3 Why Interviews?

In the first two chapters we have noted a range of social science research methods and seen that there can be a case for using a mix of methods in an enquiry. What we have not yet done is consider what interviews might be good for. This chapter does so. However, we argue that when it comes to choosing research methods, you need to take account of the expectations of both your sponsors and your audiences. A further consideration is that before you interview, you need to assure yourself that you have, or that you can develop, the qualities that are hallmarks of a good interviewer.

The Power of Interviews

Some of the claims made for interviewing as a social research method are:

- 'The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on a person's mind . . . , to access the perspective of the person being interviewed . . . , to find out from them things that we cannot directly observe' (Patton, 1990: 278).
- Qualitative interviewing is a way of uncovering and exploring the meanings that underpin people's lives, routines, behaviours, feelings etc. (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).
- These interviews focus on the informants' understandings rather than checking the accuracy of the interviewers' account, which is the case with survey interviews and questionnaires; 'it allows *both* parties to explore the meaning of the questions and the answers involved, which is not so central, and not so often present, in other research procedures' (Brenner et al., 1985: 3).
- So, such interviews allow answers to be clarified, which is not the case with self-completion questionnaires.
- Furthermore, interviews, especially qualitative interviews, allow for understanding and meanings to be explored in depth. This is particularly the case with longitudinal research, where each informant is interviewed on several occasions over a period of months or years.
- Qualitative interviews examine the context of thought, feeling and action and can be a way of exploring relationships between different aspects of a situation. Interviewing is a powerful way of helping people to make explicit things that have hitherto been implicit – to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings.
- As we shall show, survey interviews can be cheaper, *per response*, than self-completion questionnaires.

- Survey interviews can allow targeting of samples that it would be hard to identify in other ways – intercepting people shopping at a particular store is an example of that.
- Collective interviews can be used to explore the dynamics of intact social groupings, such as a family, work-group, or sports team.
- All interviews have advantages in research involving those who are not fluent readers, or who read reluctantly.
- Oral history interviews allow the reconstruction of aspects of the recent past that are omitted from documentary historical sources.

Interviews and questionnaires

Here we wish to sharpen an understanding of the strengths of interviews as a research method by comparing them to self-administered questionnaires, their main rival. Table 3.1 is a conventional summary of the main differences between these questionnaires and qualitative interviews. It must be stressed that some interviews, notably surveys, are little more than spoken questionnaires, and that some open-ended questionnaires have the same aim as qualitative interviews. Equally, as telephone interviews are becoming more widely used in social science research, the case for mailing out questionnaires (which are often immediately filed in the waste basket) is weakening. And the development of e-mail questionnaires and internet conferences bring exciting possibilities to research design, although their 'reach' is restricted to those with regular internet access (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). Consequently, Table 3.1 should be taken as a prompt to reflection but the complexity of reality cannot be tabulated so neatly.

Rather than seeing interviews and questionnaires in opposition, it might be better to see them as complementary within a multi-part study. We are not saying that interviews have to be followed by questionnaires. However, questionnaires are a good way of checking the strength and incidence of the story that the interviews seem to contain. In that sense, they can be a good check on an interpretation of interview data, as well as a way of exploring how widely views, feelings and understandings are shared. But questionnaires, like the one in Box 3.1, can also be used as a quick-and-dirty way of getting a sense of issues to be explored in interviews. The permutations of different types of questionnaires and interviews are as unlimited as your imagination and the research problem.

Not an all-or-nothing decision

We return to a theme of Chapters 1 and 2 in saying that deciding whether to interview is not an all-or-nothing decision. It is not the case that we use interviews *or* other methods. Better to consider interviews *and* other methods. Box 3.2 contains an example of the use of multiple methods, showing how a clinical psychologist whom one of us interviewed had used interviews in the process of developing a numerical rating scale to describe children's levels of pain and breathlessness.

