# 2.13

# INTERVIEWING

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**Chapter summary**

- Interviewing is a good method for researching people's beliefs and religious experiences.
- Interviewing results in rich and complex data.
- Contemporary epistemological developments encourage a dynamic view of knowledge as created in the interview situation between the interviewer and the interviewee.
- Interviews have a scientific and ethical frame and must be distinguished from ordinary conversations.
- The interview process includes preparations, sampling procedures, recording, transcribing, coding, categorizing, analyzing and report writing.

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## Introduction

Interviewing is a way to create data by orally asking people questions. How this is done, however, can vary greatly. Some interviews are highly structured and resemble spoken questionnaires. Such interviews often aim at collecting data for quantitative research. Other interviews are largely unstructured, with the interviewee freely telling his or her story. Most interviews, though, are semi-structured: they start with specific themes and issues but remain open for new questions to come up. This chapter will primarily deal with the latter, as used in qualitative studies.

Within religious studies the qualitative interview is a very useful method, since people's beliefs are diverse and multifaceted, aspects that can be hard to catch in quantitative studies. Qualitative interviews result in rich, complex and nuanced data.

Interviews are often used in combination with other methods, especially in ethnographic field studies; this reflects so-called methodological triangulation. In my study of pilgrimages (Davidsson Bremborg 2010), I started with a questionnaire that was distributed to participants on ten pilgrimages. From the respondents I recruited interviewees who provided more complex insights into their thoughts and experiences, but also made me re-evaluate some of the results from the survey. Then, I made field observations on almost 30 pilgrimages. Though the field studies included many conversations with pilgrims, I did not use these conversations in the same way as the interviews. The conversations deepened my knowledge, thus informing

the overall analysis, but I did not refer to these pilgrims specifically or provide any quotations in books and articles. For this purpose, the structured form of an interview is preferable as it maximizes mutual ethical consent for the conversational frame.

## Epistemology

Qualitative interviews have similarities to the hermeneutical tradition within textual analysis. One of the main purposes of qualitative interviews is to understand and interpret people's thoughts, beliefs, ideas and conceptions. The method starts with people's experiences in the world and seeks to get to the bottom of them. The philosophical approach is phenomenological, which means that it is people's experiences of the world that are to be explained, not the world in itself. Interviews are also often carried out in order to explain statistical correlations and observed changes, differences or tendencies.

Though many would say that the interviewee is the main source of knowledge, there are different epistemological conceptions of how knowledge is actually collected—and created—in the interview situation and in subsequent interpretation. Kvale uses two metaphors to describe contradictory epistemological conceptions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 48–49). The first metaphor is the interviewer as a miner: knowledge is like a buried metal that needs to be detected and uncovered. Knowledge is something hidden within the **interviewee**, and the **interviewer** only has to put the right questions to get hold of it. The second metaphor is the interviewer as a traveler: the researcher travels to unknown places to collect stories from those who he or she meets. Knowledge consists in the stories collected and interpreted by the traveler. While the mining metaphor has a static view of knowledge, the travel metaphor acknowledges the production of new knowledge and the possibility that the traveler (researcher) might change during the journey. The two metaphors are epistemological ideal types. The mining metaphor has a positivistic epistemological viewpoint, seeing knowledge as given, waiting to be discovered. The travel metaphor offers a postmodern constructive epistemological understanding of knowledge as something being produced, interpreted and constructed.

The postmodern approach rejects any universal meta-story that could explain everything (Lyotard 1984); instead knowledge is viewed as constructed, achieving meaning through relations. On this view, knowledge emerges between the subject and the object, in relations between the interviewee and the interviewer, as well as between producers and readers of texts (reports). This more recent epistemological view has brought the interviewer as a person into focus. The interviewer's background, pre-understanding and personality are all seen as having significance for the result. In 1981 the feminist researcher Ann Oakley criticized the positivistic epistemology that lay behind attitudes towards interviews at that time and argued for an alternative view of the researcher. Her experiences as a female researcher interviewing women differed from how interviews were described in methodological literature. The women she interviewed asked *her* questions and were interested in her personally. She could not, as recommended, neglect to answer these questions. Instead she found that a more non-hierarchal and intimate relation between the interviewer and the interviewees contributed to richer material. The women were also active in contacting her for additional information and interviews. They were not just objects from whom she gathered material; together they were jointly *creating* material. Today, several of Oakley's ideas have been integrated into general qualitative interview methodology and research ethics. At the same time, a more integrated view of qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary and not contradictory has emerged (Oakley 1998), and different methods are often mixed in research designs (Morse and Niehaus 2009).

