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In-depth Interviews

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In-depth or unstructured interviews are one of the main methods of data collection used in qualitative research. Classic ethnographers such as Malinowski stressed the importance of talking to people to grasp their point of view (Burgess, 1982a), and personal accounts are seen as having central importance in social research because of the power of language to illuminate meaning:

> [T]he expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts. A crucial feature of language is its capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:126).

The in-depth interview is often described as a form of conversation (Burgess, 1982a, 1984; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). Indeed Sidney and Beatrice Webb described the method of the interview as being 'conversation with a purpose' (Webb and Webb, 1932: 130). As such it reproduces a fundamental process through which knowledge about the social world is constructed in normal human interaction (Rorty, 1980). But there are some obvious differences between normal conversation and in-depth interviews - their objectives, and the roles of researcher and participant, are quite different (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In reality although a good in-depth interview will appear naturalistic, it will bear little resemblance to an everyday conversation.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the various perspectives on the interview raised by different traditions of qualitative research. We then look at the key features of in-depth interviews and the professional and personal skills they require. The chapter examines the nature of the 'contract' between participant and researcher, and the 'staging' of an interview. We then set out some key principles in asking questions and probing, and the techniques that inform good interview practice. We also cover how researchers can respond to difficult situations that may arise in interviewing. The chapter concludes with coverage of practical issues in organising interviews.

The in-depth interview

Perspectives on the interview

The different traditions of qualitative research described in Chapter 1 have resulted in a diversity of perspectives on in-depth interviewing. In particular, there are debates about how far knowledge is constructed in the interview or is a pre-existing phenomenon, and about how active or passive the role of the interviewer should be. As Chapter 5 describes, there is also diversity in how structured interviews are, and in how far the content is set by researcher or participant.

Two alternative positions on in-depth interviewing are put forward by Kvale (1996). The first, which he summarises as the 'miner metaphor', falls broadly within a modern social science research model which sees knowledge as 'given':

> knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal ... [T]he knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions. (Kvale, 1996: 3)

The second, which Kvale calls the 'traveler metaphor', falls within the constructivist research model in which knowledge is not given but is created and negotiated. The interviewer is seen as a traveller who journeys with the interviewee. The meanings of the interviewee's 'stories' are developed as the traveller interprets them. Through conversations, the interviewer leads the subject to new insights: there is a transformative element to the journey

> The traveler ... asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as 'wandering together with'. (Kvale, 1996: 4 emphasis in original)

The researcher is thus an active player in development of data and of meaning. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) stress that the researcher is not simply a

'pipeline' through which knowledge is transmitted. They, too, see knowledge as constructed in the interview, through collaboration between interviewee and researcher.

This emphasis on knowledge as something that is created within the unique situation of the interview has led to concerns among some authors about the stability and validity of interview data (see Chapter 10 for discussion of validity generally). But other writers, while they acknowledge the influence of postmodern thinking on the nature of interviewing, nevertheless see the interview as meaningful beyond its immediate context. Interviews can:

> provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 100)

The influence of postmodernism, constructionism and feminism has also led to new perspectives on in-depth interviewing, and new forms of interview (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Kvale, 1996). Postmodern approaches emphasise the way in which a reality is constructed in the interview, and the relationship that develops between researcher and interviewee. In creative interviewing the researcher moves away from the conventions of interviewing, with lengthy or repeated interviews taking place in people's everyday world situations, and an emphasis on free expression (Douglas, 1985). In dialectical interviewing, the interview focuses on contradictions in the social and material world and on the potential for action and for change, with an emphasis on the transformative aspects of an interview. Heuristic approaches emphasise the personal experience of the interviewer, and see the process of interviewing as a collaboration between researcher and participant, sharing reflection and enquiry (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985).

Feminist research approaches have particularly raised issues about the form and features of in-depth interviewing (Finch, 1984; Nielsen, 1990; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2000; Reinharz, 1992), although as Olesen in particular has stressed there are many different feminist approaches. Feminist interviewing attempts to be more reflexive and interactive, aiming to take a non-hierarchical approach which avoids objectifying the participant. The distinction between the roles of researcher and participant becomes less stark: the interview is seen as a collaboration between them as they share in the process of negotiating coverage, language and understanding. Reciprocity is emphasised. The researcher feels free to step outside the formal role of the neutral asker of questions, expressing their own feelings and giving information about themselves (an issue discussed later in this chapter). Some feminist approaches emphasise the value of women interviewing women (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981), although the issue of cultural affinity is also discussed in relation to other characteristics and patterns of

characteristics (Olesen, 2000; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). This has led to questions about whether people should be interviewed by researchers who have similar socio-demographic characteristics, or who have experiences in common with them (see Chapter 3).

Finally, biographical, narrative, life history and oral history approaches (see Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Miller, 2000; Thompson, 2000) also bring different perspectives to the interview and have yielded different forms of interview. These methods are concerned with understanding cultural milieux and social worlds through personal accounts and narratives, with life history or biographical interviews covering an individual's whole life and oral history approaches concentrating on specific events or periods. The approaches involve intensive and extended data collection with several interviews with each participant, and participants are given a fairly free rein to shape their own narratives.

These different perspectives and traditions thus lead to different priorities, emphases and practices. But there are a number of features of in-depth interviewing which remain broadly consistent.

Key features of the in-depth interview

The first key feature of the in-depth interview is that it is intended to combine structure with flexibility. As Chapter 5 noted, even in the most unstructured interviews the researcher will have some sense of the themes they wish to explore, and interviews will generally be based on some form of topic guide (or interview schedule or guide) setting out the key topics and issues to be covered during the interview. However, the structure is sufficiently flexible to permit topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee, to allow responses to be fully probed and explored and to allow the researcher to be responsive to relevant issues raised spontaneously by the interviewee.

A second key feature is that the interview is interactive in nature. The material is generated by the interaction between the researcher and interviewee. The researcher will ask an initial question in such a way as to encourage the interviewee to talk freely when answering the question. The next intervention by the interviewer will usually be determined by the participant's answer. (How much of themselves researchers offer in this interaction is discussed below in this chapter.)

Thirdly, the researcher uses a range of probes and other techniques to achieve depth of answer in terms of penetration, exploration and explanation. An initial response is often at a fairly 'surface' level: the interviewer will use follow-up questions to obtain a deeper and fuller understanding of the participant's meaning. The in-depth format also permits the researcher to explore fully all the factors that underpin participants' answers: reasons, feelings, opinions and beliefs. This furnishes the explanatory evidence that is an important element of qualitative research.

Fourthly, the interview is generative in the sense that new knowledge or thoughts are likely, at some stage, to be created. The extent to which this is so may vary depending on the research questions, but it is likely that the participant will at some point direct themselves, or be directed by the researcher, down avenues of thought they have not explored before. Participants may also be invited to put forward ideas and suggestions on a particular topic and to propose solutions for problems raised during the interview.

The emphasis on depth, nuance and the interviewee's own language as a way of understanding meaning implies that interview data needs to be captured in its natural form. This means that interview data is generally tape recorded, since note taking by the researcher would change the form of data.

Finally these key features together mean that qualitative interviews are almost always conducted face-to-face. It would be extremely difficult to conduct really detailed in-depth interviewing over the telephone. The interview is an intense experience, for both parties involved, and a physical encounter is essential context for an interview which is flexible, interactive and generative, and in which meaning and language is explored in depth.

