular person for scrutiny, or a small set of people. This approach allows for the in-depth examination of a particular set of social processes in a particular context. However, you need to be able to argue how this narrow example relates to a wider population and how the interviewees do, or do not, compare with each other.

3 A relationship that covers a *relevant range* of people in relationship to a wider population, but is not designed to represent it directly. This does not mean an ad hoc sample, but involves a strategy of selection which ensures that a relevant range is covered.

Source: adapted from Mason, 1996: 91–92

Additionally, *theoretical sampling* is a common approach to selecting individuals for qualitative interviews. Here, people are selected according to how likely it is that their interview will contribute to the development of an emerging theory. The relationship of this to some population is generally not known. Theoretical sampling is discussed in Chapters 9 and 22. Roger Hewitt's experience in a study of processes of racism is helpful in showing how sampling decisions can be made in a qualitative interviewing study (Box 12.9).

The size and nature of your sample will depend partly on how it is designed to relate to the wider population (and the nature of that wider population). It will also be affected by the resources available to you. Identifying and gaining the cooperation of interviewees and conducting the interviews themselves are all time-consuming processes. But they are likely to be outweighed by the time spent listening to and annotating or transcribing the interviews and analysing the results. You should start out with a target number of interviewees which you think is suitable for your project. This may include target numbers of different people who have the required characteristics to supply the range of people who you want to interview. It might be helpful to set up a table of target interviewees who fulfil certain criteria (as in quota sampling – see Chapter 9). However (to introduce an element of theoretical sampling) this should be used flexibly by allowing for the development of new criteria and selection strategies as the research proceeds. For instance, you may realise after a while that there is a different group who provide a 'negative' comparison to those who form the bulk of your interviewees. It may be important to investigate this group. Or you may decide to follow up fewer interviewees but do so in more depth than originally planned, or conversely, increase your target number of interviews.

BOX 12.9

SAMPLING IN A STUDY OF RACISM

We were concerned to build up a picture not simply of racial attitudes but of how young people who expressed racist opinions made the move into perpetrating racist acts. While we regarded understanding the experience of victims as central, it was the perpetrators of racist actions who were the major focus of our attention. At the same time, we were anxious to find out about those people who formed the social and family network of perpetrators. What did they think about racism and racist attacks? How did people in any neighbourhood allow harassment to go on? Who knew about it? What did they say to each other about it? This was part of what we called 'the social basis of racist action'. We believed that perpetrators of racist harassment probably did not behave in a social vacuum. It was somehow either allowed or even encouraged by others, and there was something in the local community that allowed it to happen.

In order to investigate the social basis of racist action, we interviewed as many young people as well as adult professionals including youth and community workers, teachers and the police. We attended community groups and other such meetings, talked to a wide range of adults in different neighbourhoods and interviewed both boys and girls – in groups in schools and youth clubs.

Source: Hewitt, 1996: 2

Once you have outlined your target selection, you then need to find the people and get them to talk to you. This can be a nerve-wracking process, but it is often surprising how willing people are to give you their time if approached in the right way. You need to think about how to contact potential interviewees. Are there organisations which will give you access to a certain population or specific ways of contacting them? For instance, if your target group is social workers working on adoption and fostering, are there professional bodies you can approach to help you find interviewees? Can you identify the agencies in which they work and approach them directly? Are there professional journals or magazines which also might help you locate interviewees? But you also need to think about how the route taken for your approach to interviewees may influence who you eventually interview. For instance, if you wanted to interview fathers who bring up single-headed families, you could contact the campaign groups that represent them. However, the men that are

involved in these groups may have characteristics that are not shared by other men in similar situations. For instance, they might tend to have different class characteristics, or be more unhappy with their situations. In this case, if you were concerned to represent a full range of fathers in this position, you would need to develop alternative strategies for contacting single fathers who had different characteristics.

Sometimes getting access to interviewees requires going through intermediaries or gatekeepers (see also Chapter 14). For instance, if you want to interview elderly people, you might choose to approach a nursing home or social group for pensioners. You will need to get the permission of the head of the nursing home or group organiser. You will also want to ensure that the gatekeepers are not putting pressure on people to participate, and try to judge whether being introduced in a particular way by a person perhaps in authority may affect the interviewees and what they say.

