9

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

The ethics of conducting interviews

In Chapter 3, I spoke about codes of practice, contracts and protocols which require researchers to ensure that participants are fully aware of the purpose of the research and that they understand their rights. It will be helpful if you refer to the 'ethical guidelines and protocols' section in this chapter before you get too far in planning your interviews, because you should not proceed without respondents' consent to participate. If you are researching in a hospital or in fact in any health-related area, I should be very surprised if you were not required to produce a written protocol. Conditions vary and so it's essential that you find out what the requirements are at an early stage.

Obtaining 'informed consent' may not be as easy as it sounds and if you are working on a 100-hour project, you will have little time to prepare and trial the sort of protocol required in a major study (see Cohen et al. 2000: 50–6). However, in any size of project, you will still have a responsibility to explain to respondents as fully as possible what the research is about, why you wish to interview them, what will be involved and what you will do with the information you obtain. I personally feel that this should not be presented verbally at the start of an interview, but sent beforehand so that respondents have an

opportunity to query the meaning and implications of any statements – and even to withdraw at that stage. Better for participants to withdraw at the start rather than halfway through or after the interview.

In case you are coming to the conclusion that this is just one more bureaucratic and unnecessary procedure, I would ask you to remember that it's not only ensuring that your respondents know about their rights and your responsibilities but it is also protecting your own position.

Advantages and disadvantages of the interview



One major advantage of the interview is its adaptability. A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal. Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified.

There are problems, of course. Interviews are time-consuming, and so in a 100-hour project you will be able to interview only a relatively small number of people. It is a highly subjective technique and therefore there is always the danger of bias. Analysing responses can present problems, and wording the questions is almost as demanding for interviews as it is for questionnaires. Even so, the interview can yield rich material and can often put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses.

Moser and Kalton (1971: 271) describe the survey interview as 'a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent'. This, they continue, might appear a straightforward matter, but the attainment of a successful interview is much more complex than this statement might suggest.

Wiseman and Aron (1972) liken interviewing to a fishing expedition and, pursuing this analogy, Cohen (1976: 82) adds that 'like fishing, interviewing is an activity requiring careful

preparation, much patience, and considerable practice if the eventual reward is to be a worthwhile catch'.

Preparation for interviews follows much the same procedures as for questionnaires. Topics need to be selected, questions devised, methods of analysis considered and a schedule prepared and piloted.

Question wording



Though question wording is important, it may not be quite as important to be precise about the use of certain terms as for questionnaires, though of course the language you use must be understandable to the respondents. In the chapter on questionnaire design, I gave the example of students having been asked how much time they spent studying and suggested that 'a great deal', 'a certain amount' and 'not much', would mean different things to different people. In an interview, it would be possible to ask 'How much time do you spend studying?' and then to follow with a prompt on the lines of 'For example . . .'

Follow the rules laid down for questionnaire design (no leading, presumptive or offensive questions, etc.). Prepare topics and then questions on cards or on separate pieces of paper, so that you can decide the order of questioning when all topics have been covered. Consider which is likely to be the best order in which to ask questions. The order may be important in establishing an easy relationship with the interviewee. The manner in which you ask questions most certainly will be. Practise interviewing and managing your schedule to make sure your form of questioning is clear, does not antagonize the respondent and allows you to record responses in a way that you can understand when the interview is over.

The interview schedule

Structured and semi-structured interviews

If you are using a structured or semi-structured format which enables you to tick or circle responses on your previously prepared schedule, you should be able to leave the interview with a set of responses that can be fairly easily recorded, summarized and analysed. It's not quite so easy if you have decided on an unstructured format but you will still need to prepare a list of items you wish to discuss and a few prompts or probes to remind you about the particular issues you wish to cover. Let's say you are carrying out a survey of staff participation in a company's in-house French language programme. Company headquarters are in Paris and it was felt that the language programme would be a good idea. However, take-up was disappointing, possibly because though half an hour of work time was allowed, participants had to give a further half hour in their own time. You think it might be useful to know whether there was any difference between men and women participants; the length of time staff had worked for the company; whether they had spent any time at the Paris headquarters; their seniority in the firm and (an issue which had unexpectedly cropped up during the pilot interviews); whether attendance brought any increase in salary or even promotion and, of course the extent of employees' participation in the French language programme.