Requirements of a qualitative interviewer

The success of the interview depends, to a large extent, on the personal and professional qualities of the individual interviewer. In contrast to quantitative interviewing, qualitative research interviewers are, themselves, research instruments, and there are some key requirements of them (Kvale, 1996; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Thompson, 2000). So what are the qualities that go to make up a successful depth interviewer?

In-depth interviewing makes a number of demands on the mental and intellectual abilities of an interviewer. First, the ability of the researcher to listen is fundamental to the art of interviewing. The researcher must hear, digest and comprehend the participant's answers in order to decide how to probe further. Second, good in-depth interviewing requires a clear, logical mind. The researcher needs to be able to think quickly to distil the essential points of what the participant is saying, exercise judgement about what to pursue, and simultaneously formulate the relevant question. Third, a good memory is an important attribute. It is often necessary to make a mental note of a point made earlier on by the participant and return to it at a judicious moment in the interview to seek further clarification or elaboration.

Curiosity - an enquiring mind - is an essential asset in an in-depth interviewer. It greatly helps if the instinct of the researcher is to want to know more about what they have been told. Thompson (2000) stresses that in-depth interviewing requires interest in and respect for people as individuals, and is not for people who cannot stop talking about themselves. Patton (2002) argues for patient curiosity:

> If what people have to say about their world is generally boring to you, then you will never be a great interviewer. Unless you are fascinated by the rich variation in human experience, qualitative interviewing will become drudgery. (Patton, 2002: 341)

However active or passive the role of the interviewer, an in-depth interview is based around the ability of the interviewer to establish a good rapport with the participant. Researchers have to be able to establish a good working relationship with people from all walks of life, from people living in difficult circumstances to those in positions of power and influence. A good working relationship is achieved where the researcher seeks to put the participant at ease and to create a climate of trust. This involves demonstrating a real desire to understand from the perspective of the interviewee. It also involves the researcher displaying the confidence that comes from being professional, having a job of work to do and knowing how to do it. Trust is strengthened where the researcher appears to be comfortable with the interview situation, and with everything the interviewee has to say.

Creating the right rapport also involves demonstrating interest and respect, being able to respond flexibly to the interviewee, and being able to show understanding and empathy (Thompson, 2000). Adaptability is therefore a key requirement. This does not mean attempting to be like the interviewee; rather it involves respecting the individuality of the other person while retaining one's own identity.

Interviewees also respond positively where the interviewer displays a sense of 'tranquillity' - an inner stillness which communicates interest and attention and which is accompanied by a feeling of being comfortable with the interviewee and the situation. Humour also has its place in helping to foster a sympathetic interviewing environment: the ability to share a joke made by the interviewee or to lighten a situation with humour can facilitate the interviewing process.

Researchers need to establish their credibility with participants by asking relevant questions which are seen as meaningful by the participant and which are based on an understanding of the research subject. But equally the interview is not a forum for the researcher to make a show of their own knowledge. This can be particularly challenging in interviews with senior professionals or with peers. Researchers need a degree of hurmlity the ability to be recipients of the participant's wisdom without needing to compete by demonstrating their own.

Efficiency and careful preparation are also essential. This means, for example, being fully conversant with the objectives of the research and with the topic guide. It means planning an itinerary that allows for punctuality in keeping appointments, and ensuring that recording equipment is in good order.

Mason (2002) stresses the range of tasks that interviewing involves. At any one time the researcher needs to listen to what is being said and understand it; assess how it relates to the research questions; be alert to contradictions

with what has been said earlier; decide what to follow up or explore in more detail now and what to return to later; decide how to phrase the next question; pick up on nuances, hesitation, emotion and non-verbal signals; pace the interview; keep an eye on recording equipment, and deal with any distractions or interruptions that arise. Concentration and stamina are essential qualities for coping with these simultaneous demands.

One task that can be omitted from this list - and indeed that is best deliberately set aside during interviews - is analysis. During the interview, the researcher needs to be totally dedicated to interviewing. Their attention should be focused on listening and responding. It is deleterious to be thinking about analytical constructs, or considering how what is being said sits within analytical themes, during the interview since this means that the researcher will not be giving their full attention to what the participant is saying. It can lead to questions that are rooted in the researcher's over-hasty interpretation of what they are hearing, rather than questions which seek to understand the interviewee's interpretation and the meaning something holds for them.

The staging of an interview

Although the purpose of the interview is to understand the perspective of the interviewee, the researcher will nevertheless have a clear sense of the issues they wish to hear discussed. The researcher therefore has an important role to play in directing the interview process, and must be clear about how to 'stage-manage' the interview effectively so as to meet the purposes of the research.

A number of aspects of the process need to be considered for effective stage-management. Firstly the researcher needs to be aware of the various stages that an interview passes through during the course of its existence and know how to direct the interview through each stage. Secondly, the researcher has to understand the terms of the contract between researcher and participant and know how to make them work for the benefit of the research. Thirdly it is up to the researcher to make clear what the role of the participant should be during the interview.

Interview stages

An in-depth interview involves a number of stages (Robson, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979). In broad terms, the researcher's task is to ease the interviewee down from the everyday, social level to a deeper level at which they can together focus on a specific topic or set of topics. Towards the end, the researcher needs to signal the return back to the everyday level. The process needs to be fully completed before the researcher leaves the participant.

The stages of an interview, and the ways in which researchers can help to direct the participant through them, are as follows:

STAGE ONE! ARRIVAL

The interview process effectively begins the moment the researcher arrives on the participant's doorstep. The first few minutes after meeting can be crucial for establishing the relationship between researcher and participant which is a prerequisite for a successful in-depth interview. The researcher therefore needs to be aware that the participant may be feeling anxious or even slightly hostile initially. It is important at this stage for the participant to feel that they have control on their own territory, but the researcher should take responsibility for putting them at their ease. The researcher therefore needs to play the role of the guest while at the same time being quietly confident and relaxed, making conversation but avoiding the research topic until the interview begins. Once the participant seems comfortable with this stage of the process, it is time to move on.

STAGE TWO: INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

This is the stage at which business begins. The researcher starts to direct the interaction by introducing the research topic. This involves providing a clear reiteration of the nature and purpose of the research, reaffirming confidentiality, and seeking permission to record the interview. It also involves making sure the environment is suitably quiet, private and comfortable for the interview to proceed without distraction (see below).

STAGE THREE! BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

As Chapter 5 noted, the opening questions are an opportunity to collect important contextual information. Although it may be thought that beginning with a neutral topic is better than asking personal details, such as the interviewee's age or relationship status, having such information at the beginning is important to help with question formulation. For example, it may be useful to know that the participant has young children when it comes to exploring influences on their views and experiences. Asking for factual background information in the middle of the interview can break the flow. In addition, it is at the beginning of the interview that interviewees realise that their role is to 'open up' and give full answers. They can begin to do this most easily where the subject matter is something with which they are familiar.

In an informal way, the researcher thus asks for background information about their age, who they live with, whether they go out to work and so on. These questions are asked in a way that makes it clear they are not being read from a pre-formulated list. Follow-up questions (for example about how long the interviewee has lived in the area, brief details about their job) help to set the scene of an interview in which the participant will be required to give

detailed and spontaneous answers, and in which the researcher will probe and respond. The researcher can also judge from the initial reply how easily the interviewee will take to this role and can adapt their approach accordingly.