As is shown in Chapter 9, another method of finding interviewees is to snowball, where you ask people you have interviewed to suggest friends or colleagues to interview. This can be a very successful method of making contacts, but it is likely only to introduce you to people who are similar to those you have already interviewed. It can be helpful to get a sense of networks or the ways in which people in similar situations use the same discursive repertoires. However, it is not likely to enable you to cover people across a range of differences (there is a tendency for people to know and introduce you to others who are broadly similar to themselves). In addition, it makes you dependent on your interviewees' choices of who you should talk to. They may have different selection criteria from you – for instance, suggesting people with unusual experiences where you want to interview more 'normal' cases.

However you contact your interviewees, you have to remain reflexive during this process, which is likely to happen over a period of time. You need to be aware of how your sample is developing and how it compares with your targets. Are there reasons for your changes to original plans? If certain people are particularly difficult to reach, can you find new approaches (see Chapter 31 on what to do 'When things go wrong')? If you are finding it difficult to find interviewees, this may *add* to your understanding of what you are trying to research. For example, it is often hard to find people for interviews about the experience of certain illnesses (e.g. HIV/AIDS), whereas others have conditions that they are more happy to discuss (e.g. heart disease). This may reflect the fact that some conditions attract more social stigma than others.

Where do you interview?

In most qualitative interviewing, the interview takes place face to face. However, in some contexts, it may be impossible to meet with your interviewees. Telephone interviews are possible, although you will need to establish a way to record the interview (with appropriate consent). You also need to consider what is lost through the long-distance encounter. In particular, non-verbal cues and body language will be absent and you are less able to ensure that your respondent is not distracted. Finally, it is difficult to get people to settle down to a long conversation with someone that they do not know on the telephone. Some internet- and email-based research may involve interviewing (see Chapter 11). Even in face-to-face interviews, the setting in which you interview may also make a difference. For instance, you could get different responses from teenagers if you interview them in a classroom rather than a familiar café. You should therefore give some thought to *where* the interviews are conducted. Ideally, you need a space where you and the interviewee (or group) will be relaxed, able to talk and be undisturbed. This can sometimes be difficult to achieve. Often interviews are conducted in people's own homes as this is most convenient for them. However, this can have implications for privacy if other family members are around. You also need to have proper consideration of your own safety. Do you feel that this is a safe environment to go into? You should always have a responsible person who knows where you are going and when you expect to be finished. You should make an arrangement with that person that once you are out of an interview, you will call them to confirm your safety. Meeting in public places or at workplaces may influence the tone of the resulting interview in certain ways.

What do you ask?

Qualitative interviews can be experienced by the interviewee as very similar to an informal conversation. However, this does not mean that they are totally unstructured or unplanned. Like sampling, the conduct of the interview needs to be planned, but it must also be responsive and, as the quotation from Paul Thompson in Box 12.1 suggests, it is a skill that needs to be learned. The key to a good interview is to adjust your approach so that the interviewee is encouraged to talk, but crucially to talk about subjects that you are interested in researching. You should also pilot (trial run) your approach or questions so that you know that they make sense to interviewees. Your questions need to be clear and in a style of language that your respondent understands. It is often best to keep questions simple (this can avoid the problem of asking more than one question in a single sentence).

BOX 12.10

EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

1 First trying marijuana.
2 Circumstances surrounding first contact.
3 State of being following first contact.
4 Conditions for continual use.
5 Conditions for curtailment or stoppage.
6 Present situation.
7 Current attitudes towards usage.

Expansion of section 5 Conditions for curtailment or stoppage:

(a) Why did you decide to stop or cut down?

(b) What was happening to you at this time (e.g. were you still in school, working etc.)?

(c) Was the drug still relatively accessible to you?

(d) Did your decision to stop have anything to do with what was taking place in your life/career (i.e. was the usage of marijuana on a regular basis becoming too great a risk in moral, social or legal terms)?