TABLE 3.1 *A comparison of qualitative interviews with self-administered questionnaires*

Characteristics	Qualitative interviews	Self-administered questionnaires
Provide information about	As for questionnaires, but far better at exploring these things in depth, learning about the informants' perspectives and about what matters to them.	Attitudes, motivation, accounts of behaviour, opinions, events
Best at	Exploring the stories and perspectives of informants (Understanding)	Checking how far the researcher's hypothesis or world view is shared by the sample (Surveys)
Can also be useful for	Surveys: closed questions can be asked, as in opinion polls about voting intentions Important when subjects neither read nor write easily and willingly	Open-ended questions allow researcher to ask for informants' stories and perspectives
Richness of response	Can be a dialogue between researcher and informant, allowing nuances to be captured (especially where video recording is used) and for questions to be clarified and adapted, and new ones to be improvised. Long interviews quite common	Questions cannot be modified once printed, nor can the nuances of the respondents' voices easily be detected in their writing. Long questionnaires are rarely acceptable – short (and superficial?) is the norm
Sensitive to	Informants. Good for finding out about the individual, specific and particular	The research literature and the range of responses amongst groups. (Also true of survey interviews)
Anonymity	Can be awkward for some people to say some things in face-to-face settings – danger of only hearing from the confident members of the population	Sensitive questions may be more acceptable in anonymous questionnaires
Ethics	Interviewers know whom they have interviewed, although transcripts can be anonymized	Anonymous questionnaire responses easily ensured
Sample size	With the exception of phone and intercept interviews, less suitable for wide coverage – better for detailed work with fewer people	Can be very large, and since the aim is often to generalize from the sample to the population, samples often need to be big
Time costs	Devising interview guide (checking validity and reliability, see next chapter), piloting (check on usability) – may be less of an issue with qualitative research	Devising questionnaire (checking validity and reliability – see next chapter), piloting (check on usability)

Characteristics	Qualitative interviews	Self-administered questionnaires
Time costs (continued)	Arranging interviews – less of a problem with intercept (or 'clipboarding') and telephone surveys Establishing trust and rapport – less of a problem with surveys Allowing time for diversions during the interview – less of a problem for surveys Travelling, getting lost and hanging around (unanswered calls in phone interviews, refusals in intercept interviews) Limit number of interviews to guard against interviewer fatigue	Distributing questionnaires
	Transcription of data (frequently estimated as 7–10 hours transcription time per hour of tape)	Usually swift, especially where optical mark readers are used
	Data analysis (time needed for analysis regularly under-estimated, especially where qualitative data are involved)	Usually swift. However, open-ended questions are difficult to analyse, whether they are used in interviews or questionnaires
Money costs	Hire of interviewers (perhaps), travel costs, tapes, batteries, transcription of tapes Phone bills and costs of sending respondents an advance letter telling them about the research project and the phone contact to come	Mainly cost of printing, distributing and retrieving questionnaires. Looks cheap per questionnaire distributed but typical low response rates can make it an expensive method per returned response

Audience

While research designs should be sensitive to the matters we have discussed here and in the previous chapter, they will also reflect the stances of any sponsors and of the intended audience for the research findings.

For example, much research is done to order, commissioned with deadlines and budgets to meet, which effectively fixes what can and cannot be done. This is as true for undergraduates who have to finance their own dissertation study to be submitted before the end of the year, as it is for us, doing funded research for commissioning agencies. Research sponsors will have their own preconceptions about the best way to do a study, and they will often be positivist preconceptions. Furthermore, some sponsors will want a report that highlights action points and areas of concern but, as we recount in Chapter 5, will not permit any publication that draws on that work.

For students, the audience is likely to be a member of faculty. Quite apart from matters to do with deadlines and resources, it is important to remember that these

Box 3.1 An open-ended, self-administered questionnaire

(Used by Peter in 1995, early in a study and as one enquiry method)

Learner autonomy is a key goal of Higher Education. Can you see better ways of fostering it? If so, please outline them here. [one-third of page left blank for responses]

What do you think learners need to master if they are to become – and be recognized as – autonomous learners by the end of their course? [one-third of page left blank for responses]

The programme that I described overleaf has somewhat limited appeal to undergraduates. Can you suggest any developments that are consistent with current thinking about good practice in teaching and learning that might enhance the programme's appeal to students? [one-third of page left blank for responses]

academic staff will often have their own preferences about research orientations and methods: the wise student is alert to them (Arksey, 1992). Faculty and departments too often have working (and often tacit) notions of what counts as 'proper' research, and may take deviance from those norms as evidence of sloppy research. The 'paradigm wars' may be muted nowadays but their aftermath lingers in some places. We have repeatedly heard North American colleagues tell us that quantitative, positivist research is seen as 'normal' research in social science, especially in psychology, with qualitative and descriptive research being judged to be inherently inferior. So, the choice of methods is best made with the audience in mind.

Nor are professional researchers exempt from such expectations. Many of us have come across referees whose comments on research proposals seem based on assumptions about the properness of certain research designs and who seem to have taken slight account of the problem to be investigated. Journals have their peccadilloes too. Even at the design stage (perhaps, especially at the design stage), the 'streetwise' researcher will have an idea of possible publication outlets for the research findings and be aware of the range of methods that is likely to be acceptable to them.

