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Chapter 8

Interviews

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Introduction

Interviews, in one form or another, have long been used by researchers interested in understanding particular issues in their own society or the history, character and context of other cultures and other societies. For instance, they were used in nineteenth-century studies of poverty in English industrial cities, and were also often used by Western anthropologists as they sought to understand the social organisation and characteristics of 'primitive' or non-Western cultures. Throughout the twentieth century, researchers developed the use of interviews to investigate many different social issues, including in the fields of education, care and health. In the second half of the twentieth century, as research methods across the social sciences began to move away from the dominance of 'measuring' social phenomena using quantitative methods, so the use of interviews moved towards more informal approaches in qualitative research to investigate participant experiences, perceptions, identities and beliefs.

Social science researchers who are seeking to understand the lives and perceptions of others often opt to use interviews as at least one of their chosen methods for investigation. Yet the interview is not a simple 'tool' that can be selected unproblematically from a methodological 'toolkit'. It involves a relationship between two or more people, and however brief that relationship may be, its nature and quality will deeply influence what can be found out through the interview process. In this chapter, I encourage readers to reflect critically upon how interviews are always social events, where an interviewer and interviewee(s) meet to exchange information face-to-face, by telephone or in a virtual environment. Although in most interviews, the interviewer usually asks most of the questions and the interviewee responds to them, both participants express their opinions and views through what they say and the ways they say it. I review some of the many different forms that interviews can take, including structured, semi-structured and unstructured, and consider social relationships during the interview process, the different kinds of data that interviews can generate and how these might be interpreted. Although the chapter focuses on interviewing young people and children, thought will also be given to interviewing adults.

What are interviews?

The Latin prefix *inter* (meaning *between* or *among*) suggests an exchange of *view*, that is, far from being a process where 'you ask, they answer, and then you know' (Hollway, 2005: 312), research interviews are a particular kind of social interaction where data are constructed in the process of exchanging questions and answers: 'a place where views may clash, deceive, seduce, enchant.' (Schostak, 2006: 1).

Conducting interviews is sometimes referred to as collecting stories about people's lives in order to 'know' (Seidman, 2006).

When people tell such stories, they select information from a stream of consciousness, drawing on their memories of experiences and making meaning of them through the process of telling. Stories that have been told and re-told over time have been one of the main ways throughout history that humans have recorded and made sense of their social and cultural lives. The stories we tell are always shaped in some way by our sense of the story audience, and in this respect, researchers who are planning to embark on interviewing need to consider not only what questions they are going to ask in order to find answers to their research questions (or raise new questions), but also how, where and when they are going to ask these questions. As much attention should be paid to the *process* of interviewing as to the *product*. It is fundamentally important never to lose sight of the social nature of the interview where the 'view' of the interviewee is explored through the 'view' of the interviewer, as expressed through the questions asked. Regardless of whether an interview is structured by the researcher or led by the study participants, the research agenda will always in some way shape the interview responses that are generated.

Why are interviews used as a method for collecting data?

Different researchers use interviews for different purposes, depending on the research questions they are seeking to answer, and the research approach they have chosen to adopt. However, regardless of the methodological framing, interviews can:

1. generate insights into participants' lives which would otherwise remain hidden to the researcher
2. give access to individuals' understanding of the contexts they are in, to their opinions, aspirations, attitudes and feelings
3. generate complex insights into others' perceptions of social phenomena and why they make certain choices and act in the ways they do.

To illustrate this latter point, I give a brief example from research conducted by Johanna Einarsdottir (2005) in an Icelandic preschool. In this participatory study with preschool children and teachers, Einarsdottir encouraged the children to be actively involved in data gathering by drawing and taking photographs using both digital and disposable cameras. However, when it came to interpreting the visual data with the participants, not only did the teachers' voices predominate in the analysis but they drew largely on their professional expertise, rather than on what they had learnt through the process of research. To overcome this bias, Einarsdottir designed group interviews for the child research participants to talk about their drawings and photographs, and in this way, 'the children's reality came into view as they explained things concerning the pictures that were not evident without their elucidations' (2005, p538). Although one could argue that what the children said was inevitably co-constructed with the interviewers during the process of informal interview, the results surprised both the researcher and teachers as they learnt how important outdoor play areas were to the children, along with 'private spaces' and their friendships. Without adapting the methods to include the child interviews, the children's views would not have been heard, and without the children’s explanations the study findings would have been very different.