Did any particular person or persons influence your decision to stop or cut down? Who, and how did they influence you?

[*To be asked of those who have stopped completely.*] Since having given up marijuana, have you felt any strong yearning to try it again or resume your use of it? Tell me about it (times, occasions, places and so on in which yearning is experienced). How do you handle these feelings when you get them – what do you tell yourself or do in order to resist the desire?

Source: quoted in Lofland, 1971: 78–9

Different researchers and research projects will adopt different approaches to qualitative interviewing. At one end of the spectrum would be conducting interviews with reference to a relatively structured topic guide, such as that in Box 12.10 which is taken from a study of people who had ceased using marijuana.

At the other extreme is the *single-question induced narrative* approach developed by Tom Wengraf (2001). Wengraf aims to elicit stories from the interviewee with a single question such as 'Tell me the whole story of your life' and no further questions except for clarification. Clearly, this is appropriate for some research projects, but not all.

Most qualitative interviewing falls somewhere between the single question and the relatively structured topic guide. They will involve the researcher having planned in advance the way in which he or she intends to introduce and open the interview and a range of topics which they hope to cover. Qualitative interviewing is a skilled process, as you need to develop the ability to listen carefully to what you are being told at the same time as you consider how to take the interview forward and what your next question will be. You also need to be aware of body language and other non-verbal signals that you are being given, as well as to attend to your means of recording the interview, either by taking notes or by making sure the recording equipment is still working. Juggling all these tasks takes practice.

As should be clear, conducting interviews is not the same as merely taking part in a conversation. It needs a different kind of listening and different responses. You need to take more care not to interrupt your interviewee's speech than you might in a normal conversation. Qualitative interviews generally concentrate on open-ended or 'non-directive' questions which require more response than a simple 'yes' or 'no'. There are various ways to encourage your interviewees to carry on talking or expand on what they are saying. Sometimes simply not rushing in with another question will give them time to reflect on what they have said and say some more, especially if you are giving encouraging semi-verbal cues such as 'uh-huh' and nodding encouragement. You can also repeat statements back to the interviewer in the form of a question. For example, if someone says 'When I was young, I didn't have much of a relationship with my sister,' you can ask them again as a question 'You say you didn't have much of a relationship with your sister?' as an encouragement to talk further about this topic.

In some cases, qualitative interviews may be covering quite sensitive material, or issues that the interviewees do not particularly want to talk about. It is important to raise sensitive issues in ways that make interviewees still feel comfortable about discussing them. This may involve using indirect questions. For example, rather than asking a white interviewee directly about their own attitudes – 'What do you think of Black people?' – it might be more productive to ask more general questions such as 'Do you think there is a problem of racism in this country?'. Interviews may also place researchers in a disturbing position where they have to respond to statements and opinions with which they disagree or even find offensive. There is no single appropriate response to these situations. You may need, for example, to weigh up your ethical and political desire to combat prejudice wherever you encounter it with a desire to maintain a good relationship with your interviewee. On the other hand, sometimes a more combative response may produce a discussion which is useful for your research (see Back, 1996; Wetherell and Potter, 1992: 99).

How do you record interviews?

You need to think about how the interview material will be recorded and transcribed. This may depend in part on the form your analysis will take. For example, do you need exact transcription of the interviews (more important perhaps for discourse and conversation analysis)? Or will more summary notes be sufficient for your analysis? Will you be using a computer program to help you code your data? In this case, you will need to have all your material in electronic form, and this has important implications for the amount of time that the analysis will take.

The need to concentrate on what the interviewee is saying and how to respond and adapt to this is easier if you do not have to take notes of what is being said as you go along. This means that audio recording of interviews is often desirable, although it requires specific consent from the interviewee and may not be suitable in all cases. Recording also entails more post-interview work, as you will need to listen again to the interview and perhaps transcribe it.

Whether the actual interview is recorded electronically or not, it is wise, once the interview is over, to make field notes of the encounter. Often these will record aspects of the interaction and your sense of the interview, not otherwise included in your interview notes or transcript. This can be very helpful in reminding you of important things when you analyse the material (Box 12.11).