STAGE FOUR! DURING THE INTERVIEW

Chapter 5 described some general principles in shaping the main body of the interview. Here, the researcher is guiding the participant through the key themes - both those anticipated by the researcher and those which emerge from the interview. Each subject is explored in depth with a series of follow-up questions and probes. At this stage, the interviewee will be working at a deeper, more focused level than normal, discovering ideas, thoughts and feelings that may be dormant in daily life.

STAGE FIVE! ENDING THE INTERVIEW

About five to ten minutes before the end of the interview, the researcher can signal the approach of the end of the interview to allow the interviewee gradually to return to the level of everyday social interaction. Phrases such as 'the final topic …'or 'in the last few minutes …' are useful here. It is also important to check that the participant has not been left with any unfinished business: for example, feelings unexpressed or issues of burning importance left unmentioned.

STAGE SIX: AFTER THE INTERVIEW

What happens when the tape recorder is switched off is also important. The researcher thanks the participant warmly, and begins to help the participant to move out of interview mode by saying something, fairly briefly, about how their contribution will help the research. Any reassurances about confidentiality or the use of the interview data should also be given. This is the time to answer any questions raised by the interviewee during the interview (see further below), or to give any information about support groups or services (see Chapter 3). Moving away from the interview sometimes sparks some final reflections, or even new information, from interviewees. If these are significant, the researcher may feel it is appropriate to ask the interviewee to repeat them with the tape recorder ruining again, or may make a note of them after the interview.

   The researcher should take their cue from the participant - if the participant seems to want to talk, either about the interview subject or more generally, it is important to be prepared to stay a little longer. By the time the researcher takes leave of the participant, the process of coming out of the interview should be fully completed and the participant, it is hoped, left feeling 'well'.

The interview 'contract'

Researchers need to feel confident that the participant has freely given their consent to be interviewed. While the researcher clearly has obligations to the

participant (discussed in Chapter 3), they also have permission to interview the participant within the terms on which consent has been given. In a sense, the participant has entered into a type of 'contract' by agreeing to take part in an interview. The terms of the contract are that the participant has agreed to be interviewed for a predetermined length of time, at a particular venue, on a particular topic, and under clear conditions of confidentiality.

Nevertheless, the researcher should also be aware that participants have the right to change their mind at any time. It is therefore advisable to take nothing for granted and to ensure that the terms are agreed. At the beginning of the interview the researcher restates the aims of the research and reaffirms confidentiality. Should the contract need to be changed for any reason during the interview, for example if extra time is required, the terms should be negotiated and agreed - never assumed.

Researcher and participant roles

Researcher and participant have different roles in the interview process. The researcher needs to be clear about his or her own role in the process, and needs to help the participant to understand what their role is to be at an early stage in the interview.

The role of the researcher is that of a facilitator to enable the interviewee to talk about their thoughts, feelings, views and experiences. However, the role of the facilitator is an active, not a passive, one. It does not mean sitting back and just letting the interviewee talk. On the contrary, it means managing the interview process to ensure that the required subjects are covered to the required depth, without influencing the actual views articulated.

Managing the interview process involves ensuring coverage of the agenda to be discussed within the interview, steering the interviewee back to topics from which they stray. It means exercising judgement about the length of time that should be devoted to any given topic and when to move on to the next one, and about how to respond if the interviewee moves on to unanticipated topics. The researcher has to decide what questions are asked and how they are phrased, and how to follow up until a satisfactory answer has been obtained.

Another important part of the researcher's function is to help interviewees to see what their role is in the interview process. The interviewee's role is to give fulsome answers, to provide more depth when probing questions are asked, to reflect and to think, and to raise issues they see as relevant but which are not directly asked about. By using open questioning techniques, demonstrating interest and actively encouraging the interviewee to talk, the researcher is intimating to participants that their role involves opening up and talking as opposed to giving simple answers. It is quite usual for people to start anticipating follow-up questions like 'why?' and start supplying the information without prompting. Participants also need to make judgements

about whether to include a subject not yet raised by the researcher or about how much detail to give. The researcher helps them to make those judgements by providing a clear articulation of the objectives of the research, and by asking questions which can clearly be seen to relate to those objectives.

Asking questions to achieve breadth and depth

The aim of the in-depth interview is to achieve both breadth of coverage across key issues, and depth of coverage within each. A number of writers describe different types of questions which are used to achieve this (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979).

A distinction can be made between content mapping and content mining questions. Content mapping questions are designed to open up the research territory and to identify the dimensions or issues that are relevant to the participant. Content mining questions are designed to explore the detail which lies within each dimension, to access the meaning it holds for the interviewee, and to generate an in-depth understanding from the interviewee's point of view. Any interview involves a combination of these question types and they are not confined to distinct parts of the interview. A content mapping question is asked to raise issues; content mining questions are used to explore them in detail; content mapping questions are used to raise further issues, and so on.

Both types, but particularly content mining questions, also involve probes. Probes are responsive, follow-up questions designed to elicit more information, description, explanation and so on. They are usually verbal, but non-verbal probes - such as a pause, a gesture, a raised eyebrow - are also highly effective. In content mapping questions, probes are used to help in mapping out the territory; in content mining questions, they are the essential tool through which depth is achieved.

Content *mapping questions*

There are a number of types of content mapping questions.

GROUND MAPPING QUESTIONS
Ground mapping questions are the first questions asked to 'open up' a subject. They are generally widely framed questions designed to encourage spontaneity and to allow the interviewee to raise the issues that are most relevant to them. With, at this stage, minimal probing, they will often generate a rich list of dimensions which will need to be followed up.

> Have you ever applied for a benefit?
- No, I haven't, I wouldn't want to.
> Why is that?

- I've always managed to be self-sufficient all my life and I couldn't bear to ask for money I wasn't entitled to.
> What makes you say you are not entitled to it?
- Well, I haven't paid towards it at all so I am not really entitled to anything, am I? I would feel very uncomfortable. It would feel like I was having to accept charity.

DIMENSION MAPPING QUESTIONS

Dimension mapping questions are used to focus the participant a little more narrowly on particular topics or concepts: they are used to signpost, structure and direct the interview. They may be used, for example, to structure a participant's account of a process or experience, perhaps in broadly chronological order, where they may be as simple as 'What happened next?' Or, as in the example above, they would be used to focus on each of the dimensions or topics raised by the interviewee in response to the initial ground mapping question, encouraging the participant to talk about each in turn (self-sufficiency, entitlement, contribution, charity) and uncovering the elements that make up each concept. The researcher might refer directly to the fact that the participant mentioned, for example, 'managing to be self-sufficient' and ask what they meant. More detailed probes (see below) would then be used to ensure that each of the elements that makes up the interviewee's conception of self-sufficiency is explored in depth.

PERSPECTIVE-WIDENING QUESTIONS

To understand the interviewee's perspective fully, they need to have an opportunity to give more than their first thoughts on a subject. Encouraging them to look at issues from different perspectives will uncover more layers of meaning and greater richness. The third type of content mapping questions are therefore ones through which the researcher widens the interviewee's perspective, stimulates further thought or ensures comprehensive coverage.

They may be questions which invite the participant to consider dimensions or subtopics which the researcher wishes to hear explored, rather than ones which have been generated by the interviewee. These are sometimes described as 'prompts' - items to which the researcher explicitly directs the interviewee's attention rather than ones raised by the interviewee through more open questioning. Such questions need to be raised with a light touch, so that dimensions which are not of relevance to the participant are not given undue emphasis and the unique perspective of the participant lost.