Qualitative research such as this uses interpretive methods of data analysis, that is, the researcher is tasked with accurately recording what is said and then interpreting meanings for the purposes of answering specific research questions. There is therefore a risk that during the process of interpretation the researcher’s own values, life experiences and understandings (sometimes referred to as the researcher’s ‘subjectivity’) will shape the research account. If researchers are reliant on observational data alone, then they may unwittingly draw on their own subjective viewpoints to explain participants’ behaviours, and run the risk of falsely attributing intentions and motives. Furthermore, interviews give participants the chance to reflect on their actions and perspectives, which can open up ways of seeing, thinking and acting that are almost always more complicated and often very different from what might be assumed.

Interviews can also prompt participants to consider details which would otherwise be inaccessible, for instance, through snippets of life histories, personal anecdotes and social events that have occurred in times and places that the researcher cannot personally experience or visit, and can only learn about through the process of interviewing. Interviews are equally useful for increasing researchers’ understanding of documentation by exploring, for example, why national and local guidelines and policies in the areas of health, education and social care have evolved in particular ways and how they are put into practice by different people in different institutional settings.

Some researchers use interviews as the primary means of collecting data and focus on participants' subjective stories or narrated realities. Rather than seeking to verify if these correspond to others' perceptions of the same or similar events, these accounts are valued as individuals' life histories. However, there are critically important methodological issues to bear in mind about the extent to which any interview responses are true representations of interviewees' views or are influenced by the interview process and are co-constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee(s). Depending on the nature and aims of a study, it may be advisable to build complementary methods into the research design that run alongside interview data, to check the validity of what is reported.

Structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews

Interviews can take many different forms, depending on the research aims, scope and design, and are often categorised as structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Decisions about which kind(s) of interview to use are dependent primarily on which approaches are most likely to provide answers to the research questions that are being asked, but also depend on what is practicable and achievable in the allotted timescale, on the financial (if applicable) and human resources available to carry out a study, and last but certainly not least, on the participant cohort. The key point to bear in mind is that depending on the approach used, the researcher(s) will end up with a different data set. Whether you are conducting research or reading research reports, you should reflect critically on how the research approach and methods have shaped the data and the subsequent analysis and conclusions.

Structured interviews

Structured interviews sometimes resemble the format of a questionnaire, particularly in studies where geographic distance is an issue, and in large-scale studies dealing with big samples or populations. In these cases, the only feasible way to conduct interviews across the cohort might be by telephone, by post or in a virtual space, with several interviewers working from a pre-agreed and tightly adhered to schedule of questions. The questions asked usually offer a range of possible responses to choose from presented in an easily measurable way. Such highly structured interviews may have the advantage of allowing what can be extensive data to be gathered comparatively consistently from large groups of respondents, yet they are limited in how much they can tell us about the subtlety of respondents' individual viewpoints. They may require respondents to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with a supplied statement, for example on a 5-point scale from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. Respondents' answers can be influenced by many different factors, such as the length of time they have to answer; how relevant they find the questions; the feeling that they should express a view even if they don't have one; a desire to appear well-balanced leading to choice of 'middle-of-the-road' options. These factors can be countered to some extent: by only offering an even number of options, so there is no clear 'middle view'; by including open-ended questions that allow respondents to give more in-depth views; and by allowing time for respondents to reflect before giving their views. However, it is unlikely that a trusting and empathetic relationship can be built between interviewee and interviewer, and that in itself will shape the responses that interviewees feel comfortable expressing. Furthermore, however closely structured an interview might be, each interviewee has to interpret the questions asked (and the available answers), and may do so in unexpected ways.

Semi-structured interviews

For smaller research cohorts, semi-structured interviews offer a more flexible approach, where the interviewer starts with a set of questions which provide a 'backbone' for the interview, but may use this flexibly, adding in new questions where appropriate. The interviewer is therefore free to formulate new questions spontaneously in response to the answers given. This interplay more closely resembles the flow and turn taking of everyday exchanges, and thus, despite the interviewer having a pre-set list of questions to which they refer, it can help both interviewee and interviewer to relax and result in more personalised responses, opening up areas of enquiry that emerge from participants' rather than from the researcher's preconceptions.