BOX 12.11

WRITING FIELD NOTES AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoglu stressed the importance of field notes to accompany interview data in their work on young people's sexualities:

> Obviously the text of a transcript does not reveal all that went on in the interview: language was not the only thing exchanged. Body language, non-verbal exchanges, distress and laughter are all part of that interchange, and all need to be taken into account in understanding and interpreting what the young women and young men were trying to communicate about their sexualities. (1994: 141)

They feel that these field notes helped analysis by reminding them about each interview:

> Since no researcher can gain more than a glimpse of other people's lives through accounts given in an interview, much of the 'skill' of interview-based research lies in what sense we make of the interview after the subject has gone – how we interpret our interview texts. (1994: 126)

How do you analyse interviews?

This section is short, but this does not reflect the importance of thinking about analysis: many chapters in the rest of this book guide you in doing this, since the considerations that apply to the analysis of qualitative interviews are really no different (and no less complex) than those that apply to other kinds of qualitative material. Thus, an interview might be analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Chapter 21), as a part of a project in which grounded theory is being generated (Chapter 22), or using discourse analysis (Chapter 23), narrative analysis or interpretative phenomenological analysis (Chapter 25), content or linguistic analysis (Chapter 26) or (very occasionally) conversation analysis (Chapter 24). Combining qualitative with quantitative analysis (Chapter 27) may also be appropriate in some circumstances.

The distinction between analysis of interview material as a [illegible] or a [illegible] is key to

understanding different approaches. Here, the basic decision is whether to 'read' interviews as a report of experience (the resource approach), or whether to treat them as events in their own right so that they become occasions that are observed (the topic approach). Qualitative thematic analysis often involves treating the interview as a resource; discourse analysis is one example of an approach which topicalises the interview, and occasional conversation analyses of interview data also do this. This distinction was also discussed in the section earlier on the epistemological status of interviews.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed both practical considerations of qualitative interviewing and methodological issues that concern the underlying epistemological and political considerations that lie behind the use of this kind of material for research purposes. It should have equipped you both to do and to think about qualitative interviews. If you use this method, it is important to keep a note of all the decisions you make in planning and undertaking the interviews. This will help you when you come to writing up your research and providing a rationale for the way you have proceeded.

Finally, consider whether it is appropriate to have any follow-up with your interviewees. This might involve sending out a letter which tells them the results or progress of your research, or even giving a workshop or presentation where you explain the results of your research to a group of respondents and give them a chance to comment on what you have found.

FURTHER READING

Denzin (1989) gives an overview of a variety of approaches to qualitative interviewing. Silverman (2001) presents a sophisticated discussion of different ways of approaching the analysis of qualitative interview data. Scott (1984) gives a feminist account of interviewing. Gubrium and Holstein's *Handbook of Interview Research* (2002) gives a comprehensive, up-to-date and authoritative account of a wide range of approaches to interviewing. Rubin and Rubin (2005) is a comprehensive guide to qualitative interviewing, as is Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). James and Busher (2009) and Salmons (2010) have a specific focus on online interviewing.

Student Reader (Seale, 2004b): relevant readings

10 Herbert H. Hyman with William J. Cobb, Jacob J. Feldman, Clyde W. Hart and Charles Herbert Stember: 'Interviewing in social research'

36 Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer: 'Participant observation and interviewing: a comparison'

37 Sue Jones: 'Depth interviewing'

38 Ann Oakley: 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms?' (and a subsequent exchange with Joanna Malseed)

79 Maureen Cain and Janet Finch: 'Towards a rehabilitation of data'

See also Chapter 2, 'Interviews' by Tim Rapley; Chapter 3 'Oral history' by Joanna Bornat; and Chapter 4, 'Biographical research', by Gabriele Rosenthal in Seale et al. (2004).

Journal articles discussing or illustrating the methods discussed in this chapter

Ogden, J. and Cornwell, D. (2010) 'The role of topic, interviewee and question in predicting rich interview data in the field of health research', Sociology of Health & Illness, 32 (7): 1059–1071.