The main feature of qualitative interviews is the possibility of collecting nuanced and complex material. Meredith McGuire describes in her book, *Lived Religion* (2008), how she was confronted, early in her research, with the fact that people's religion was so much more complicated than she had thought. Interviews with people led to an insight in their religious lives that former studies of affiliation and organized religion had not shown. 'Realizing the complexities of individuals' religious practices, experiences, and expressions, however, has made me extremely doubtful that even mountains of quantitative sociological data (especially data from surveys and other relatively superficial modes of inquiring) can tell us much of any value about individuals' religions' (McGuire 2008: 5). The same result has come from other researchers using interviews (e.g. Ahlstrand and Gunner 2008; Rosen 2009), who have shown that statements about Northern Europe as the world's most secular place (e.g. Zuckerman 2008) are too narrow-minded and do not fully capture people's relations to religion.

## Different forms of interviews

Interviews can be made in different ways and with different purposes. One kind of interview is the expert interview, carried out with key persons in a given field. They are usually made early in the study process in order for the researcher to get general knowledge about that field. Experts have an overview over the field and can present an analytical insight. Key persons are persons in a leading position, in one way or another. When doing interviews, key persons may also have the role of gatekeeper, someone with the power to 'open the door'. A common example in religious studies is first to interview a leader in a given religious community, in order both to learn about the group and to get access to the group. If bypassing the leaders, the research study can easily be perceived beforehand as being critical in a negative sense, which can obstruct the study. This is especially relevant for religious groups, which often have an especially hierarchical structure.

Though key persons are important, they have a tendency to speak for other persons. However, letting key persons represent third persons is not optimal. If this kind of data is used, it is important to make clear distinctions between these interpretations and non-expert views. Key persons and other respondents must be kept apart, as the interviews usually have different purposes. Another trap is that the interview might end up as a 'lecture', far from the original questions, as key persons often want to tell the researcher 'how it is'. Sometimes it is better to see interviews with key persons as background information and not to include them in the analysis.

As stated already in the introduction, interviews can be more or less structured. This chapter refers mainly to semi-structured qualitative interviews. The semi-structured interview has a frame consisting of some main themes that should be touched upon, but new questions and themes can be brought up during the interview, both by the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview usually follows a thematic scheme, called an interview guide, with the main questions and some alternative follow-up questions blocked out ahead of time. Though this chapter mainly deals with semi-structured interviews, two other kinds of interviews will first be briefly mentioned, because they fall into qualitative research methods and could be useful alternatives depending on the research aim.

*Narrative or ethnographic interviews* are more or less unstructured interviews where the interviewee's story is in total focus. These are often used for life stories in which the interviewee talks about his or her life in chronological order, from childhood to the contemporary situation, though the story often jumps back and forth in time. During the interview, photographs

and other personal objects might be brought out and included in the story. In the unstructured interview, the interviewee steers the interview, while the interviewer's role is to create an inviting, open atmosphere and to only ask questions when needed to facilitate the story-telling (Atkinson 1998). Vähäkangas (2009) conducted life story interviews among childless couples in Tanzania. She describes how she could use just one starting question to receive most of the information; she just said: 'Would you tell me about your life?' In most cases the questions she wanted to hear about—those of marital life, questions of adoptions, life of a childless couple—were touched upon in the narrative the interviewee told; if not, she guided the interview into these questions during the story. An ethnographic study might even centre on one person's or a few people's life stories, such as McCarthy Brown's (2001) portrayal of Mama Lola, a Vodou priestess living in Brooklyn.