This approach is often used in qualitative research, for example as part of a broader ethnographic study, where time is spent observing community activity with the aim of gaining understanding 'from the inside'. In this case, the planned interview questions are usually generated through a combination of the research aims and the observations made. Semi-structured interviews are often conducted in the interviewee 'space', or study site, so the interview is likely to unfold within the usual communicative norms and conventions of that site (Briggs, 1986).

Unstructured Interviews

Alternatively, interviews might be 'unstructured' or take the form of more naturally occurring talk, where a researcher who is also a participant in an activity spontaneously joins in a discussion amongst research participants, and later notes down what was said. There is a fuzzy boundary between unstructured interviews that occur naturally in the field, and the process of collecting data as a participant observer (see Chapter 7). During such exchanges, it is important to remain critically aware of the influence of the researcher's motivations on the direction of subsequent discussion, and to bear this in mind when interpreting research findings – whether your own or someone else's. Although an interview may be called 'unstructured', if an interviewer is present, then what the interviewee says is always co-constructed with the interviewer, depending on how questions are asked, and how the respondent has answered previous questions. Unstructured interviews can lead to original and rich insights, but the resultant data will require considerable analytic and interpretive work, rendering this approach impracticable for larger participant cohorts. When researching with young children, who are unlikely to be familiar or at ease with interview procedures, some researchers describe the process as a 'conversation' (Gollop, 2000). However, 'conversation' is potentially misleading, as research 'conversations' are inevitably driven by a research agenda and bear little resemblance to the kind of undirected chatter that occurs spontaneously as part of everyday social life.

Mixed method approach

Rather than opting for just one of the above approaches, some studies use structured interviews and primarily quantitative methods of data analysis to collect responses from large participant populations, and then complement these with qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with smaller sub-samples of the same participant cohort. This mixed method approach was used in a large-scale study of student and teacher perceptions of English teaching practices in Bangladesh (*English in Action*, 2011). The project, spearheaded by a team of researchers at the Open

University, used questionnaires and interviews to achieve both a broad-based and rich picture of participant perceptions. The initial structured interviews enabled fieldwork to take place in a comparatively large sample across six divisions in Bangladesh, with 1,693 secondary students completing a highly structured questionnaire, and 288 subsequently taking part in semi-structured group interviews. The data collected thus afforded both broad and deep understandings of young people's experiences and perceptions of the teaching of English in Bangladesh, such as the negative impact of noise and disturbance on their learning in large classes, and the positive impact of feeling supported by their teachers. A mixed methods approach was also used by the large scale longitudinal qualitative study *Inventing Adulthoods*. This ongoing project follows the lives of young people from five socially and economically contrasting areas of England and Northern Ireland as they develop throughout their teens, twenties and early thirties at the turn of the 21st century. The study began in 1996 and is based primarily on in-depth repeat interviews with over 100 participants, but has also involved extensive use of questionnaires and focus groups (see Chapter 13 for detailed discussion of this study).

How many people should be interviewed?

So far, I have discussed different possible approaches to conducting interviews with children, young people and adults, depending on the research aims, participants and settings. A further consideration is whether to conducting one-to-one interviews, group interviews or focus groups, and the gains and losses of each of these strategies. The size of an interview group can have an effect on what participants feel free to say or to remain silent about. Interviewees may fear they are being judged in some way by their colleagues if interviewed in a group, or that there are 'right' and 'wrong' answers to the questions they are being asked. Whether you are conducting research or reading research reports, you should bear in mind that interview data depends upon how researchers manage the interview process and the relationship between themselves and the participants, and also between the participants in group interviews.

One-to-one or group interviews?

One-to-one interviews may work well with some research participants, particularly those who wish to maintain confidentiality, but for others, this may seem such a strange and intimidating procedure they are unable to relax or articulate their views. When working with children and young people, some researchers opt to conduct group interviews, as we saw in Einarsdottir's research (2005). The talk between youngsters, or indeed between adults, in a group can be richer and more relaxed than in a potentially more intimidating one-to-one situation. Many children and young people are unlikely to be familiar with or at ease with a standard interview procedure. Their views and knowledge may be implicit, that is, they may be unaware of what they know, and less familiar with the processes of critical reflection that are involved in giving their views and opinions, so informal and indirect methods are often considered preferable (see Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Focus Groups