> Are there any other factors that would influence your decision? I'm thinking of things like whether the client has a job, their family commitments and so on.

Perspective-widening questions might also involve stimulating thought by putting to the participant issues or perspectives that have emerged in earlier

interviews or in other research. Again, it is important that this is done in a way which leaves the participant to answer freely:

> People talk a lot about the doctor-patient relationship. Do you see that as being relevant here?

A further technique involves checking out all sides of the interviewee's perspective, to ensure that the answer obtained is a comprehensive and fully rounded one - asking for other views or factors, encouraging them to think about positive as well as negative issues and so on.

> You've said you were delighted with it, but was there anything that fell short of your expectations?
> Are there other cases where your decision would be different?

Content mining questions

Content mining questions are the tools used for exploring what has been raised by the interviewee through different types of content mapping questions - obtaining a full description of phenomena, understanding what underpins the participant's attitude or behaviour and so on. Although some probes may have been called into play in content mapping, it is in content mining that they are used much more extensively. There are four broad groups: amplificatory, exploratory, explanatory and clarificatory.

AMPLIFICATORY PROBES

Participants rarely provide the level of depth of articulation that qualitative interviewing requires without further probing, and amplificatory probes are used to encourage them to elaborate further. They are important for obtaining full description and in-depth understanding of the manifestation or experience of a phenomenon.

Examples of amplificatory probes - each of which would be followed up with further probes until the researcher is satisfied there is nothing else to add - are:

> You said you have a very varied patient group. Can you tell me a little more about the types of patients you see?
> Can you give me an example of a case that was difficult in the way you've described?
> When you say he was on your side, what gave you that impression?
> What was it exactly that you liked about her manner?
> What was she saying or doing that made you feel she was ill-informed?

EXPLORATORY PROBES

A key role of qualitative research is to explore the views and feelings that underlie descriptions of behaviour, events or experience, and that help to show the meaning that experiences hold for interviewees:

> How did you respond when ...?
> What did you feel when ...?
> Why did you think it was important to ...?

Exploring impacts, effects and consequences also helps to illuminate experiences and behaviours, and to create a more rounded understanding of them:

> What effect did that have on you?
> Did that help you in any way?
> How did your approach change when you found that out?

EXPLANATORY PROBES

One of the hallmarks of the in-depth interview is probing for reasons - asking 'why?' Explanations are repeatedly sought for views, feelings, behaviours, events, decisions and so on. There is often an initial reluctance to do this among new researchers since it seems to be contravening social norms, to be impolite, to do so. Nevertheless it is fundamentally important for the researcher to understand the reasons for a participant's views and behaviours. Explanations are often multi-layered, and it is a key value of qualitative interviewing that responsive, iterative probing can uncover these layers. Where a simple 'Why?' feels too bald, there are a number of ways of softening the question:

> What was it that made her go up in your estimation?
> What makes you say that?
> What was it about the case that made you decide to ...?

CLARIFICATORY PROBES

Exploring issues in depth requires a high degree of precision and clarity. Clarificatory probes are therefore important, and used in different ways:

- *To clarify terms and explore language.* It is all too easy to assume the researcher understands the meaning of terms used by the interviewee. But exploring the language used will often show that the assumptions differed from the interviewee's reality, and will add real depth and richness to the researcher's understanding of the interviewee's perspective. It is therefore important to be alert to the use of emotive or descriptive words. In some cases, it is sufficient to repeat the word in the interrogative: 'Dodgy?' Other examples of probes to clarify language are:

  > How was it scary?
  > Could you just explain what you mean by it being a classic case of ...?
  > You said it was really special to see your granddaughter for the first time. In what way was it really special?

- *To clarify details, sequences etc.* There will be points in any interview where details, dates or sequences need to be clarified - whether someone is talking about the same colleague or a different one, whether they saw the

solicitor before they began mediation or only after, whether descriptions of a client's manner related to the same encounter or to different meetings, and so on.

- *Clarifying through testing an expressed position.* Asking clarifying questions which gently challenge or test the participant's account, without being confrontational, can encourage them to elaborate further:

  > You said you were resigned to it, but did you ever think about leaving?
  > Some people might have thought about leaving at that point. Did those sorts of feelings ever come into it for you?

- *Challenging inconsistency.* Finally, it is also important to be alert to conflicts or inconsistencies in the interviewee's account. These may arise because an issue that involves social norms is being addressed and the interviewee is gradually gaining confidence to express their real view. Or they may occur where someone is being encouraged to think about something for the first time so that their view is developing as they speak. Again, it is important to find a non-confrontational way of drawing the participant's attention to inconsistency or contradiction, and asking them to clarify:

  > Earlier you were saying that you were delighted with how the project went but you've also said quite a lot about what didn't go so well. What are the main feelings you're left with?
  > You began by saying that disability means not being able to do things physically, but you've just been talking about it as being what *other people* stop you from doing. Is it always both those things equally, or do you sometimes see it as one more than the other?

In-depth, iterative probing

Probes are not meant to be used in isolation. It is not sufficient to move on to the next point having asked just one probe ('why', for example). The response to that probe will then require another, and so on. This will reveal a whole mine of information around the particular point that would otherwise remain unexplored, and probing needs to continue until the researcher feels they have reached saturation, a full understanding of the participant's perspective.

This kind of iterative probing involves asking for a level of clarification and detail that can sometimes feel unnatural or artificial. It goes far beyond what is usual in everyday conversation. The researcher is putting aside their own knowledge and their own intuitive understanding, and asking for explanations of things they might think they comprehend. But this is essential to achieve the depth of understanding that is the aim of qualitative research. Questions which may feel obvious or banal, or even ridiculous, can reveal a layer of complexity or detail that the researcher would otherwise have missed. They can if necessary be prefaced by a phrase which recognises that an unusual level of clarification is being sought, such as:

> This may sound like an obvious question, but why ...?'
> I just want to make sure I've really understood you. What was it exactly that...?'

Good probing is a little like detective work. The researcher is alert to clues that they have not yet heard the full answer, that something does not quite 'ring true' or 'add up', that the interviewee may be rationalising after the event, or giving what they perceive as the 'correct' answer. For example, an interviewee talking about reasons for not taking up physical activity may refer to lack of time. The researcher may have a hunch that time is not the only barrier to physical activity and may, through careful probing, elicit that other factors are also at work:

- really don't have any time to do any sort of activity except walking to the bus stop on my way to work. I'd love to if I could, I really would. But I don't fin-ish work till after 6 and then I have to help my wife with the three children. I am also a school governor which takes up a lot of my time.
> What sort of things do you do at weekends?
- Well, there is the shopping and then I have to mow the lawn and generally look after the garden and ferry the kids around, take them to friends, swim-ming, you know.
> Do you go swimming with them?
- No. I have a couple of times but I don't usually.
> Why is that?
- I suppose if I'm honest I am really quite lazy physically and I have never much cared for swimming or any other kind of sport.

With further probing, it transpires that the interviewee's aversion to physi-cal exercise dates back to being teased about his physical aptitude at school.

Question formulation

Using broad and narrow questions

It is often said that good in-depth interviewing involves open questions. These are contrasted with dichotomous yes/no questions which call for affirmation rather than description (Patton, 2002). Certainly, in-depth interviewing does not involve a series of yes/no questions, and researchers have to work hard to ask questions which encourage a ful-some response. Although short, open questions look deceptively easy, they are much harder to implement in practice. Asking closed questions is a habitual aspect of ordinary social intercourse and one has to make a con-scious effort to think in an 'open' way in an interview. For example, rather than asking 'So did you then make an appointment to see your doctor?', a question like 'What happened next?' would allow the interviewee to men-tion all the actions they took, their discussions with other people and their feelings, as well as whether they did indeed make an appointment to see their doctor.