*Focus groups* are a kind of group interview with their own logic and epistemology (Fern 2001). A focus group usually consists of four to eight persons and a 'moderator'. In the group the moderator introduces a discussion topic, but then the group may talk more or less freely. Unlike the one-to-one interview, where the respondent directly answers a question, the participants in the focus group can be both stimulated and challenged by other people's stories. Focus groups can be a good alternative to one-to-one interviews, for example if the respondents lack experience in talking about the topic and would be helped by input from others, or if the topic is hard to talk about due to external circumstances. Furthermore, a focus group gives rich insight into how meaning is negotiated, how arguments are defended and re-evaluated, and into interpersonal relations. This was the reason for Rosen (2009) to choose focus groups when she wanted to study how Danish people understand the concept 'religion'. While field observations or one-to-one interviews were potential alternatives, she chose focus groups because she wanted to see how people construct and negotiate meanings and worldviews. In the focus group discussions, aspects of the concept 'religion' were more fully talked about than would have been the case in a single-person interview, as the participants had to refine their answers and re-evaluate them. The sample consisted of 12 focus groups, and in each the participants had a common social context, such as working place or affiliation with the same (non-religious) organization.

Another example where focus groups were used successfully is Gunilla Hallonsten's study among HIV positive Christians in Swaziland.[1] In this context HIV and AIDS are taboo topics connected with shame and exclusion from congregations. To get women talking about their experiences, Hallonsten used focus groups. In the groups, the women found confidence and safety, because they met other women with similar experiences of stigmatization. However, male participants in the study had to be interviewed one by one, as the patriarchal structures would not let the 'strong' men expose themselves in front of others.

## Sampling

When doing an interview study, two urgent questions arise: who and how many? There is an important epistemological difference between a quantitative and a qualitative study when it comes to sampling. For a quantitative study the question of representativeness is solved by having a statistically representative sampling. For a qualitative study the issue of sampling is related to the theoretical question: have I found all the empirical data that could be found in order to make my analysis and develop a theory? Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this as **theoretical sampling**. Unlike statistical sampling, it is not possible to know in advance how many persons you have to interview or where you could find them. The sampling strategy and the selection of each new respondent are based on the assumption that he or she can

contribute with relevant knowledge. When nothing new of significance emerges from the interviews, **theoretical saturation** of a category or group has been reached. To reach this goal, it is possible to start with a stratified sampling strategy, which is based on different variables that might have importance for the research questions: age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation or social position. The aim with the first stratified sampling is to get a wide and broad entrance into the material. After the first analysis, which should be done after a couple of interviews, new respondents can be chosen.

There are several ways to find respondents. You can make announcements, send requests to persons from a membership list or other kind of register, ask questionnaire respondents if they are willing to participate in an interview study, just ask individuals personally (e.g. when encountered in field studies), or ask those you have interviewed about other persons. The last alternative is called snowball sampling. All sampling methods have their advantages and disadvantages, and the main question is not who will be reached, but who will not be included. Are there opinions that have not been included? A continuous reflection about who will be interviewed next is of main importance.

With snowball sampling there is a risk of bias if the respondents only come from a group of friends, but if the group is small and hard to find, this might be the only way to find respondents. One way to reduce the risk of bias is to spread one's entrances into the group. Nordin (2004) used the snowball method in her study among Chilean migrants in Sweden in order to find interviewees. She started with one contact person in four different congregations. Each of them got a request to ask someone else if they might agree to an interview. After having got a positive answer, the contact person gave the name and phone number to Nordin. The same procedure was made with the next interviewee, who then asked the next respondent.

The sampling process might differ when doing qualitative research, but even here the goal is to arrive at theoretical saturation. The number of interviews needed for saturation is a constant question within qualitative research. Many studies show saturation between 12 and 30 interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) hold that most interview studies tend to have between five and 25 interviews, but they also conclude that, in general, it is better to have fewer but better prepared and more thoroughly analyzed interviews. To test the degree of saturation, Guest *et al.* (2006) made continuous saturation tests on their data, which finally consisted of 60 interviews. Already after six interviews general concepts and themes were distinguished, and by 12 interviews 92 per cent of the final analysis had been revealed. Their experiment suggests that if the group is rather homogenous, if the research question does not involve comparisons of several variables or sampling groups, and if the domain of inquiry is well defined, then 12 interviews are enough. Typically, large-scale projects make use of a much larger number of interviews; for example, Ammerman's (1997) study of 18 congregations was based on 317 interviews, field observations and a questionnaire. In my own study among funeral directors (Davidsson Bremborg 2002), I searched for younger and older persons, women and men, employers and employees, in the contexts of smaller and larger funeral homes, smaller and larger communities, regions with different religious traditions, and different areas of the country. Even though there were many variables included, it was obvious when saturation was reached. In total, 29 interviews were made.