A focus group involves facilitating discussion of a topic among a relatively large group of participants (perhaps between 10 and 12). Rather than asking direct questions of individuals, the researcher acts as a 'moderator' or 'facilitator' to keep the group talk going and broadly 'on topic'. This can be an effective way of stimulating debate amongst participants to scope out an area of enquiry and to learn about participant experiences and perceptions (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). For example, Souza, Downey and Byrne (2012) used activities and focus groups as a way of gathering 11-year-old pupils' views on the implementation of new curricula. Rather than relying on talk alone, they designed a set of activities based on creative methods and imaginative processes to help the pupils describe and give meaning to their experiences, including making a pie. The resultant talk afforded rich insights into the impact of a new curriculum on pupils' attitudes, motivation and feelings concerning their educational progress.

The data gathered in interviews is highly dependent upon the degree of mutual trust that can be established between the interviewer and interviewee(s), on the assurances that the researcher has given and on the consent obtained (see Chapter 5). Interviewees of any age may be very selective in what they want the researcher to know about, and exercise their right to remain silent and/or selective about the information they divulge.

Power in interviews

Whatever format is chosen for interviews, they are also infused with complex relations of power: who chooses what (and what not) to discuss, who asks what questions, when, and how, who is allotted the status to answer and who is not, who determines when to end a line of questioning, and so on (Talmy, 2011) – and power can shift between interviewer and interviewee, depending on the particular circumstances of each interview. Power is also enacted beyond the immediate context of the interview, for example, in the researcher's selection of particular extracts that are written up and included in research reports, where it is lifted from its original context and could be misrepresented by a researcher and/or misinterpreted by readers. As Briggs (2007, p. 562) notes:

> power lies not just in controlling how discourse unfolds in the context of its production but [in] gaining control over its recontextualization—shaping how it draws on other discourses and contexts and when, where, how, and by whom it will be subsequently used.

Furthermore, an interviewee's previous life experiences of power relations in interviews may also influence how they respond in the context of a research interview. For example, an adult may wittingly or unwittingly associate the process of being interviewed with a potentially life-changing outcome, such as a job interview, a medical consultation or being questioned by police. Or power could swing the other way: if researching their place of work, interviewers might avoid asking questions which risk suggesting they are critical of the workplace or that they lack respect for those above them in the hierarchy. Similarly, respondents in this circumstance might consider it ill-advised to give full and frank answers to all the questions they are asked.

Beyond these issues of power are concerns about exploiting research participants for one's own scholastic gain. Although research may be conducted in the interests of improving conditions for participants and wider populations, there is almost always an aspect of personal gain which researchers should endeavour to balance out with benefit for participants, for example, by giving participants the chance to reflect on and talk about their experiences, to identify the need for and to bring about change in their practices, environment or understanding as a result of the research process.

Participatory approaches to interviewing

Researchers sometimes attempt to diffuse some of the potential tensions discussed above by engaging participants in some form of activity during interviews (Parkinson, 2001; Cappello, 2005) such as using props, paper and pen(cils), sand, clay, pictures, photographs, dolls and puppets when interviewing children (Brooker, 2001). In their interviews with twin children about their friendships in preschool education, Danby et al (2011) used a sticker task where young participants were asked to create a pictorial representation of their friendships and relationships with their twin siblings. These tasks enabled the children to express their views in non-linguistic modes, which then provided a focus for discussion and led to the children talking about unexpected details in their friendships.

Having something to share which is of interest to the interviewer and interviewee(s) can also create reciprocity and a bond of communication which encourages common engagement. In their investigation of older children with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI), Boylan, Linden and Alderdice (2009) overcame the participants' attention difficulties by encouraging them to draw pictures of whatever they chose during the interview. They found that the act of being physically engaged in an activity led the children to speak more freely, and using photographs as a basis for talk helped children with ABI who found verbal comprehension difficult.

Photographs can elicit a high level of interest during interview, particularly if they feature and/or are taken by the participants, and can enable researchers to ground an interview in participants' own experience. To explore the lives of child Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, Samuels (2004) compared data collected from word-only interviews with data collected using photographs taken by the participants as a basis for photo-elicited interviews. Samuels found that not only did the latter method evoke greater descriptions from the research participants, but those descriptions were more emotionally charged than word-only descriptions. He also found that this approach was an effective means of bridging the culturally distinct worlds of the researcher and the researched, and enabled the research to step outside the narrow frame of his own thinking.