However, to suggest that in-depth interviewing involves only open questions is to understate the specificity that good interviewing requires. Both content mapping and content mining involve asking questions which vary in terms of how broad or narrow they are. For example, content mapping as we have described involves very wide questions to map the territory or a dimension. But it might involve asking whether a particular motivation or view was relevant - a question which could be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no', and which would then need further probing. Content mining, similarly, primarily involves broad and open questions but may also require narrow questions. In fact, understanding the interviewee's perspective in depth can require a high degree of specificity. For example, in a study looking at impacts of a welfare to work programme it would be essential to know whether someone was looking for work before they used the service, and whether they were doing so after, as well as understanding broader issues like their feelings about work, the meaning work holds for them, and their perceptions of barriers or difficulties.

Closed questions can also play a role in controlling the interview process. They are useful, for example, where the participant's answer is straying from the question and the researcher needs them to focus on the particular topic. They are also helpful where a participant is extremely voluble and the researcher needs to structure their response by asking narrower questions to ensure an issue is discussed in the detail required.

Avoiding leading questions

The researcher's questions in an in-depth interview are designed to yield a full answer: they are not intended to influence the answer itself. However, it is all too easy to ask a question that suggests a possible answer to the interviewee, such as 'Were you furious when he said that?' or - even worse - 'You must have been furious when he said that.'

A much better version of the question, which allows the participant to supply the response and will reveal what they actually felt, would be:

> How did you react when he said that?

The participant is then free to supply whatever responses he or she chooses. In this case, possible responses might be:

- I was shattered
- Oh, I didn't take any notice of him
- I hit him and threw him out of the house

If necessary, a question which might seem to invite a particular response can be 'neutralised' by adding 'or not?':

> Would you like to have done that, or not?

Asking clear questions

The most effective questions are those that are short and clear, leaving the interviewee with no uncertainty about the sort of information sought. There are various pitfalls to avoid here. First, it is sometimes tempting to preface a question - perhaps to make it seem less intrusive if it covers a delicate issue, or to link it with something said earlier by the participant, or to explain how the question was prompted by the researcher's under-standing of the subject. Although some explanation will occasionally be necessary to clarify the relevance of the question, preambles can easily become so convoluted that the question itself gets lost or obscured. Where this temptation arises, the most effective solution is usually to 'think simple' and ask the question in as straightforward a way as possible.

Double questions too should be avoided. In the heat of the moment, it is very easy to ask two questions in one: 'How old were you when that happened and what effect did it have on you?' This is a relatively simple example of a double question. However, where they are more complex it becomes very confusing for the participant to remember or to answer both halves. People's inclination is generally to answer the easier part, and the one that would generate richer data will be lost. It is much more effective to ask one question at a time, follow it up with whatever probes are appropriate, and then ask the next question.

Third, it is important to avoid questions that are too abstract or theorised. The most effective questions are those to which the interviewee can relate directly and which are clearly pertinent to their own views or circumstances. Although the researcher's question may derive from their understanding of relevant social theory, it is important to find a way of translating it into a simple, concrete question phrased in everyday language. It is, paradoxically, these questions that are most likely to generate the rich data that actually further theoretical understanding (Kvale, 1996).

Finally, it is important to be sensitive to the language and terminology used by people, and to 'mirror' it as far as possible. Using official or bureaucratic language where someone has used more colloquial language can set up a barrier which might impede the interview process. It is also, of course, important to explore the specific terms used by people where this might shed light on their underlying perceptions, values or attitudes.

Further techniques for achieving depth

As well as the ways in which questions are asked, there are some further techniques that are central to achieving depth of coverage.

Listening and remembering

A fundamental principle of in-depth interviewing is to listen. This does not just mean listening to the words but really trying to hear the meaning of what the participant is saying, understanding where there is a subtext that needs to be explored, and hearing the nuances in the participant's account. Indeed, Herbert and Irene Rubin subtitled their 1995 book on qualitative interviewing: *The Art of Hearing Data.* The interactive nature of the in-depth interview means that the researcher's next question should be determined by the interviewee's answer, not determined in advance. It is important to find a way of clearing one's mind of plans for conducting the rest of the interview and concerns about how things are going, to listen really acutely. Although it may seem a passive role, listening is in fact an active part of interviewing (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), and it is listening to which a good interviewer's energies and attention will be most directed.

One of the spin-offs from really hearing what someone is saying is that it helps the interviewer remember points that need to be followed up at a later stage in the interview. One response from an interviewee may trigger four or five points to probe in the researcher's mind. However, a swift decision has to be taken about the immediate issue that needs to be followed up. In such cases, the researcher should make a mental note to return to the other issues raised, either once they have dealt with the immediate issue or later in the interview when they are dealing with a relevant topic:

> Can I take you back to something you said earlier...
> You said earlier that you felt embarrassed about ... why was that?

Facilitating the relationship with the participant

The importance of the researcher establishing an effective working relationship with the participant has already been stressed. The following are some of the ways in which the researcher can assist the relationship during the interview:

EXPRESSING INTEREST AND ATTENTION
This is achieved by maintaining eye contact with the interviewee, giving the odd smile and the occasional nod designed to express attention (not approval), and by asking follow-up questions which demonstrate that the researcher has heard what has been said and wants to know more. These are signals to the participant to continue giving full answers and that what they are saying is relevant and valuable.

ESTABLISHING THAT THERE ARE NO RIGHT
OR WRONG ANSWERS
It is sometimes useful to say this at the start of the interview, but it is important to convey it throughout the interview through a non-judgemental

manner. It also means not correcting mistakes or misunderstandings. A participant may be misinformed about their entitlement to a particular social security benefit, for example, or about the designated procedure for assessing a claimant's eligibility. Rather than correcting them and running the risk that they would feel foolish and clam up, the researcher's task is to find out how they formed this impression and what its consequences were.

BEING SENSITIVE TO TONE OF VOICE AND BODY LANGUAGE

People often convey their state of mind through their tone of voice, manner or body language. The researcher should be constantly receptive to these clues. So, for example, if the interviewee sounds doubtful about a view, this should act as a signal to the researcher to explore further. This might involve simply allowing them to continue talking, or asking whether they have other views or experiences, or saying 'you look (or sound) a little doubtful' and giving them an opportunity to reflect or clarify further.

Body language and speech patterns can be important clues that there is more depth to be found. They also add a context and flavour to the interview that a researcher may feel has enriched their understanding during the interview - for example, where a participant was particularly emphatic about a point, or seemed angry or frustrated. But this context will be lost if it is not verbalised and explained, and thus captured in the recording. The researcher needs to ensure the underlying feeling is made explicit, and then explained, for example by saying 'You sound very certain about that - what makes you so certain?', or 'You look a little uncomfortable as you're talking - why is that?' These emotional contexts can also be usefully recorded in fieldnotes (see Chapter 5) although this is no substitute for directly addressing it in the interview, since the researcher's interpretation of it may simply be wrong.