Rapley, T.J. (2001) 'The art(fulness) of open-ended interviewing: some considerations on analysing interviews', Qualitative Research, 1: 303–323.

Seale, C., Charteris-Black, J., Dumelow, C., Locock, L. and Ziebland, S. (2008) 'The effect of joint interviewing on the performance of gender', Field Methods, 20: 107–128.

Web links

Forum Qualitative Research – click on 'Search' then search for the term 'Interview': www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm

Methods@manchester – creative interviewing: www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/methods/creativeinterviewing/index.shtml

Interview as a method for qualitative research: www.public.asu.edu/~kroel/www500/Interview%20Fri.pdf

Martin Ryder's qualitative research site – follow the links on interviewing: http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/pract_res.html

Oral History Society (UK): www.oralhistory.org.uk

Oral History Association (USA): www.oralhistory.org

Resources for Qualitative Research: www.qualitativeresearch.uga.edu/QualPage/welcome.html

KEY CONCEPTS FOR REVIEW

Advice: Use these, along with the review questions in the next section, to test your knowledge of the contents of this chapter. Try to define each of the key concepts listed here; if you have understood this chapter you should be able to do this. Check your definitions against the definition in the glossary at the end of the book.

Bias

Data collection vs. data generation

Discursive repertoires

Informed consent

Qualitative interview

Reflexivity

Snowball sampling

Topic vs. resource

Review questions

1. What is a qualitative interview, how does it differ from other kinds of interview, and what different approaches to carrying out qualitative interviews exist?
2. What kinds of research study are qualitative interviews best suited for?

3 What does it mean to say that an interview is treated as a topic rather than a resource at the analysis stage?
4 What kinds of ethical issues may arise in doing qualitative interviews?
5 What consideration arise when deciding who to interview, where to interview, what to ask and how to record qualitative interviews?

Workshop and discussion exercises

1 The aim of this exercise is to produce interview data on students' experiences of studying and thus to experience some of the problems of asking questions and understanding answers in an unstructured interview.

(a) The workshop should be divided into groups of three or four.
(b) Each group should draw up a short *topic guide* for unstructured interviews with other students. Focus on a specific aspect of experience (e.g. reasons for coming to university, financial problems, reactions to lectures and classes) and work out some questions.
(c) Each group should choose an interviewer, an interviewee and one or two observers.
(d) The interviewer should interview the interviewee using the topic guide. The observer should write down as much as they can of what the interviewee says. Then change roles and do another interview.
(e) Compare the two interviews and discuss what you have found out. Consider the language of the questions. What do these take for granted? How far is the interviewer sharing understandings with the interviewee? How could the interview be improved?

2 Read the transcript of an interview with Joanna, an Australian woman interviewed for a research project concerning mothers' experiences of child day care centres (Box 12.12).

(a) How would you characterise the relationship between interviewer and respondent?
(b) What does this interview tell us about what has happened to Joanna and her child? Construct a list of key themes relating to this and say which segments of talk illustrate each theme.
(c) What does this interview tell us about the person Joanna wants to be, and about the child that she wants Jared to be? Construct a list of key themes relating to this and say which segments of talk illustrate each theme.

BOX 12.12

TRANSCRIPT OF A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW

Interview with Joanna, separated, about Jared, aged 18 months, who has been going to a childcare day centre for three months:

1	*Q*:	How did you feel during the first week or so that Jared was in
2		day care?
3	*Joanna*:	Ah I worried. I worried a lot because he was very young then about
4		three or four months old. Um but then I used to go and visit him say
5		after two because I had a break and I'd go and visit him in between and
6		he wasn't even interested in … I stopped doing it because I'd go in
7		and after I'd been there an hour and a half two hours to play with him
8		and he was busily involved in something else and um wasn't grizzly
9		enough to want me.
10	*Q*:	You said you were rather worried. What were you worried
11		about?
12	*Joanna*:	Um I was worried that it was going to affect him not
13		being with me – that he wouldn't get the same love and attention – that
14		he'd cry and miss me and but now I think it's ah I worry more about me
15		missing him than him missing me.
16	*Q*:	How long has Jared been in day care now?
17	*Joanna*:	Since he was three months. So about a year and a bit.
18		He virtually been going there really since he was about two months. I
19		have found though that when we shifted from the country up here he didn't
20		go for about eight weeks and he was … used to cry all the time for the
21		first week or two um then I started to take him back to going into
22		creche.
23	*Q*:	You found it difficult leaving him after?
24	*Joanna*:	Yes I found it difficult I don't know if it was a stage he was
25		going through. That clingy stage or whether he just got so used to being
26		with me he didn't want to …
27	*Q*:	Was that hard for you?
28	*Joanna*:	Yes terribly hard. I don't know if I could leave him if he was
29		the type that cried all the time that I left him because I just … it
30		makes me feel sick. I worry about him being away from me the whole
31		time that he is away … so I'm really glad that he's happy and laughing
32		when he walks in.
33	*Q*:	Have your emotions changed since the first weeks Jared was in day
34		care? If so – how?
35	*Joanna*:	Well I think I've got a really positive outlook for it now I really
36		feel that it's a really good thing for him to be going to day care as an
37		only child – he doesn't have any brothers and sisters to mix with – it
38		teaches him sharing and not being the centre of attention. Um and how
39		to get on with other children and I think it's really important. And I
40		think maybe an only child doesn't learn that early enough if they
41		don't go to something where they are mixing with other children so I
42		think really even if I didn't have to he would go at least a couple
43		of times a week into a local childcare centre.
44	*Q*:	And if you were perfectly free to choose, how would you have arranged
45		your life since the birth of Jared?
46	*Joanna*:	I'd have a nanny … If I was really going to choose anything I'd
47		have a nanny/housekeeper. [*Jared appeared with something that he*
48		*shouldn't have had – mother quickly removed it – Jared started to cry*].

(Continued)

(Continued)

49		I find he get very bored if he's at home with me I usually by ten o'clock
50		have got to go down the street because he get so restless.
51	*Q:*	How about in the future if you were perfectly free to choose?
52	*Joanna:*	I'd still have him go into a creche maybe not quite as much as he
53		does at the moment um and I think I would prefer to have more help at a
54		night time.
55	*Q:*	So you'd still like a nanny?
56	*Joanna:*	A nanny/housekeeper. I mean I wouldn't like her to be bringing him
57		up. But I suppose um somebody who could replace because my parents
58		aren't up here. Somebody who would replace his grandmother I suppose.
59		Somebody ah who I could just ... more of a grandmother figure I suppose.
60		Um just somebody who could help out occasionally a bit ... It's very hard
61		when you've got no ... I've got girlfriends up here but none of them
62		have got children so it's very hard to ... yeah some are having children at
63		the moment so it'll be different once they have them. But I wouldn't
64		leave him with someone who didn't have children because it might put
65		them off.
66	*Q:*	Is there anything else you would like to add?
67	*Joanna:*	Well I actually feel that it doesn't hurt any child going to
68		child care I think it does depend on the child care centre um and I've
69		been really lucky with both centres he's been to they've been really
70		good. Really good in the way that they're brand new. So they have
71		been very clean bright and new facilities bright windows a good
72		playground which is really important. And the staff have all
73		been new so they're all really enthusiastic um and they really like
74		what they're doing and um I've found also that the children that go to
75		them have been really nice types, and that makes a difference. And um
76		I'm not being classist or anything but I'm not sure if I was living in
77		a housing commission area and going to creche there in those areas I
78		would find a difference. But both times he's been in really nice where
79		the parents are nice types and ah it does affect even on really young
80		children you can tell about the parents. In both the creches he's
81		been in there have been no children swearing being naughty they've been
82		taught discipline and I think that's good and actually the creche is good
83		it teaches them a little more discipline than I do in a way.
84		Sitting when he's eating and things like that where as a sole parent I
85		can get a little bit soft on him so it's good that he does have a little
86		stern-ness.

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13

FOCUS GROUPS

Fran Tonkiss

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