In a recent study with much younger participants using drama to enhance their story-telling in East London early years settings, my colleagues and I used a freely downloadable picture-based story-telling App called ‘Our Story’, developed by researchers at the Open University (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z76jcP-np60). Using this picture-based App encouraged the young children to talk about their experiences of telling and acting out their own stories.

An innovatory approach to participatory methods which push the boundaries of what constitutes an interview was used by Clarke, Boorman and Nind (2011) in their study of teenage girls who had been excluded from mainstream provision. Clarke and colleagues argue that sometimes ‘voices are missing because people have been silenced’ (p769), and after years of negative school experiences, the girls needed to be convinced that their voice was ‘worth listening to and, moreover, that people will hear their voice and that it will make a difference’ (Lewis and Porter 2007, p. 226). Rather than relying on conventional interview approaches, the researchers sought to value the communication styles preferred by the girls, and to enable the girls' excluded voices to be heard in an education system where their identity was constructed as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. A particularly effective approach was a video diary, where a camera was placed in a quiet room at school. This was soon named the Diary Room, reflecting the girls' interest in the UK television series Celebrity Big Brother. Rather than talking to an interviewer, the girls talked to the inanimate camera, but in the full knowledge that the researchers would watch and listen to what they had said. This approach drew on the girls' strengths and interests, and led to very deep insights into their perspectives which might not have been shared during a more standard interview procedure. Furthermore, the researchers found working positively with the girls an empowering personal, educational and political process for the participants and for themselves.

Depending on the research participants, participatory methods may or may not work well. Some children and young people may find certain approaches patronising or strange, whilst others might respond positively to them. Researchers have to be sensitive, responsive and creative in their approach, and readers of research have to adopt a critical stance towards how the methods used have shaped the data collected.

Reflecting critically on what questions to ask and how to ask them

How can researchers devise 'good' questions that will get to the heart of the topics they are exploring and which will lead to innovative and well grounded conclusions? Particularly when conducting exploratory research, it is difficult to plan for an unknown outcome. Dewey (1938: 105) referred to indeterminate situations as ‘disturbed, troublesome, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies [and] obscure’. So, if you find planning or evaluating interview questions problematic, then you can be comforted by the fact that you are not alone! Ultimately, ‘good’ questions are ones which lead to the kind of data needed to inform the overarching research question(s). Some questions may turn out to be redundant or to diverge from the main research focus, yet they may unexpectedly unearth rich and relevant findings.

What must always be borne in mind is that participant responses are shaped as much by the way questions are asked as by what respondents feel or believe. Linguistic analyses of interview data have shown the extent to which respondents display conscious awareness of the interviewer’s perspective and interests, and hedge their responses accordingly, often hesitating to assess the interviewer’s likely response before speaking, and mimicking the phraseology used by the interviewer (Talmy, 2011). This applies to interviewees of any age, but may be more marked with youngsters who may feel they are expected to give an answer whether they have one or not. They may also blur the role of the interviewer with the authoritative role of a teacher, and this can result in them trying to give ‘right’ answers, rather than answers which truly reflect their standpoints. It is therefore essential when interviewing to build a rapport with research participants, to earn and to merit their trust so they feel confident to voice personal responses. This means balancing the human concern of putting respondents at their ease with the precision needed to probe for information, and listening actively and responsively to what is said.

There are also different types of questions to consider. Interviews often move from the factual (name, age etc) and the everyday (e.g. questions about Who, When, Where and How much/often) to the more abstract and reflective (e.g. questions about How, Why, What is your view of …?). Many interviews begin with questions that are comparatively easy to answer, and gradually lead into more demanding questions which require reflection. However, asking even comparatively straightforward 'Who/When/Where/How much…?' questions can elicit rich descriptions from participants and may raise issues that can be returned to at a later stage. In this way, data gained through interviews can shape the future development of data collection. It is essential to remember that participants may not always be able or willing to provide answers to research questions, however straightforward the questions may seem to be, and their right not to respond must always be respected sensitively.