## Interview guide

Before the interview is carried out, an interview guide should be developed. The interview guide consists of the main questions and themes that are to be included in the interview. It is

a template and an aid for the interviewer, though in semi-structured interviews new questions and themes can arise during the interview. The interview guide can be compared to a tree with many branches. The large limbs are the main questions. They force the interview into different directions that ought to be covered. The smaller twigs are different follow-up questions. They are used if needed or if relevant. Then there are new sprouts, new themes and ideas that just come up and might develop. You do not know when and how far they will grow, but they might change the interview. It is not easy to find the right questions, and often the questions have to be reformulated after having been tested on some respondents. Since semi-structured interviews tend to go their own way, with sidesteps and new questions, it is not possible to prepare all questions in advance. The only solution is to become a good interviewer, a role that needs practice and reflection.

There are different types of questions. First we have the introductory questions that aim to make the respondent comfortable with the situation and get him or her to begin talking. Therefore it is important that the first questions are easy to answer but also engaging. When it comes to questions within the field of religious studies, it is often rewarding to let the person start talking about his or her life and thoughts. Some interviewers choose to start the interview with some background questions, such as age and family situation. My personal experience is that this can lead to the conversation being perceived more as interrogation than interview; at the very least, it does not create a dynamic atmosphere. Usually background information comes up during the interview, and complementary questions can be asked afterwards. An alternative is a small questionnaire that the interviewee fills in directly after the interview. This procedure diminishes an emphasis on these 'hard' facts, and separates them from the recorded interview.

It is a good idea to know the main questions by heart but, during the interview, to occasionally consult the guide to verify that all questions have been covered. Usually not all questions need to be posed, since answers may already have been articulated. There is no simple formula for how questions should be asked. Some recommendations are:

- Ask one question at a time.
- Avoid questions that are easily answered with a yes or a no.
- Avoid words that are hard to understand/expert words/analytical words.
- Avoid long questions.
- Repeat the question in other words or in a new way if the interviewee does not seem to understand the question.
- Avoid normative, provocative or confrontational questions (if that is not the research aim).
- Do not be afraid of silence.
- Take your time and don't rush through the questions.
- Be polite, interested and attentive.

It is important that the interviewer is relaxed and actively listening. Silence can be an important tool in the interview. When the interviewer is comfortable with silence, the interviewee often continues and deepens the answer without having been interrupted by a new question.

Since the interviewee can explore the theme rather freely in the semi-structured interview, a common problem (usually not discovered until the analysis process starts) is to not get clear enough answers. The interviewer must be observant to follow up on what is said, for example with questions like: 'do you mean . . .?'; 'could you give an example . . .?' At the same time, ambivalence and indistinctness can be important information. For example,

people's religious beliefs and conceptions should not necessarily be expected to be clear and coherent.

Interviewing in a foreign language is demanding for the interviewer, but in order to achieve rich data it is best to make the interview in the language the interviewee prefers and to which he or she is accustomed. When Nordin (2004) made her interviews with the Chilean migrants, some preferred Spanish and others Swedish, but she found a mix of languages in each interview.

## Recording and transcription

The best way to document the interview is audio, or audiovisual, recording, which has become easy with new technology. Obtaining explicit permission for recording is standard practice in accordance with ethical guidelines. Even if you or the participants might feel awkward having a microphone or a video camera, recording the dialogue in the beginning, people tend to forget it after a while. Check the technology while recording (e.g. be sure there is sufficient tape or memory space, check batteries and have spares on hand, make sure the microphone is not blocked, etc.)! These may seem trivial points, but most researchers have returned home with a bad or partial recording or, in the worst case, with no recording at all. During the interview the environment has to be quite silent. Clattering coffee cups or traffic noise can easily drown the voices and make it difficult or impossible to afterwards hear what has been recorded. When interviewing in such environments, it is best to also take rich notes.