ALLOWING THE PARTICIPANT TIME TO REPLY

In an in-depth interview, people are asked to think and give views about issues that are not necessarily top of mind for them. They require time to think about a particular point and then formulate their response. It can be tempting for interviewers to fill these pauses with explanation or supplementary questions. However, moments of silence in in-depth interviews are usually very productive and it pays dividends for the research if the interviewer can hold the pause until the participant is ready to speak. Contemplative silences or those that indicate the participant is thinking should never be filled.

PACING THE INTERVIEW

It is important to ensure that sufficient time is allowed to cover all the topics on the topic guide. If it seems that extra time may be needed, this should be negotiated with the participant as early as possible.

Depending on the sampling and selection methods (see Chapter 4), the researcher may have fairly detailed information about the participant relating to the subject matter. This information may be of some use in preparing for the interview, although it is important not to over-plan since additional - or contradictory - information may emerge during the course of the interview. But it is usually more effective for the dynamic of the interview to approach the subject fresh with the participant, rather than to introduce information that has not come from the interview.

A different approach might be appropriate if someone has already taken part in a survey interview as part of the same research programme, which has generated detailed factual information. Here, it may be appropriate to refer to and check the information known, to avoid undue repetition. This would be less useful, however, in relation to information about attitudes or feelings collected by the survey where approaching these issues fresh in the in-depth interview would be more likely to unlock the detailed account required.

Turning assumptions and interventions into questions

The aim of an in-depth interview is to obtain as full and unbiased an account as possible of the participant's perspective on the research topic, and the researcher's task is to use every means at their disposal to aid this. Assumptions, comments or other interventions can inhibit the interview process, and such reactions should be turned into a question.

- *Never assume.* It is easy to assume an understanding of what someone means by the terms they use, but it is surprising how often the assumption turns out to be incorrect when the interviewee is given an opportunity to explain what they mean. Similarly, it is essential not to assume that the reason for a particular course of action or belief is clear, or that it can be implied from what has already been said. It is surprising how often what seems clear takes on a deeper and richer meaning - or sometimes an altogether different meaning - when the interviewee is asked for a little more explanation. A very useful rule of interviewing is to turn an assumption into a question.
- *Refrain from commenting on an answer.* While it may be thought to help in establishing rapport, commenting on an answer by saying for example 'that's interesting', can introduce an element of judgement into the interview and interrupt the flow, inhibiting active listening and probing.
- *Refrain from summarising the interviewee's answer.* Summarising what people have said is rarely helpful. It is difficult to capture the full meaning relayed by the participant in a short summary, and attempts to do so may seem glib or patronising to the participant. The likelihood is that the summary will be partial or inaccurate, which will not aid the interview.

Summarising also prevents the interview moving on, halting the flow when a better response would be a question which seeks more depth, such as asking the participant to explain further or to give an example. If it seems important for the researcher to check that they have understood a response, they should do so in the form of a question which makes it easy for the interviewee to provide further clarification:

> > Can I just check that I have got this right? Is what you are saying ...? Have I understood that right or have I missed something?

- *Refrain from finishing off an answer.* It is important to avoid 'putting words into the interviewee's mouth', however tempting it may be to finish off their answer. It is always better to allow them time to finish, asking a further question if this will help them to make their point, or gently pointing out that they have left a sentence unfinished. For example:

  - - I felt angry, you know, really -'
  - > You felt really -?

  - - There are lots of factors I take into account in deciding what sort of financial settlement might be appropriate: Each party's needs, their resources, the length of the marriage -'
  - > Are there any other factors?

- *Avoid extraneous remarks.* Extraneous remarks such as 'Right', 'okay', 'yes' or 'I see' can encourage the participant to close down, to see what they have already said as sufficient. They are sometimes used by nervous interviewers as a prelude to moving to a new question, where a follow-up question is actually what is required. For example, if a participant said: 'It isn't really up to me to decide where we go on holiday', a nervous interviewer might say: 'Oh right. So where did you last go on holiday?'A more relaxed researcher will find out who does take the decision, why this is, and how the participant feels about it. Prefacing questions with 'And' or 'So' is another habit of new and nervous interviewers, but it results in a tone which is less spontaneous and relaxed.

Neutrality and avoidance of self-disclosure

As noted earlier, a key area where different theoretical perspectives on interviewing are manifested is the issue of how far the researcher should enter into a two-way exchange with the participant, giving information or views as well as seeking them.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) stress that qualitative interviewers should aim to achieve empathy without becoming over-involved. They must learn to empathise with different points of view, and if this is unacceptable to them they may need to draw boundaries around the kind of research they undertake. Retaining an objective and neutral approach may be particularly

challenging if a researcher is personally drawn to or involved in their research subject. But considering how these challenges might arise and how they might be met is an essential part of their preparation for fieldwork. While complete objectivity and neutrality may ultimately be a chimera, it is important to be vigilant in striving for balance in interviews.

If the participant expresses a view with which the researcher strongly agrees or disagrees, their task is always to find out what underpins the participant's view rather than to express their own or to enter into debate. Even views or comments which are offensive to the researcher should be explored. This is undeniably difficult if the researcher feels that to let a view go unchallenged might be seen to imply collusion with it. However, a question such as 'How did you come to that view?' or 'Why do you see it that way?' is a useful vehicle for exploring unattractive views in a way that avoids collusion and challenges the assumption that the view is widely held or shared by the researcher. This is likely to be a more effective strategy than a direct challenge. Equally, it is important for the researcher to remain detached and calm where people use language or become emotional in ways which the researcher might find shocking or distressing.

People sometimes seek approval of their views, or of their actions, from researchers. Again, both favourable and adverse comments should be avoided. Neutrality is a more effective response, and more in keeping with the researcher's role as independent questioner rather than counsellor or adviser.

Since qualitative interviews are essentially aimed at encouraging participants to talk about their personal views and experiences, there is a debate in the research community about whether or not researchers should also disclose some details about themselves. Earlier writers on feminist approaches such as Graham (1984) and Oakley (1981) saw the interview as a reciprocal exchange in which the interviewer will show feelings because there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (Oakley, 1981: 49). Ann Oakley's research with women before and after they became mothers has been particularly influential. Her study involved four interviews with women before and after their child was born, and she was often present at the birth too. Perhaps understandably, given the intensity of the research and the experience it was exploring, she felt that the prevailing rhetoric of the researcher as a depersonalised extractor of data was wrong. She felt that not to answer women's questions, which often sought information about the medical or physiological aspects of childbirth but also asked about her, would be exploitative, and would inhibit rapport and be inconsistent with the way in which feminist researchers wanted to treat other women.

But answering questions and giving personal views or details is also problematic, and can inhibit the objective of obtaining a fulsome, open response which is as free as possible from the researcher's influence. For instance, a participant being interviewed about her use of childcare may ask whether the researcher has children. Indicating that she has may temporarily create a

reciprocity or intimacy, but can also begin to hinder the participant's account. The participant may give less detailed responses on the grounds that the researcher 'knows what it's like'. It may colour their perceptions of the researcher and cause them to censor their own views or comments (did the researcher make different choices about work and childcare; do they spend more time with their children; might they disapprove of the choices made by the interviewee). The interviewee may want to maintain the intimacy by staying on common ground, reluctant to raise experiences or views they think the researcher may not share. Equally, for the researcher to disclose that she does not have children may create distance between them, perhaps making the interviewee reluctant to talk about more difficult aspects of parenting.