The art of interviewing

Once all the planning and preparation have been completed, the actual task of conducting interviews can seem daunting, coloured perhaps by a lurking fear that you may not gather the insights you hope to prompt. Interviews, like all social situations, require practice and interviewers need to have a clear understanding of:

- What the research aims are
- When to speak
- When to be silent
- When to prompt
- When to be passive

- When to offer or refrain from comment

Some researchers conduct 'pilot interviews' to test out questions, and this process can help novice researchers get a feel for the interview process. The initial moments of an interview can be crucial, as each meeting of two people is unique, so thought should be given to opening statements and how to put respondents at ease. Particularly when working with children, making one or two visits prior to the interview maximizes opportunities to enter into the children's "cultures of communication" (Christensen, 2004) and can help to develop a rapport with children, parents, and staff.

Interviewers should think about their own communication style, for example, by curbing any tendencies to interrupt people or to 'think out loud'. It can help to write brief notes during an interview, even if it is being recorded, as interviewees may feel less intimidated if they are not being stared at. This can also help the interviewer, for example, if an interviewee expresses a point of view with which they do not agree - even if researchers remain silent, flickers of their opinions can often be read in their faces, and any such interpretation by interviewees would shape their subsequent responses. I personally have worn many a pencil down to its stub by pressing hard on paper as I make notes about viewpoints which I find difficult to comprehend in the moment they are uttered. We are all human, after all.

Most respondents, whether adult or children, need time to reflect on their ideas before speaking, so silences are often a feature of interviews. There are different kinds of silences: silence to think; silence to refuse to answer; silence that reflects the fact that an interview is not going well. Interviewers also need to pay close attention to participants' body language to gauge when it might be appropriate to prompt or not (see Chapter 4 for discussion of this). Respondents are far more likely to feel at ease if an interviewer is patient, calm, attentive and responsive.

Choosing who to interview

Identifying a set of people to interview can be one of the most challenging aspects of conducting research as participants must be carefully selected to ensure the study aims can be achieved. A range of respondents may be needed to get a sense of different perspectives and experiences, but finding participants can be problematic. Whether you are planning or evaluating research, it vital to reflect critically on the participant cohort, and why certain participants may have been chosen. Some researchers select sites where they already know people, such as their place of work, or a place where they socialise. Whilst this arrangement may be practically convenient, serious thought should be given to the role of a researcher in a familiar setting – how will the previous relationships with familiar participants shape the outcomes of the interviews? Will participants feel comfortable about giving their honest opinions? Might they temper what they say because they know the interviewer? On the other hand, for novice and even experienced researchers, contacting unfamiliar people can require overcoming shyness and a sense of social awkwardness – being an interviewer is an unusual thing to find yourself doing if you are not familiar with the process. Yet overcoming these potential obstacles and successfully completing an interview can be a very satisfying experience.

Participants of any age, whether known personally to the researcher or not, all need reassurance that the information they give will be treated as confidential, and issues of confidentiality should be clarified at the outset of the research process when participant consent is first sought, along with clarifying participants' rights to withdraw from an interview at any time (see Chapter 5).

Recording interviews

I have already discussed the importance of considering the location of where interviews are held, and the advantages of choosing a site where respondents feel at ease. The site of the interviews in turn may dictate how the interviews are recorded. For example, sound recordings can be problematic in a noisy environment, and in this case taking detailed notes may be the best option. However, note taking inevitably means that the interviewer can only write down a selection or summary of what is said, and responses gathered in this way are more likely to be skewed by the interviewer's perspective. Audio recordings are often preferable, particularly given the compact size and discrete appearance of recording devices, along with the affordability of directional microphones. In some instances, video recordings may be preferable, such as when using artefacts or creative activities as a basis for interviews, or when interviewing participants who may express their views through body movements and facial expressions.

Whatever method is used for recording an interview, the data will need to be transcribed and checked, and this is an extremely time consuming process. One hour of audio recorded data can take 4 hours or more to transcribe, and video data can easily take twice or three times as long. The length of time transcription takes is of course dependent upon the transcription techniques and conventions that are used. Whilst there is not space in this chapter to discuss transcription styles in detail, it is important to choose a transcription method that will accurately represent the data in a form that is most useful to answer the research questions (also see Flewitt, 2006; Plowman and Stephen, 2008). This should also be borne in mind when reading research reports. It may sometimes be appropriate to return interview transcripts to respondents, so they can check there have been no misunderstandings. This process takes time and needs to be built into the overall research timetable.

How many interviews are enough?

