

6 Approaches to Interviewing

It has already been shown that, despite their common features, survey and qualitative interviewing serve different purposes and have different characteristics. This chapter develops those differences as more detailed consideration is given to the different approaches to interviewing. The principal argument is that there are no hard-and-fast rules about which approach to use, nor is any approach a prescription for practice: the choice of approach and the way any approach is worked out in a particular research setting is very much a matter of designing that which is fit for the research purpose. That said, ideas about survey interviewing tend to be more fixed and more prescriptive than with qualitative interviewing, where practices are much more flexible.

In this chapter, we explore some of the ways in which you can vary the standard approach of having one interviewer in a private setting with one informant. It is possible to have more than one interviewer and to interview more than one person at a time, and to interview face-to-face, or over the phone. We conclude this chapter with a fairly detailed description of one interview-based study. This draws together many of the themes that have run through these first six chapters.

One-to-one interviews and variations on the theme

More than one interviewer

It can be very useful to have two researchers present during an interview. For example, when interviewing groups of North American students about whether they would choose to do postgraduate study in the UK, Peter found it helpful to have a colleague in the room. Their roles were explained to the interviewees. At any one time, one would chair the discussion while the other would keep notes, referring to the counter on one of the tape recorders that was running, but saying nothing. Advantages included:

- The silent researcher could notice things of interest that were missed by the chairing researcher, whose attention was often held by the management of group dynamics. At the end of the interview each interviewer had a chance to raise points that had struck him while observing.
- The researchers had a good account of the interviews and a guide to where the most interesting quotations were long before the tapes could be transcribed.
- Having two views of what had happened helped to clarify key themes and areas for enquiry and analysis.

- In this case the researchers were 'on the road', going from city to city, hotel to hotel, doing four sets of interviews in four days, and had to give a *preliminary* report to sponsors on the fifth. It was only possible to work to this schedule because two interviewers were used.

More than one interviewee

Joint interviews Joint interviewing involves one researcher speaking with two people simultaneously to gain both perspectives on the same phenomenon. It is an approach that tends to be used in work primarily of a qualitative nature rather than in structured surveys. Family life is one area of enquiry where joint interviews can be used to advantage (Allan, 1980), suggesting that participants will generally be people in marital relationships or living as couples. Quite often, joint interviews are used as part of a triangulated study (see Chapter 2), involving separate conversations with the individuals concerned either before or after the joint interview, and with interviews repeated over a long period of time (Radley, 1988; Backett, 1990).

In Box 6.1, we detail some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of conducting planned joint interviews, which are quite different from unplanned joint interviews (see Chapter 5).

There are various practical difficulties with a joint interview research design. First, this sort of technique is associated with a low response rate. In two studies involving family finance – admittedly a sensitive issue – men were less likely than women to be willing to participate (Pahl, 1989; Jordan et al., 1992). Secondly, organizing joint interviews can be a difficult and drawn-out process, particularly if both partners work. Accommodating two people's schedules may mean that joint interviews are more likely to be arranged for evenings or weekends. Finally, there may be financial implications. The areas where increased expenditure may be expected include the training and time commitments of the interviewer(s), fieldwork activities, transcription and coding, and data analysis and interpretation. Unfortunately, in small-scale studies with limited time and resources available, implementing a joint interview approach may not be appropriate, even if it does appear to be particularly suited to the research questions.

Interviewing an intact social group There can be interviews with groups as well as with individuals. Group interviews can show something of the dynamics of social relationships amongst group members – for example, who gets to speak and who does not, what forms of speech characterize different members in the group setting, and whose ideas are listened to. When the group is a naturally occurring social group, then things can be discovered by talking with all members together that could not be gleaned through one-to-one interviews. The researcher may observe the processes of consensus formation and of the rules by which disagreements are played out.

Bruner (1990) describes a method in which family members were individually interviewed about their lives. As is often, but not invariably the case, the informants 'later remarked spontaneously that they had enjoyed the interview

Box 6.1 Advantages and disadvantages of joint interviews

(Developed from Arksey, 1996)

Advantages

- May establish rapport and an atmosphere of confidence more easily.
- Can obtain two versions of events rather than one, which may, or may not, produce a coherent joint account. The distinct forms of information and knowledge are likely to corroborate and supplement each other, but at the same time may contain points of divergence. Inconsistencies between perspectives are likely to be missed if one partner is left out of the study, and his or her views are inferred from the other's data.
- The story that emerges may be more complete as interviewees fill in each other's gaps and memory lapses.
- The information obtained may be more trustworthy as bias in one account may counterbalance that in the other.
- Researchers may gain insights into the interactions and nature of (power) relationships between couples through observation of verbal and non-verbal modes of communication; for example, it may be possible to witness how couples support, negotiate and influence each other, as well as manage disagreements and areas of tension.