Once one question has been answered, it is difficult to avoid answering further questions and the researcher loses time that could be spent more valuably hearing from the participant. Abetter response would be to say that the researcher wants to focus on the participant and their experience during the interview, but to offer to answer questions - and to ensure the participant has the opportunity to ask them - once the interview has ended. Maintaining a warm and interested, but neutral, presence is certainly a delicate balance, and one that becomes harder where research is more intense or, as Oakley says 'where there is least social distance between the interviewer and interviewee' (1981: 55).

Responding to different interviewing situations

The interviewing situation is to a certain extent always a venture into the unknown in that it is impossible to predict the precise course the interview will take. Situations arise in the course of an interview which may require special handling on the part of the researcher. In some cases, the situation can be anticipated in advance. In others, it may suddenly present itself without warning.

Conducting sensitive interviews

Sensitive interviews come in two forms. First, the nature of the topic itself may be intrinsically sensitive. Obvious examples are topics relating to issues like sex, financial problems, bereavement, relationship breakdown or serious illness, which deal with very private and emotionally charged issues. The researcher can anticipate this in advance and be mentally prepared in various ways:

- It is helpful for researchers to remind themselves that the participant has consented to be interviewed on the subject, and the researcher therefore has permission to address it - sensitively and appropriately - unless that consent is withdrawn or comes into question.

- Reassurance about confidentiality at the outset of the interview will help to put the participant at ease about disclosing potentially sensitive information.
- Any unease or embarrassment on the part of the researcher will communicate itself to the participant and may make them reticent about discussing the topic. Even questions that appear to be somewhat intrusive or sensitive should be asked in a matter-of-fact way Researchers will often be surprised at how willing people are to talk about sensitive subjects, and at how their own discomfort seems to be greater than that of the interviewee.
- It is helpful to acknowledge the sensitivity of the area and that the participant is being asked to bare their soul:

  > I know this may be difficult for you, but how did you feel when you found out that you wouldn't be able to have children?

- As noted in Chapter 3, it is helpful to have details of local or national support groups or sources of information relevant to the research subject for people who may be distressed about their experiences. But the researcher should not step outside their role and become a counsellor or adviser.

The second type of sensitive interview arises where a topic that appears fairly innocuous becomes highly sensitive because some aspect of the discussion triggers a strong emotional response in the interviewee - perhaps because it raises a particular incident in someone's past that the researcher could not have anticipated. These situations draw on more general strategies for dealing with strong emotions in interviews, which the next section addresses.

RESPONDING TO EMOTION

Where a strong emotional response, such as anger, distress or embarrassment, occurs in the interview situation, the first signs are often expressed through facial expression, tone of voice or body language. At this stage the researcher should register the fact mentally but not interrupt the interviewee if they continue talking.

If the participant becomes very distressed or upset it is important to acknowledge this and respond appropriately:

- It is important to be guided by the participant as to what they are and are not willing to address. People may want to continue to talk about subjects even though they find them distressing. However, if this is not clear, consent to continue the interview, and to continue to cover the issue that prompted distress, needs to be reaffirmed by asking whether the participant is happy to continue with that topic.
- Even if a participant becomes tearful, they may want to continue. The researcher should not make this decision for them, but should check

whether they would like to take a break, and if so switch off recording equipment. However, if a participant is so distressed that they are unable to indicate whether or not they want to continue, the researcher should stop recording and give the interviewee a chance to recover before asking whether they want to continue.

- The interviewee's distress should be acknowledged by the researcher's body language - maintaining eye contact and communicating an empathetic willingness to listen - or by comments such as 'It sounds as if that was a difficult time for you' which indicate empathy but an interest in hearing more. More direct comments of sympathy that convey the researcher's own emotional reaction or feelings should be avoided.
- Whatever the researcher's own reaction to the situation, they should not display their own emotions during the interview but deal with them later.

In some cases, people may display anger and hostility. Here it is important to remain calm and not take the anger personally to acknowledge that the interviewee has strong feelings about the topic and ask them to say more about it.

> It sounds as if that was something you felt very strongly about. Can you say a bit more about how it affected you?

It may be helpful to explain why the line of questioning is relevant to the research topic if this may not be clear to the interviewee. And, again, it may be necessary to reaffirm consent by checking whether the participant is willing to continue. The researcher should be prepared to move on to another topic, and should seek permission to return to it if necessary.

RESPONDING TO ANXIETY OR RETICENCE

Some people may seem particularly anxious about the interview, or reticent in their responses. If the researcher senses this before the interview begins, it is helpful to spend more time trying to put them at their ease by chatting generally before beginning the interview. Taking time over the introductory information about the nature and purpose of the study confidentiality, and how the study findings will also be used will be particularly important. It should be stressed that there are no right and wrong answers and that the researcher is interested in everyone's views.

Strategies for addressing reticence or anxiety during the course of the interview include:

- spending more time on the opening subjects to give the participant an opportunity to feel more at ease
- spending more time earlier on more factual, concrete and descriptive topics before moving on to their feelings and emotions. Intangible or conceptual questions should also be left until the participant seems more at ease

- using very open questions that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer to encourage the interviewee to talk
- speaking clearly and calmly ensuring that questions are clear and straightforward
- showing interest and attention and giving plenty of positive reinforcement by maintaining eye contact, nodding and smiling encouragement
- stressing that the researcher is interested in everything they have to say, even if it is something the interviewee has not thought about before
- acknowledging that other people have sometimes found it a difficult topic to talk about
- if necessary, stimulating ideas by referring to what other participants have said and asking for their view.

RESPONDING TO DOMINANCE OF THE INTERVIEW AGENDA

There is a delicate balance to be struck between allowing the participant to speak freely and raise issues of relevance to them, and ensuring that the key research issues are addressed. Getting this balance right becomes more difficult where a participant is particularly dominant. This may arise because they are in a position of authority and used to setting the agenda or see themselves as an expert in an area, or because for some other reason they find the interview situation difficult. Their behaviour may arise in a number of ways:

- Saying they have very little time: the time required for the interview should always be reaffirmed at the beginning of the interview. If this is very curtailed, the researcher will need to decide whether to focus on a few key topics only, or to try to rearrange the interview.
- Asking the researcher questions: questions about the conduct or purpose of the study should be answered by giving factual information but not entering into a discussion. But the researcher should be polite but firm about not answering questions about their own views, until the interview is over.
- Returning repeatedly to the same point: the importance of the point should be acknowledged, but the need to cover other subjects stressed.
- Answering the question of their choice rather than the one asked by the researcher: it is important to bring them back to the original question.
- Giving very brief answers or saying they have no view or relevant experience: this should not always be accepted at face value. The same question can be asked in different ways, or returned to later in the interview.

Again, it is helpful for researchers to remind themselves that the participant has agreed to be interviewed, and to persist with the interview.

RAMBLING RESPONSES

People sometimes ramble, become very repetitive, or get side-tracked by tangential issues when answering a question. The researcher's task is to try

and bring the participant back on track. Ways of doing this without causing offence are:

- at the first available opportunity to ask a question which re-routes them to a relevant point
- to use body language to indicate that the researcher wants to interrupt (leaning forward, beginning to voice a question, raising a hand slightly)
- to acknowledge that what they have said is important and has been noted - they may be returning repeatedly to a point because they feel it has been ignored
- if they continue to return to the same point, to move the interview on to a completely different part of the required subject matter, or to return to a relevant issue they raised earlier
- if necessary to withdraw signs of encouragement and approval - removing eye contact, looking down at the topic guide and other ploys designed to indicate less than rapt attention
- to ask more direct, structured questions which give less scope for long replies, at least until the participant seems more willing to remain on relevant topics
- if they are digressing and talking about other people, to bring the topic back to themselves: 'what about you?'
- mentioning that time is moving on and that there are a few other topics that need to be addressed. Rambling responses are sometimes an indication of tiredness or loss of concentration on the participant's part, and saying that only a little more of their time is required or that there is one remaining issue for discussion will often reinvigorate them.