In choosing methods, think of the outcome in the sense of the relationship between methods and research findings, but also think of social outcomes, in terms of the relationship between the methods and the reactions of the intended audience.

Box 3.2 The use of serial research methods in the construction of rating scales for child pain and breathlessness

(This is based on an interview with the clinician who developed the rating scales)

Researchers wanted to create a scale that would allow them to develop a way of estimating the levels of pain felt by children who, because of developmental problems, were not easily able to communicate. Consequently, they were not able to say how much post-surgical pain they felt. Although physicians could estimate a pain level on the basis of the physiological consequences of the surgery, pain thresholds differ from person to person.

Since the children could not report how much pain they felt, the decision was taken to treat parents as key informants about children's manifestations of pain. Earlier attempts to investigate parents' observations of children's pain responses by having them write descriptions had been inhibiting for some parents and had produced rather short accounts. Interviews with parents were seen as a way of getting richer and more extensive data.

Twenty parents were interviewed and asked how they knew when their child was in pain, and what signs of pain the child showed. They were happy to talk, and talked so much that they brought in a lot of material that was not relevant to the interviewer's concern.

The researchers thought it important to capture the nuances of the spoken voice, nuances that might have been lost if the transcripts alone had been analysed. Consequently, the interviews were analysed by two coders, who listened to the tapes while reading the transcripts. When they had reached a high level of agreement about the analysis of the interviews, the basis was laid for piloting a paediatric pain manifestation scale. It is not our purpose to describe the complex and rigorous procedures necessary to develop a reliable scale, but we do want to draw attention to the way in which interviewing was used to explore the territory and to establish the content validity of the scale. (That means whether the scale included the full range of pain symptoms.) Interviews were one part of a multi-method research approach.

A similar study looked at child breathlessness. Formally speaking, the objective breathlessness measures of respirology do not match well sufferers' feelings of breathlessness. If the sense of breathlessness is attended by feelings of panic, or if it is unexpected, then feelings can be stronger than when the child had a greater sense of being in control of similar physiological symptoms. Researchers wished to develop a pictorial scale of breathlessness, which would indicate how breathless child patients felt. The advantage of a pictorial scale is that children, who may not communicate fluently, could identify the picture from the scale that best described their state.

continued

Interviews were held with a group of parents of children prone to breathlessness, with a group of 12–16-year-olds and with a group of 8–12-year-olds. This technique of using focus groups can have the advantage that the social interaction can trigger off new ideas, but there is also the risk that dominant individuals can overshadow quieter people (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of this). It is cheaper to run three groups of eight people than to do 24 individual interviews. Since the purposes were qualitative, the limitations of focus group interviews were acceptable.

The discussions were not taped, since this was felt to be intrusive. Instead, a note was kept of the adjectives that respondents used to describe their breathlessness, or that of their children. In addition, the children were asked to draw pictures to represent breathlessness and they then explained what they were trying to convey. In retrospect, it was a mistake to have a respirologist present, who intervened too much in the discussions. It would also have been better to run focus groups containing only a single class of breathless children or parents, since the onset, symptoms and prognosis of asthma and cystic fibrosis are quite different.

However, the results were useful. The researchers had expected children to describe breathlessness in terms of images of physical exercise, such as running. In fact, children used images to do with the throat and its constriction (especially asthma sufferers) and with the lungs and their congestion (especially cystic fibrosis sufferers). On the basis of the children's pictures, which were collected, and of the adjectives they used, the researchers and a graphic artist constructed three provisional, pictorial breathlessness scales. These scales were then piloted and refined by a mixture of further interviews and physiological measures. Statistical techniques were then used to organize the findings on an interval scale (see Table 11.2 for an explanation of this concept).

Can *you* interview?

While you may be persuaded that interviewing is the method that is best fitted to your research purpose, you need to check that you have the qualities necessary to interview effectively, or to be sure that you can develop them.

Even with survey interviews, potential informants decide to participate partly on the basis of a snap judgement about the interviewer. They wonder 'is this a person whom I wish to spend time with – after all, the only benefit for me is likely to be an interesting encounter? What's the cost? What do they want from me?' The more personable the interviewer and the more intriguing their status, the more likely it is that an interview will be granted.

For example, if we are approached in the street by an intercept interviewer, our thoughts might be:

- Are they trying to sell me anything?
- Am I busy? Is it raining or freezing, or blowing a pestilential gale?
- Do I like the look of them?
- How far am I prepared to say something about myself to a stranger, when I have no idea where the data will end up?