Directly after the interview you should write down some reflections about the interview: How did it go? Where did it take place? How did you feel during the interview? Did anything interrupt the interview? As soon as possible after the interview it should be transcribed. (Full transcriptions are common, but initial coding of the audio/video can highlight specific passages to be transcribed.) If only notes have been taken, a fuller transcription should be done immediately. Transcribing one hour of recorded interview takes between five and eight hours, and even longer if linguistic or conversation analysis requires that each pause and repetition be marked. The time needed depends on the quality of the recording as well as on how the respondent speaks. Spoken language differs largely from written language, which becomes obvious when transcribing. Even when you make strong efforts to transcribe as closely to the spoken language as possible, you will probably miss words or repetitions, but if you plan to work with an analysis based on the content, you could accept a 'good enough' version.

Some researchers send the transcription to the interviewees. This procedure might increase the reliability, as corrections could be made. Maybe some answers were misunderstood, or there is something the interviewee wants to add? Responses from the interviewees can differ largely. At the same time as I did my research on funeral directors (Davidsson Bremborg 2002), a colleague made interviews with persons involved in New Age activities (Löwendahl 2002). We followed this procedure with interviews, sending the transcriptions of each of some 30 interviews to the respondents. I received one response: a call from a funeral director who told me how much he had laughed while reading the interview, because he realized how different the spoken language is. However, he had nothing to comment upon regarding the content. My colleague, on the contrary, received from half of the interviewees shorter and longer complementary additions to the answers that had been given during the interview. She had to evaluate how to treat these additions, as they sometimes added new questions and themes. The differences between the two groups became clear in unexpected ways. From an

ethical perspective it is good practice to share the transcription with the interviewee (this underlines the value of obtaining full contact information for participants). When doing interviews in the field, this cannot always be done and is not expected by the respondents either.

## Analysis and report writing

When a couple of interviews have been transcribed, the first round of analysis should begin. The material will have to be analyzed several times, as new perspectives will probably arise until saturation is reached. Analysis could be done according to specific methods, such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which aims specifically at developing new theories abductively, or content analysis (Krippelberg 2004), which is a way to quantify a qualitative material. What will be described here is a bricolage approach of analyzing interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

The first step is to just read through the interview to get an overall impression. The next step is **coding**. Coding is the process by which the text (the transcribed interview) is classified into meaning units. Traditionally, this was made by cutting paper copies into separate pieces, and sorting them into envelopes or a card index. Using different color pens was also common and is still applied. Today, however, a variety of computer programs make it easy to code, recode and search. It is possible to apply some categories already from the beginning, but the point of the coding procedure is generally to develop new categories and subcategories. In grounded theory no predetermined categories should precede the coding process. A category ought to be on a more theoretical level, in contrast to the respondents' concrete answers and the codes. After the coding procedure, the codes need to be reconstructed by comparing the codes, finding higher-order categories, and searching for patterns and relations in a **categorizing** process. In this step the immediate text is set aside for a while and the essential question is the theoretical development.

In Table 2.13.1, there is a coding example from my own study of pilgrimages, an interview conducted in 2005, originally in Swedish, translated here by me.[2] First, the interviewee, a male participant, talks about pilgrimages as something in which not everyone takes part. His words 'there are certain kinds of people' are coded as 'exclusiveness'. (In Table 2.13.1, passages in italics refer to the related codes.) The first coding separates the meaning units 'searching' and 'wanting to have experiences', though in the text it is unclear if these words are two separate units or one, nor is it obvious if he means religious experiences or general experiences. A follow-up question could have clarified his meaning. On the other hand, an interruption from the interviewer could also have disturbed the flow in the interviewee's answer, because he continues with a deeper reflection. Assuming that he talks about two different aspects, we could create on overarching category: motives. He does not use this word, but that is what he talks about. During the pilgrimage he has also learned about another motive: remedy. This leads him to think of how some people, maybe more fragile, need special help from the leader. Here a new category is revealed, the role of the leader, who the interviewee believes should act professionally and responsibly. From the pilgrimage he brings with him new knowledge of people, another category. In this way a structure is built, and when all interviews have been coded, and new categories created, further analysis can be made on the basis of this. Finally, an overarching theory might be developed. Research questions emerging from this example might be: Who takes part in pilgrimages? What do the pilgrims want to achieve during the pilgrimage? What demands are there on the leaders?