Every interview situation is unique, and every interview a step into unknown territory. What is important is to be alert to changes in the dynamic of the interview and in the participant's demeanour, to ponder what might be bringing about this change, and to shape the response accordingly. Addressing a dominant or rambling participant needs to be done with grace and humour, avoiding confrontation. The researcher needs to show their respect for the participant, but at the same time to respect their own right to carry out the interview so long as the participant consents.

Practical considerations

Scheduling appointments

The length of interviews will vary between studies, and between participants. It should not be constrained by the researcher, but should reflect how long the interviewee wants or needs to spend in the interview. Generally, at least an hour is required, but it will be difficult for both researcher and

interviewee to concentrate if the interview lasts for more than two hours. In scheduling appointments, it is important to bear in mind the degree of mental concentration required to conduct qualitative interviews. It is important to allow time between interviews to assimilate what has been heard, to prepare for and travel to the next appointment, and to rest so the researcher feels calm and alert when he or she arrives. Allowance should be made in the work schedule for interviews starting late or over-running, and for participants asking questions or needing reassurance and an opportunity to come out of the research topic after the interview. In practice, this means it is rarely possible to carry out more than three interviews in a day - and even then only if long journeys are not involved.

It is not uncommon when interviewing professionals in particular to find that the agreed time is no longer available, and the researcher will need to decide whether to try to rearrange the appointment. As Chapter 5 noted, it is useful to consider which areas of the topic guide should be seen as key if time remains short.

Venues

The choice of venue for in-depth interviews is often left to the participant. It will usually be their home, or (if they are interviewed in their professional capacity) their workplace. But some participants may prefer to be interviewed away from their personal surroundings, and researchers need to be willing to find another venue if this is what the participant wants. The environment needs to be conducive to concentration: private, quiet and physically comfortable. Researchers therefore have to develop strategies for adapting the environment for this purpose. It may be necessary to ask whether there is a space where the interview can be carried out without disturbing other household members, to ask for a radio or television to be turned off, and to ask whether a chair can be rearranged to allow interviewee and researcher to face each other comfortably with recording equipment appropriately positioned. In professional interviews, it is helpful if telephones can be directed to another extension or to voicemail to avoid interruption.

Recording

It is highly desirable to audio-record the interview and for the researcher to take few if any notes during the interview. This allows the researcher to devote his or her full attention to listening to the interviewee and probing in-depth. It provides an accurate, verbatim record of the interview, capturing the language used by the participant including their hesitations and tone in far more detail than would ever be possible with note-taking. Audio-recording also becomes a more neutral and less intrusive way of recording the interview. Note-taking

can give participants unintended cues - that they should slow down or pause if the researcher is writing; that they have said enough if the researcher is not. It is rare for participants to refuse to be taped so long as the researcher provides a clear, logical explanation about its value, reassures about confidentiality and explains what happens to tapes and transcripts.

Being comfortable with the operation of recording equipment, checking it works before and immediately after the interview, and having spare tapes and batteries on hand is essential.

Other people attending the interview

There are times when it is helpful for two members of the research team to attend an interview, particularly at the beginning of fieldwork when it allows the interviewing strategies and the topic guide to be reviewed (see Chapter 5) or for training purposes. The reason should be explained and the participant's consent sought when the appointment is made, and the second person's presence explained again at the beginning of the interview. If the second person is a representative of the funding organisation, this should be made clear: confidentiality will need to be stressed. It is generally more effective for the interview to be conducted largely by one researcher only, with the second invited to ask further questions at specific points or at the end of the interview. It is difficult to develop a line of questioning and to probe in depth if the interviewing role is being shared, and dealing with two interviewers at once can become confusing for the participant. More than one additional person would be intrusive to the interviewing relationship.

Overall, being interviewed provides what is likely to be, for many people, an unusual experience in which someone else is dedicated to listening to them, encouraging them to reflect and speak freely, and reinforcing the value and worth of what they have to say. People seem generally to find some satisfaction in the experience - they are sometimes surprised at how much they had to say, and they are very receptive to the idea of being interviewed again where studies involve a longitudinal element. The end of the interview is not the time to ask for reflections or feedback on the process, unless this is specifically relevant to the interview (for example, if part of the purpose of the study was to explore how far a very sensitive issue can be pursued). This can otherwise feel to the interviewee like a request for reassurance for the researcher. But there is a dearth of research into what the experience of being interviewed is really like for participants, and this subject merits much more investigation.

Finally, a well-conducted interview will seem a very precious thing to the researcher. They will feel privileged to have been given access to the participant's social world, to their meanings and experiences. That richness will be a joy when they move on to analysis. But a poor interview, with issues only

half explored, will be a hindrance, and even the finest analysis will not be able to retrieve it.

KEY POINTS

- There are a number of different theoretical perspectives on in-depth interviewing, and different types of interview. But the features which are broadly consistent across research models are their flexible and interactive nature, their ability to achieve depth, the generative nature of the data and the fact that it is captured in its natural form.
- In-depth interviewing calls for a diverse and challenging range of qualities in researchers. A key skill is the ability to listen and to hear, but their role as facilitator is an active rather than a passive one.
- Achieving breadth and depth involves asking a combination of content mapping questions (to map territory and identify the component elements of dimensions) and content mining questions (to explore them in detail). Both types of question, especially the latter, require probing questions of which there are a range of types. Clear, non-leading questions are key. Dichotomous questions are of little value, but to suggest that only open questions have a role is to understate the specificity that good in-depth interviewing achieves.
- Assumptions, extraneous comments and a temptation to summarise should all be turned into questions. An empathetic but neutral stance is required, and sharing personal information during the interview can hinder the in-depth interview process.
- Any topic can raise sensitive issues or strong emotions. There are a range of strategies for dealing with these, but recognition and acknowledgement of the participant's reactions are key.

Probes are responsive questions asked to find out more about what has been raised. Their aim is always to obtain greater clarity, detail or depth of understanding - for example to elicit further description, an example, an explanation, and so on. Their key feature is that they relate directly to what has already been said by the interviewee, often referring to the exact phrase or term that they have used. Probes are a crucial element of any in-depth interview.

   Prompts are questions which come from the researcher rather than directly from what the interviewee has said. They are used where the researcher wants to ask the interviewee to reflect on something else - perhaps something raised in other interviews, or that the researcher thought might be relevant from their own reading or thinking.

Leading questions are those which could be perceived as indicating a preferred, expected or acceptable response, and should be avoided.

Open questions are questions which require more than a single word, or a handful of words to be answered. **Closed questions** are those which can be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

Reciprocity is the idea of researchers giving something back to those they interview by sharing their own views, experiences, or reflections on what has been said. It is a feature of some approaches to feminist research in particular, but carries some cautions with it.

Further reading

Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Lofland, J. and Lofland, L.H. (1995) *Analyzing Social Settings,* 3rd edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

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Spradley, J. (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview,* New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston

Thompson, P. (2000) *The Voice of the Past: Oral History,* 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press