Or, if we are trying to get an interview with someone who thinks they are important (which means they think they are busy), getting the interview may depend upon:

- *Your status*: a student doing a thesis has lower status than someone of similar standing to the respondent. By and large senior people are more likely to get an interview, especially with élite informants, than are junior researchers.
- *The project*: if the project is intriguing, or if the potential respondent can see a possible pay-off, then there is a greater likelihood of getting the interview.
- *Yourself*: if you sound personable, trustworthy and interesting, whether your approach has been in writing, in person, or by phone, agreement to doing an interview is more likely.

In survey interviews, the interviewer usually works from a schedule that must be closely followed and the self comes through only (but very importantly) in appearance, body language and voice.

In qualitative interviews, the interviewer is more like a jazz musician in a jam session. The key may have been set and there is an initial theme: thereafter it is improvisation. Your ability to 'jam' is crucial to the success of these interviews, since there will be times when it will be right to improvise in any of the following ways:

- Vary the question order to fit the flow of the interview.
- Vary the phrasing of the questions to help the conversation to seem natural.
- Probe, or ask follow-up and clarification questions, *ad lib*.
- Let the interview seem to go off track.
- Give a lot of attention to building trust and rapport, which will often involve putting something of the interviewer's self into the interview, perhaps by raising similar or different experiences, by saying 'something that has always puzzled me . . . Can you help me to understand that?', and so on.
- Throw the interview guide away, if necessary (see Box 3.3 for an example).

The following things about us relate to our effectiveness as interviewers.

Understanding the topic

> The investigator who is well versed in the literature now has a set of expectations that the [forthcoming interview] data can deny . . . It is, however, true that preconceptions can be the enemy of qualitative research . . . but the benefits of the 'preconceptions' that spring from the literature review are, perhaps, much greater than their costs . . . a good literature review creates much more distance than it collapses. (McCracken, 1988: 31)

Box 3.3 Throwing away an interview guide in qualitative research

(This is based on an interview with the researcher whose experience is described here)

A researcher was investigating the attitudes of people with terminal AIDS to experimental drug treatments. Should treatments that might offer relief and remission be permitted, despite the dangers of serious side effects and of hastening death?

Qualitative interviews were used. The interviews were distressing to the researcher who 'sobbed for a year': we return to this theme in Chapter 9. One involved a man whose face was swollen and misshapen beyond recognition by sarcoma. He could no longer see. By his bed was a picture of how he had been, which he asked the interviewer to look at. He wanted to talk about his illness and what it meant, saying virtually nothing about experimental drug treatments. Respecting him and his needs, the researcher did not press the interview guide but instead took on the more therapeutic role of listening and talking with him. To do otherwise would be ethically uneasy in any circumstances, and quite wrong with a dying man. He thanked her for the conversation. Despite having got nothing from the interview that was usable within the research, and despite being very upset by the experience, the researcher now looks back on it as a lesson in the importance of being more sensitive to the informants than to any research agenda: she sees it as a lesson in practical ethics.

The better we know or understand an area, whether through sensitive reading or from our own experience, the better we can connect with the interviewee. Sometimes, it is necessary to become an 'insider' in order to make this connection (see Box 1.2, above; Chapters 7 and 8 extend this point). Connecting is not, of course, the same as overwhelming. It means that we have a knowledge that allows us to interpret, understand and respond.

Understanding people (including ourselves)

> If what people have to say about their world is generally boring to you, then you will never be a great interviewer. Unless you are fascinated by the rich variation in human experience, qualitative interviewing will become drudgery. (Patton, 1990: 279)

Being interested in others is certainly important in sustaining enthusiasm for the job of interviewing. Being self-aware helps us to do the job well. The more we have recognized the different sides of ourselves and glimpsed the different people we can be, the more we can see them in others. This helps to make our questioning and prompting more sensitive. Self-understanding is also valuable in alerting us to ways in which who we are can skew the interview. For example, if the interviewer knows that he or she has a tendency to try to stamp their presence on a situation, that self-awareness can help them to hold back and try to listen to the informant, hearing the informant's view of the world without overlaying the interview with their own presence.

Body language

> The person taking me to get the train to get to my interview said that in her research department, she'd not be allowed to do an interview in jeans (and I mentally added 'let alone in blue suede shoes, open neck shirt and earring'). However, the dress seems to me to be okay for the circumstances (a university in the long vacation). (Peter's field notes, July 1997)

The *Guardian* newspaper carried a report on 12 March 1998 claiming that 7 per cent of the impact of any piece of communication is verbal, 37 per cent comes from the tone of voice and 56 per cent derives from body language. Are we aware of what messages are sent by our dress, appearance and body language? We have more to say about dress in Chapter 7.