*Table 2.13.1* Sample coding of an interview

| The interviewee | Categories | Codes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| There is one thing that surprised me with this group that I had not thought of. But I think *there are certain kinds of people* who go on pilgrimages. We want to go because we are *searching* and *wanting to experience something more.* But it is possible to believe, and I do, that there were several in the group who came because *they were unhappy.* That they were looking for *remedy* for something, an illness, an accident or something like that. And *I had not thought of that before.* But now I think that exists in this context. And then you need *professional leaders* on these hikes. It is a heavy *responsibility.* And *I do not think the persons who led this one managed that.* They did not have that competence. | Motives | Not for all/exclusiveness |
| | | Searchers (religious?) Experiences (experience tourism?) |
| | | Cure |
| | Own experiences/ knowledge | Knowledge of people |
| | Role of the leader | Professionalism (lack of) Responsibility (lack of) |

Coding text into pieces poses a risk of losing sight of the context and totality. It is important to go back to the original text once in a while, to see if later interpretations fit the original meaning. Quotations should always be checked. Another way to analyze interviews is to search for linear connections, for examples, stories over time or causal relations. The coding of meaning units can be combined with these analyses in order to produce a more contextual analysis.

After the analysis, a report has to be written, typically a thesis, a book or an article. There are two different modes to handle the interviews and the interviewees. One has a strong focus on the interviewees as persons. The interviewees are presented with some attributes and a code name. Then throughout the report their thoughts and ideas come forth, either in edited text with reference to the person, or with quotations from the interview. This way to present the material and the analyses was done in a study of Swedish female Muslim converts (Månsson 2002). The nine interviewed women are presented in a personal way in the beginning, and throughout the book the author returns to each of them at length (three to ten pages) while discussing different themes. In that way the reader can follow each case.

The other mode of presenting the analysis places greater emphasis on the theoretical content than on the individuals. General categories or research questions are in focus, and the interviewees receive at most a short, statistical presentation, for example range of age, gender distribution, religious affiliations. Quotations are used to show examples of different theoretical-driven themes, but there is no ambition to let the reader follow an interviewee's thoughts from one chapter to another. Quotations might have a reference to an interviewee number, but often references are excluded altogether. This is how Frey (1998) used her interviews in an ethnographic study among pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. Quotations from different people are interwoven in the text, some with short presentations like 'a German carpenter', 'a Swiss pilgrim', others with a name and a little longer presentation.

Regardless of presentation style, quotations must be carefully selected. They should be not too long nor too many, and they should be understandable. It is easy to 'fall in love' with your own interviews, but the report should be written with the eyes of the reader. A quotation

should clarify or deepen the text. No explanation should be needed in order to understand how the quotation relates to the analysis in the text. Neither should quotations stand alone, without any comment or analytical reference. The aim of quotations is not to verify the analysis but to exemplify the analysis.

Usually quotations need some kind of editing to increase readability, if it is not a linguistic analysis or conversation analysis. No major changes should be made, but a totally unedited quotation might portray the interviewee in a negative light and obstruct the aim of the quotation. To remove 'hm', 'well', and repetitions of words facilitates reading and does not change meaning. If the interview has been done in a language in which the interviewee is not fully fluent, special care must be taken with quotations. A poor understanding of language might obscure the intended meaning. Another problem might arise with interviews made in mixed languages: should certain parts then be translated or can you expect readers to know the language?

## Potential, limitations and ethical issues

Qualitative interviews within religious studies are useful for studying people's complex conceptions of religion and beliefs. They allow individuals to express their personal and intimate views and thoughts in substantial ways. The method allows us to have a dynamic and exploratory attitude, with new knowledge being brought into theory building. In contrast to standardized quantitative approach, new answers and new questions can arise.

The most common objection to qualitative interviews is the degree of generalization. While generalization in a statistical sense cannot be obtained, if theoretical saturation is achieved it is possible to infer that the results are valid for a group larger than the interviewees. This, however, does not mean that you can make a statistical analysis of the data. If it is a qualitative study and analysis (and not a content analysis), then statistics of different variables, such as 'one-third of the interviewees thought . . .' should be avoided. Similarly, if your research question starts with 'how many?' or 'how often?', then you should avoid qualitative methods of analysis.