It's fairly easy to circle numbers on your checklist, but not so easy to write down what people say. The last thing you want to do is to write furiously throughout the interview, so the more items you can surreptitiously circle, the better. You need to record whether your respondent is male or female but you don't need to ask. You can see, so circle the M or F at the start of your schedule.

You might prepare the draft schedule on the following lines. Try it out with your pilot study volunteers and if it does not work, then redraft until you are satisfied it serves your purpose.

Title: Survey of staff participation in the French language programme

Date of interview: Venue:

Name/number of interviewee: M or F

Q 1: To what extent have you participated in the French language programme?

Prompt:				
	6-week basic programme	1	2	3
	12-week improvers' programme	1	2	3
	1-year advanced programme	1	2	3
	2-year bilingual oral programme	1	2	3

1 = not at all (any particular reasons?)
2 = to a certain extent (ask for examples)
3 = a great deal (ask for examples)

You might then wish to probe further.

After the interview, all the circled numbers can be entered into your summary sheet and the process of analysing responses has begun. Some people add a summary column on the right-hand side of the schedule; others prefer to work on a separate sheet.

Questions and coding can be developed during the course of pilot interviews. There may be changes as you go on. What seemed to be a good idea at the start may not be appropriate as you proceed. There is no reason why code numbers should be indicated on the schedule at all. Unless you plan to key in your numbers direct to a computer, there is no reason really why you should work with numbers. You could have letters which will immediately give you the key to the question item. If the majority of your data collecting is through interviews, you are unlikely to accumulate very large numbers and if you are coding by hand, the letters have considerable advantages over numbers. So, on your summary sheet, you would have headings of M and F and the numbers of participants who were male or female would be listed under the appropriate heading. Easy.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews centred round a topic may, and in skilled hands do, produce a wealth of valuable data but such interviews require a great deal of expertise to control and a great deal of time to analyse. Conversation about a topic may be interesting and may produce useful insights into a problem, but it has to be remembered that an interview is more than just an interesting conversation. You need certain information and methods have to be devised to obtain that information, if at all possible.

Preliminary interviews can probably be placed at the 'completely unstructured' end of the continuum of formality. This is the stage when you are trying to find out which areas or topics are important and when people directly concerned with the topic are encouraged to talk about what is of central significance to them. You are looking for clues as to which areas should be explored and which left out. Interviews of this kind require only the minimum of note-taking, and as long as your notes are clear enough to enable you to extract points of interest, and topics for inclusion in the study, they will suffice.

Most interviews carried out in the main data-collecting stage of the research will come somewhere between the completely structured and the completely unstructured point on the continuum. Freedom to allow the respondents to talk about what is of central significance to them rather than to the interviewer is clearly important, but some loose structure to ensure all topics which are considered crucial to the study are covered does eliminate some of the problems of entirely unstructured interviews. The **guided** or **focussed interview** fulfils these requirements. No questionnaire or checklist is used, but a framework is established by selecting topics on which the interview is guided. The respondent is allowed a considerable degree of latitude within the framework. Certain questions are asked, but respondents are given freedom to talk about the topic and give their views in their own time. The interviewer needs to have the skill to ask questions and, if necessary, to probe at the right time, but if the interviewee moves freely from one topic to another, the conversation can flow without interruption.

The advantage of a focussed interview is that a framework is

established beforehand and so recording and analysis are greatly simplified. This is important for any research, but particularly so for limited-time studies.

Group interviews and focus groups

One-to-one interviewing is not the only way of meeting respondents and in some cases you might feel it would be more useful to consider group interviewing. There is nothing new about group interviewing, though focus groups in particular have recently become much more popular, especially in social science and health research. As their name indicates, the purpose of focus groups is to focus discussion on a particular issue. They can be structured, where there are pre-prepared questions and checklists, or completely unstructured, where the intervention of the researcher is minimal. It all depends on the purpose of the interview. Sometimes, they are informal gatherings of a varied group of people who may not know each other, but who might be thought to have an interest or concern in issues like community policing or council taxes. The intention (and the hope) are that participants will interact with each other, will be willing to listen to all views, perhaps to reach consensus about some aspects of the topic or to disagree about others and to give a good airing to the issues which seem to be interesting or important to them. The researcher becomes less of an interviewer, more of a moderator or facilitator.