This is a particular issue for qualitative researchers where the boundaries of a study may be more flexible than in quantitative research. The answer of course depends on the overall aims and approach of a study, along with practical considerations such as time and money (if the research is funded). If the intention is to conduct a small number of case studies, then 'enough' would be when the information sought has been obtained. If the intention is to contribute to or build on theory, then 'enough' would be when a point of 'saturation' is reached, that is, when new data are only adding in a minor way to the patterns that have already been identified. 'Enough' could be when sufficient data has been gathered to provide a strong and tightly woven evidence base for the research findings. Analysing interviews soon after they are conducted can therefore help researchers to recognise when to stop.

A further consideration is how many times to meet with each interviewee. If interviewers adopt a 'one shot' approach to interviewing a participant who they have not met before, then they are skating on very thin contextual ice (see Locke, Silverman and Spirduso, 2004: 209-226). In my research, I have found that for in-depth studies, three interviews with each participant or group of participants can work well, although this is not always possible. For example, the first interview can be used to establish the interviewee's 'context' by asking them to talk about themselves, focussing on whatever information is needed for the study; the second can follow up on this, and include points that have arisen during observation or as a result of analysing the first interview. During a third interview participants can be encouraged to reflect on what their experiences mean to them. This final interview can also be used for the interviewer and interviewee to discuss their different perspectives, if appropriate. Longer term studies are rare, but as with *Inventing Adulthoods*, data collected from interviews over extended periods of time often reap richly rewarding findings.

One final consideration is how long interviews should take. This is rather like asking how long a piece of string is, yet there are limits to be borne in mind. An interview should be no longer than it needs to be. Informal or impromptu interviews may last only a few minutes if they occur naturally during the course of observation, for example. The timing of structured interviews can be gauged fairly accurately, but semi-structured interviews can vary in length depending on the respondents' enthusiasm. However, it is good practice to allot a specific time and attempt not to overrun that time. It is also important to read interviewees' silent signals that they are ready to stop: if an adult starts to check her or his watch, or if a child appears tired, then whether the planned questions have been asked or not, the interviewer must respect participant preferences. Participants also need to plan their lives so not over-running on a schedule, or finishing early if needs be, ultimately reaps benefits for all.

Interpreting Interviews

We have seen how interviews are particularly valuable tools for gaining insights into participants' perspectives on particular issues. However, as previously mentioned, researchers must be wary of interpreting participants' verbal accounts as a substitute for the observation of actual behaviours, as there is an inevitable gap between what people say and what they do. Equally, the reality that participants are talking about may not be stable and there may be marked differences between different participants' perceptions of the same event or issue. Furthermore, as discussed, researchers must acknowledge that accounts gathered through interview are co-constructions between interviewee and interviewer.

For these reasons, it is essential for any research study to be clear about the particular contribution interviews have made to research findings. Rich insights can be gained by making cross-case comparisons and by observing what happens in practice. Whatever approach to interviewing is used, researchers must be wary of making grandiose claims, and clarify that interviews are only one of many different data collection techniques, all of which give particular insights into social phenomena.

Some concluding thoughts

Interviewing people can be a fascinating and enjoyable experience. It can help us to understand the world from other people's perspective, and in the process, it can change our own views. It can also offer innovative insights into new or familiar behaviours, and as such, contribute to theoretical and practical understanding and knowledge. There is little doubt that if we want to observe and comment on issues related to the social organisation of life, whether in a culture we know well or in unfamiliar spaces and places, and whether in schools, hospitals, homes, in the street or elsewhere, then our understanding will be more complete if we seek the views of the people whose lives we are studying.

However, conducting interviews is no walk in the park. It takes up a great deal of time: first to plan the study, to prepare structured or outline questions, identify and enlist participants, gain written consent, plan visits at times that are convenient to participants, rearrange them if necessary, conduct the interviews, reassure participants if they talk about sensitive issues, reflect and decide on a transcription technique, transcribe the interviews, check them, share them with the participants (if appropriate), then work with the data to see whether and how it informs the research questions. Interviewing can also be expensive if it involves travel, and if recording equipment needs to be purchased. A central focus for researchers is to design interview techniques that suit the research questions and to develop flexible techniques that enable the active engagement of diverse research cohorts. Despite these trials, interviewing can be a deeply satisfying process, where friendships are forged, where power imbalances can be levelled and where deep insights can be gained into the experiences of those who walk alongside us in life.

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