Affect

> The researcher's empathy, sensitivity, humour and sincerity are important tools for the research . . . How the researcher asks questions depends on how he or she feels about the topic or the interviewee. And what the researcher hears from the answer may depend on his or her mood and prior experience. (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 12)

Can you build trust that brings rapport? In other words, how socially skilled are you? And being socially skilled is not the same as being voluble. For example, a quiet and sensitive person may make a far better qualitative interviewer than an egregious party-goer who overwhelms others. If social skill is a minimum requirement for qualitative interviewing, it is not sufficient for interviewing within a research stance that places great importance on building close relationships between the partners in interview research (see also Box 1.3 and Chapter 7). And, as Rubin and Rubin suggest, it is helpful to use self-awareness to monitor and to try to regulate our moods. The fieldnotes in Box 3.4 show something of the emotional, or affective, experience of interviewing.

Conclusion

The thinking behind the choice – or rejection – of any interview approaches to a research problem has now been set out. In suggesting that it frequently makes sense to use interviews as one of several enquiry methods, we have previewed one aspect of research design, namely triangulation. In the following chapter, we consider more systematically factors that will affect the ways in which you design your interview research project.

Box 3.4 Feelings about an interview

(This is an extract from a researcher's fieldnotes)

I'm a little phased by having been away from home for two days, not sure that this interview will really happen and dogged by low-level anxiety about some personal difficulties. But I've done hundreds of interviews and think I'm skilled at relating to and being easy with people. Spend some time on breathing, relaxation and affirmations . . .

Like all colleagues in this study, he [the informant] is a prolific and engaging talker, with nice, open and engaging body language and a speech style that leaves little room for me to talk. To begin with, I'm happy to put aside my three page interview guide and let him shape the conversation. It is relevant, interesting and, above all, it tells me what he thinks is important. . . . I become increasingly worried about what we're not covering . . . I'm enjoying listening to my colleague and, as with other interviews in this series, I feel an emerging sense of who he is, as well as warming to this person. But I can feel tension – I'm doing it wrong, I'm not getting through the questions on the guide. I start looking for points to interrupt him. I manage to slip in a rather complicated question and, when he simplifies it, I settle for his interpretation at the cost of losing data that would have been interesting for comparative purposes. Eventually, well aware of the time, I rather derail my informant, cover some of the closed questions in the protocol, scan it to see what important areas we've not covered (very few, thank God!) and turn him towards the remaining big area.

Relief. It more-or-less worked. Confidence high and self-esteem groomed.

4 Designing an Interview-Based Study

This chapter is based on the assumption that you will be doing a project in which interview approaches offer a good prospect of getting answers to your research questions. Most of the points we discuss have to be confronted regardless of whether an enquiry is interview-based or led by other methods. It also sets the scene for Chapters 5 and 6, which also focus on design issues, although the discussion becomes increasingly concerned with design issues that are particularly important for interview research.

We begin this chapter with some thoughts on how you might identify a topic to investigate. Then, you have to choose the enquiry methods, which we assume will include interviews. Here, the guiding principle is that the methods should be fit for the purpose – they should have the power to provide data that you can use to answer your particular research questions: different questions, different research designs. While you are engaged in the twin processes of choosing the topic and the methods, you should also be doing a search of the literature. We suggest that this is the right time for you to begin drafting your report and we make some suggestions for drafting the literature review section of it. Lastly, we address some of the more detailed design considerations that you will have to consider in an interview-based study – sampling issues, the trustworthiness of the design, and the claims that might be made about its generalizability.

Staking out the territory

What is the topic that you will investigate? This decision causes beginners problems and is not unknown to experts either. The kind of rational thinking about research that pervades much of the writing about social research points to the following strategy for identifying a research topic:

- Your reading on a topic might make you think that there's an aspect, an area, or an application of an idea that hasn't been pursued. You might wonder whether findings would apply to different groups, or to different situations. You might suppose that the conclusions were a result of the research methods used, and that different methods (substituting interviews for questionnaires, for example) or different uses of a method (substituting unstructured for structured interviews) would lead to different conclusions. Or you might reasonably want to do something that is commonplace in natural science, which is to replicate (copy as closely as possible) a study in order to check out the strength of the conclusions.