In my experience, which may be very different from yours, focus groups are more likely to include members who either have similar characteristics or experience (for example, they may all have had the same type of illness) or are known to have a professional concern about and knowledge of the issues involved.

Focus groups are undoubtedly valuable when in-depth information is needed 'about how people *think* about an issue – their reasoning about *why* things are as they are, *why* they hold the views they do' (Laws 2003: 299). However, there can sometimes be problems.

Hayes warns us that:

> Groups have to be carefully balanced in relation to the age, sex and ethnic status of respondents: for example, if young people, women, or people in ethnic minority groups are in disproportionately fewer numbers in the group they may feel socially constrained and not contribute freely to the discussion. It may sometimes be necessary to have single sex groups in similar age ranges in order for the atmosphere to be permissive and relaxed.
>
> (Hayes 2000: 395)

A couple of strong personalities can also influence and in some cases actually take over a group and make it difficult for the less assertive members to speak. Denscombe (1998: 115) warns that 'it is men who tend to hog the centre stage in group discussions', leaving the women (or at least some of them) silent – though that may not be your experience! He draws our attention to another issue, which is that if 'group members regard their opinions as contrary to prevailing opinion within the group, they might be inclined to keep quiet, or moderate their views somewhat' (p. 115). He adds that 'the privacy of the one-to-one interview does not pose this difficulty'. Of course he is right, though one-to-one interviews can present their own set of difficulties.

With experience, researchers will devise their own techniques of keeping the strong personalities in line and of drawing the silent members into the group. Laws (2003: 300) suggests that one way might be to make a periodic check in order to discover whether all group members are in agreement with statements being made, on the lines of 'Is that what everyone thinks?' or 'Does everyone agree with xyz?' – and that seems to be a reasonable approach.

There appear to be many views about the 'right' and the 'wrong' way to manage group and particularly focus group interviews. Some people consider a checklist, topic guide and prepared questions are essential: others disagree and feel that such a structure would be too directive to achieve the required exploration of respondents' beliefs, interpretations and understanding of issues. All I can say, as I always do, is that we all have our own ways of doing things, so suit yourself, select the approach which is right for your purpose and call it what you will. As long as you remember that the ethics of research always have to be honoured,

that consent has to be given, full information provided about the purpose of the research and guarantees given about your definition of anonymity and confidentiality, all will be well.

Tape-recording interviews



It's always difficult to decipher who said what in group interviews, but in one-to-one interviews, tape-recording can be useful to check the wording of any statement you might wish to quote, to allow you keep eye contact with your interviewee, to help you look interested – and to make sure that what you write is accurate. It can be particularly helpful if you are attempting any form of content analysis and need to be able to listen several times in order to identify categories but perhaps it can be most useful because it allows you to code, summarize and to note particular comments which are of particular interest without having to try to write them down during the course of the interview (see Chapter 7 for Brendan Duffy's discussion of content analysis).

However, you cannot assume that all your respondents will be willing for their comments to be recorded and the knowledge that the tape is running can sometimes inhibit honest responses. Interviewees will, rightly, wish to know what you propose to do with the tape, who is to have access to it and how long it will be kept. You need to be prepared for a refusal. Even if respondents had agreed to a tape recording earlier, they may still refuse when the time comes and so you have to do all the necessary preliminary preparation of questions, prompts and probes in order to ensure, or try to ensure that all the main issues you wish to explore have been covered – and you will also need a checklist or schedule *and* a summary sheet.