Another objection is the risk of subjectivity with regard to both the interviews and the analysis. To be a good interviewer, training is needed. Novices need to practice, to listen to recorded interviews, and to reflect before going out in the field. An interview is not a common conversation! In order to strengthen the validity of the analysis, two researchers should ideally analyze the material, and any discrepancies should be discussed and lead to recoding and re-categorizing. Having two researchers independently code selected transcripts is also a useful check.

However, there are also limitations related to the content, what people are able or wanting to talk about. They might lie on purpose, but they might also have untrustworthy or incomplete memories or idiosyncratic perceptions. In my own studies I have, for example, found it hard to ask people about what they do. Actions can be difficult to describe, and people are not conscious about when they do things and how. To study these questions, field observations or time diaries (where actions are noted each time they are performed) could well be better methods. More pragmatically, interviews have limitations because they are time consuming, and because it is easy to end up with lots of data, which can be challenging to structure and analyze.

As the specific purpose of interviews is to come close to individuals, their thoughts and minds, several ethical issues arise. The main ethical issue comes before the interview starts: the respondent must be aware that the situation is an interview. An interview is not a common talk; it is a way of creating data for analysis. The interviewee has the right to get information about

the aim of the study, who is responsible, how the interview will be used, and when and where the result can be expected to appear. The respondent also has the right to withdraw from the study. To let the interviewee sign an informed consent, with all information, is the best way to clarify the ethical issues. The interviewer keeps one copy and the interviewee the other.

As a researcher it is important to be aware of the power that lies in both analysis and quotation. It is an important ethical rule to give the reader a fair view of the interviewee. One way to equalize the power relation is to communicate with respondents before publishing the results. At the same time, such a procedure raises questions about the integrity of the research–er's interpretations. What happens if the interviewees do not agree with the analysis? Should the researcher then revise and just be a spokesperson for the interviewees? Is it not his or her task to present the interviewees' statements in a new light through theoretical lenses? What kind of loyalty does the researcher have to the respondents?

Another ethical issue concerns confidentiality. Generally, anonymity should be aimed at in the report, which could be done by giving each person a code name or a number. However, if small, specific groups are researched, it might be difficult to guarantee full anonymity when referring to situations and statements. Descriptions of social contexts that are potentially important for the understanding of the analysis might potentially reveal certain individuals' identities. The researcher needs to take these ethical aspects into consideration when deciding what needs to be described, be it about persons or the environment.

Interviewees who represent an organization or movement might be presented by their real name, if they have been informed about and consented to this. A leader of the group might be so easily identified that it is not possible to make him or her anonymous. In such cases, openness about identities can be better for all concerned. In my study of pilgrim groups (Davidsson Bremborg 2010), the participants were anonymous, while the leaders were presented by their real names. The leaders usually held an official position as a minister or deacon, and could easily have been identified, for example with a brief search on the Internet.

## Notes

1 I am grateful to Hallonsten for her allowing me to cite this example from her research in progress.
2 This particular example is unpublished, though aspects of the same research project have been published (Davidsson Bremborg 2010).

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## Further reading

*The following titles provide good introductions to interviews and interviewing:*

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*Consult the following titles for introductions to focus group research:*

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## Key concepts

**Categorizing:** the process whereby the codes are formed into theoretical units, by comparing codes, and by finding higher-order themes, patterns and relations.

**Coding:** the process whereby the text is sorted into meaning units.
**Interviewee:** a person who is interviewed.
**Interviewer:** a person who conducts an interview.
**Theoretical sampling:** choosing new interviewees by looking for different cases compared with the ones that have already been studied.
**Theoretical saturation:** the moment in the sampling process when no significant new information comes from new cases.

# Related chapters

- Chapter 1.3 Epistemology
- Chapter 1.5 Research design
- Chapter 2.1 Content analysis
- Chapter 2.2 Conversation analysis
- Chapter 2.8 Field research: Participant observation
- Chapter 2.10 Grounded theory
- Chapter 2.11 Hermeneutics
- Chapter 2.15 Phenomenology
- Chapter 2.19 Structured observation
- Chapter 2.20 Surveys and questionnaires
- Chapter 3.1 Auditory materials