Your difficulties are not at an end even if respondents do agree to be recorded. Many experienced researchers and supervisors feel strongly (and in fact state categorically) that all tapes must be transcribed. They make the point that if no transcription is done and made available for scrutiny if required, then interviewers can say what they like. Perish the thought, but they might even make up 'quotations' that suit their purpose. However, if you have to do the typing yourself, you can count on at least four hours work

for every hour of interview, even if you are a skilful and quick typist, but significantly more if you are not. If voice transcription software becomes more sophisticated, and cheaper, then it might be possible for interview recordings to be transferred direct to a word program which would save all those hours of transcribing and could also be a great help in content analysis. However, for the time being, you are likely to depend on typing or word-processing from your own audio recording. In a short project, it is questionable whether you have the time for transcription, but in case anybody wishes to check any particular point, make sure you keep the tape until after the report has been examined – and until you are sure that no corrections or rewriting are required.

If respondents do not agree for the interview to be recorded, all is certainly not lost. We all learn to devise our own shorthand system but as soon as the interview is over, do your utmost to write up as much as you can remember. If your interview guide or schedule has been well planned *and piloted*, your questions, items and headings will help you not only to record responses but to remind you of what was said under each heading. Prompts listed on the schedule may never need to be used as prompts, but they will still serve as sub-headings and will provide the beginnings of a structure for your report. Whenever possible, statements that will be quoted in the report should be verified with the respondent. The last thing you want is for a statement to be challenged at the report stage.

One other thing. Sometimes, and particularly if respondents have enjoyed the interview, they may ask if you will let them know how the research goes. There can be time and money costs here, so take care not to promise too much. (Remember the problems Stephen Waters faced in Chapter 3?) However, your interviewees will have given you their time free, so if you can possibly manage it, it would be a courtesy to agree to let them have a very brief summary of findings – as long as such findings are not confidential. Once the summary is produced, it can be presented, if required, at meetings of research committees, ethics committees, departmental meetings, governing bodies, and to those who were involved in piloting your data-collecting instruments.

Bias – the old enemy

There is always the danger of bias creeping into interviews, largely because, as Selltiz et al. (1962: 583) point out, 'interviewers are human beings and not machines, and their manner may have an effect on respondents'. Where a team of interviewers is employed, serious bias may show up in data analysis, but if one researcher conducts a set of interviews, the bias maybe consistent and therefore go unnoticed. Dictionary definitions of 'bias' generally centre on the notion of distortion of judgement, prejudiced outlook, unfair influence. That sounds obvious enough but there can be problems over interpretation because one person's 'fair and unbiased point of view' may well be judged to be 'prejudice' by another (Bell and Opie 2002: 233).

Many factors can result in bias and there are always dangers in research carried out by individual researchers, particularly those who have strong views about the topic they are researching. It can occur in many ways, deliberately or unwittingly. It is very easy to fall into the bias trap, for example by selecting only those items in the literature review which support your point of view; using inappropriate language which might indicate strength of feeling in one direction and permitting value judgements to influence the way research findings are interpreted. Gray (2000) in her doctoral study of truancy in Western Australian schools, was very conscious of the fact that she was researching a topic in which she had a keen interest and about which she held strong views. She recalls that it was her constant questioning of practice and her critical attitude towards the interpretation of data which helped her to recognize signs of bias – and it is this kind of discipline which is required.

Miles and Huberman warn that:

> We have moments of illumination. Things 'come together'. The problem is that we could be wrong. A near-library of research evidence shows that people (researchers included) habitually tend to *overweight* facts they believe in or depend on, to *ignore or forget confirming instances* far more easily than disconfirming instances (Nisbet and Ross 1980). We do this by differentially weighting information, and by looking at part of the data, not all of them.
>
> (Miles and Huberman 1994: 253–4)

Jan Gray called her 'moments of illumination' when things 'came together' as 'the process of enlightenment'. She still had to ask herself whether she had 'overweighted' any facts because of her personal beliefs. Perhaps one her main strengths was that she knew what the dangers were. She was constantly on the lookout for signs of bias and she placed great emphasis on reflection on practice and on triangulation. (See Bell and Opie 2002: 129–70 for a discussion of Jan's research.)

So, we must be wise and vigilant, critical of our interpretation of the data, regularly question our practice and wherever possible triangulate. A supervisor who is familiar with the literature relating to your subject will quickly remind you if you have placed too much emphasis on x or y or have ignored a or b, and it's always wise to listen to what supervisors have to say. If you don't agree, that's up to you and as long as you make your own strong case, based on the available evidence and not merely on your opinions, you will be safe.

Remember!



People who agree to be interviewed deserve some consideration and so you will need to fit in with their plans, however inconvenient they may be for you. Try to fix a venue at a time when you will not be disturbed. Trying to interview when a telephone is constantly ringing and people are knocking at the door will destroy any chance of continuity.

Before you make the appointment, make sure official channels, if any, have been cleared. A letter from your supervisor, head of department, principal or research officer, saying what you are doing and why will always help. Of course, your statement about guarantees, anonymity and confidentiality issues should have been sent before the interview takes place.

It is difficult to lay down rules for the conduct of an interview. Common sense and normal good manners will, as always, take you a long way. You should always introduce yourself and ask if the respondent has any queries. When you make the appointment, say how long you anticipate the interview will take. Ask if that is acceptable and if the respondent says that is too long, you

just have to do the best you can to discuss your main issues early. You're not in charge: the respondents are and you need them more than they need you. Interviews are very time-consuming. If you allow one hour maximum for the actual interview, there is also travelling time and time lost through any one of numerous mishaps (respondent late home, sudden crisis with children which causes delay, unexpected visitor who interrupts the interview, etc.). Then there is the time needed to consider what has been said during the interview, to go through notes and to extend and clarify points that may have been hastily noted. If you are working full-time, you are unlikely to be able to carry out more than one interview in an evening, and even if you are able to devote yourself full time to the task, it is difficult to cope with more than three or four interviews during the course of a day. Your original project plan should take account of the time required for planning and conducting interviews, for coping with cancelled arrangements, second visits and finding replacements for people who drop out.

Interviewing is not easy and many researchers have found it difficult to strike the balance between complete objectivity and trying to put the interviewee at ease. It is difficult to know how these difficulties can be overcome, though honesty about the purpose of the research and integrity in the conduct of the interview will all help. Daphne Johnson, a very experienced researcher and skilful supervisor, makes the point that it is the responsibility of the interviewer, not the interviewee to end an interview. She writes:

> It may have been difficult to negotiate access and to get in in the first place, but the interviewer who, once in, stays until he is thrown out, is working in the style of investigative journalism rather than social research . . . If an interview takes two or three times as long as the interviewer said it would, the respondent, whose other work or social activities have been accordingly delayed, will be irritated in retrospect, however enjoyable the experience may have been at the time. This sort of practice breaks one of the ethics of professional social research, which is that the field should not be left more difficult for subsequent investigators to explore by disenchanting respondents with the whole notion of research participation.
>
> (Johnson 1984: 14–15)

Planning and conducting interviews checklist

1	Decide what you need to know.	List all the items about which information is required.
2	Ask yourself why you need this information.	Examine your list and remove any item that is not directly associated with the task.
3	Is an interview the best way of obtaining the information?	Consider alternatives.
4	If so, begin to devise questions in outline.	The final form of questions will depend on the type of interview.
5	Decide on the type of interview.	A structured interview will produce structured responses. Is this what you want, or is a more open approach required?
6	Refine the questions.	Write questions on cards. Check wording (see questionnaire checklist).
7	Consider how questions will be analysed.	Consult Chapter 12 before deciding finally about question type and question wording.
8	Prepare an interview schedule or guide and draft a summary sheet.	Consider the order of questions. Prepare prompts in case the respondent does not provide essential information freely.
9	Pilot your schedule and summary sheet.	Both need to be tested, and you need practice in asking questions and recording responses.
10	Revise the schedule, if necessary.	Take account of pilot respondents' comments.
11	WATCH FOR BIAS	If you have strong views about some aspect of the topic, be particularly vigilant. If someone else asked the same question, would they get the same answer?

12	Select who to interview.	Interviews take time. Try to select a representative sample. Decide what to do if selected people are not willing or able to give an interview. Be realistic about the number of interviews that can be conducted in the time available.
13	Try to fix a time and place where you will not be disturbed.	
14	Make sure official channels have been cleared, and let interviewees see any protocol documents beforehand.	A letter from your supervisor, head or principal, explaining the purpose of the research may be helpful.
15	Introduce yourself and give interviewees the opportunity to ask for any necessary clarification. You will, of course, have already sent a letter and a statement outlining the purpose of the research.	Say what will happen to the information provided by the interviewee. Clarify the meaning of anonymity in the context of the study.
16	Agree with the interviewee how long the interview will last.	Do your utmost not to exceed the time limit.
17	Try to check the accuracy of your notes with interviewees, particularly if some items might be quoted in the report.	But don't promise to check with respondents after the interview if this is likely to prove difficult.
18	If you wish to tape-record the interview, you must obtain permission from the interviewee.	Remember that it takes a long time to transcribe a tape-recorded interview, if this is what you intend to do. Write up as you go along. Don't wait until all interviews are completed.
19	Honesty and integrity are important.	Make no promises that cannot be fulfilled. Respect respondents' views about anonymity. If you know a respondent has been indiscreet in revealing confidential information, *never* take advantage.

20	Common sense and good manners will take you a long way.	People who agree to be interviewed are doing you a favour. They deserve consideration.
21	Don't queer the pitch for other researchers by disenchanting respondents with the whole notion of research participation.	There are many ways in which participants can become disenchanted. Appointments not kept or the interviewer arriving late; taking longer than promised; promising to check for accuracy; promising a summary of findings but not delivering; conducting the interview in a hostile manner – and failing to thank the interviewee.

Further reading

Bowling, A. (2002) *Research Methods in Health: Investigating Health and Health Services*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Chapters 11 and 13 in Section IV discuss interviews and their response rates in quantitative research, including techniques of survey interviewing. Chapter 16 in Section V deals with unstructured interviews and focus groups in qualitative research.

Darlington, Y. and Scott, D. (2002) *Qualitative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field*. Buckingham: Open University Press (originally published by Allen and Unwin Australia, 2002). Chapter 3 considers the various stages of in-depth interviewing. It is perhaps unlikely you will have the time to become involved in such interviews but time is not the only pre-condition. As Darlington and Scott make clear, considerable skill, experience *and* training are required. If you have these attributes and feel you would be interested in considering this approach, it would be advisable to consult your supervisor and to read this chapter before making up your mind.

Denscombe, M. (1998) *The Good Research Guide for Small-scale Social Research Projects*. Buckingham: Open University Press. Chapter 7 'Interviews' is an excellent chapter, including when it is appropriate to use interviews for research, types of research interview, group and focus interviews, interviewer effect, planning and recording the interview – and much more. Helpful checklists are provided. If you have very

limited time, this is the chapter I would suggest you might wish to consult.

Hayes, N. (2000) *Doing Psychological Research: Gathering and Analysing Data*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Chapter 7 deals with interviewer effects, conducting interviews, stages of interview research and ethical issues in interview research.

Keats, D.M. (2000) *Interviewing: A Practical Guide for Students and Professionals*. Buckingham: Open University Press. Keats considers the use of interviews in research, and in particular issues involved in interviewing young children, the elderly and people from ethnic communities.

Kitzinger, J. and Barbour, R.S. (1999) 'Introduction to the challenge and promise of focus groups', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds) *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.

May, T. (2001) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 3rd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press. This book is particularly useful in a number of ways, particularly Chapter 6 'Interviewing: methods and process' which provides a review of different types of interview in social research, issues in interviewing and the analysis of interviews. The section on group and focus interviews is also helpful.

Oliver, P. (2003) *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Pages 12–16 discuss informed consent and situations where engaging in research may be ethically undesirable. Chapter 3 'Research and the respondent: ethical issues during the research' considers the ethics of tape-recording interviews and the right of respondents to end involvement in the research. These few extracts (and much more) are well worth consulting.

Wellington, J.J. (1996) *Methods and Issues in Educational Research*. University of Sheffield Division of Education: USDE papers in Education. Pages 59–63 deal with focus groups, consider what makes them rather different from group interviews and gives three short examples of various uses of focus groups.