Disadvantages

- One informant may dominate, to the extent of silencing the partner; the literature (McKee and O'Brien, 1983; Jordan et al., 1992) suggests that men are likely to be the more vocal and overbearing.
- The risk of stirring up antagonisms and conflicts of interest.
- If the research topic is especially sensitive, or there is any likelihood of provoking friction, individuals may not be willing to disclose detailed, honest information in front of their partner and instead provide a more acceptable, 'public' response (Cornwell, 1984).
- Partners may collude to withhold information from the interviewer.
- Interviewees may not concentrate as well when two people are present.

and/or that they had found it personally informative. Several said that they had been quite surprised by what came out' (p. 125). These interviews were then followed by a meeting of the whole family where they heard the researchers' account of what it was like to grow up in that family. The subsequent discussion was still going strong after three hours.

This use of a group interview had considerable advantages in terms of the research interest, which had much to do with the interplay of the individual and

the family unit. The small size of the family group (six members) and their known and distinctive voices allowed transcripts to be made that identified who had said what. It also helped to validate the individual interviews, as well as highlighting problem areas in them. It is regrettably uncommon for researchers to build on theoretical insights into the interplay between individuals and social units by using *both* individual and group interviews.

Focus group interviews A focus group is a selection of people who are invited to respond to researchers' questions, findings from earlier studies, policy documents, hypotheses, concerns and the like. They may comprise people who are a cross-section of the population, or they may be homogeneous, comprising, say, retired women, 16-18-year-olds, or clients of the probation service.

Focus groups originated in market research. Suppose that a firm wished to advertise a new product: which features should be stressed, how might it be packaged and what price might be charged? Some purchase can be had on these problems by assembling small groups of consumers and asking them, for example, what they looked for in buying a new car. In this case, it is probable that they would be shown mock-ups of different cars, descriptions or drawings, and be asked to say which they preferred and why.

The results of these market research focus groups would *not* prove anything, especially if participants were paid for their views. The number involved would be small and the generalizability would be quite low. There would also be problems because of group dynamics, where dominant individuals might obliterate alternative points of view. Again, perceived status differences may lead some group members to dissemble and conceal views. An example of this from Canada is a focus group that was discussing road safety, specifically related to motorists' behaviour in areas patrolled by pedestrian crossing attendants (who were being injured at an unacceptable rate). As focus group members introduced themselves, it emerged that one man was an officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ('Mountie'). At first, people said that they conformed to speed limits and road signs. Only when the RCMP man said that he regularly drove his private car 10 kph faster than the speed limit, even though he knew he should not, did others begin to talk more openly.

Despite the drawbacks, focus group interviews are very useful for some purposes. For example, researchers need to be sure that their instruments do explore the way people feel, think, and say they act, and not simply test out the researchers' view of how these things ought to be. Focus groups are a low cost way of getting the range of the informants' perspectives and of getting some, tentative purchase on who holds them. As long as the results of these groups are treated as material for thought, reflection and further investigation, they can be very useful and relatively inexpensive. They complement but do not remove the need to pilot and refine research instruments.

One of us has used focus groups to understand the way students choose jobs and postgraduate courses (Hesketh and Knight, 1997). At first sight, this approach is riddled with flaws. Groups can be harder to manage than individuals, so the discussion can loop around on itself and some issues can get quite brief attention.

Groups can be large (unexpectedly, one of ours had 25 people, was not easy to manage, and produced a low quality tape recording). It would be more usual to think of focus groups of about seven people, and even then it is important to have two, good-quality tape recorders with separate stereo microphones carefully placed to ensure usable recordings will be made. Even with good acoustics, good equipment and manageable groups, it can still be impossible to ascribe views to individuals, and some people simply say little. There is no scope to ask for a show of hands to see how many people agree with any particular point, since that would disrupt the flow of conversation and put the researcher in a far more directive role than is consistent with hearing as many ideas as possible. Despite such problems, the Hesketh and Knight study heard a consistent and very important message that people applying for postgraduate courses were not getting the sort of information from higher education institutions that they wanted. That was very helpful to information providers who were able to think better about providing material to potential postgraduate students.

Focus groups are also used to validate research reports. In Chapter 11 we describe some of the problems of analysing interview data. It will be seen that this is not an objective, judgement-free process, which means that the interpretations that come out of the analysis might make sense to the researcher but not to the research subjects. One way of reducing this risk is to validate the findings by giving participants a summary of them. Where this can be followed by focus groups composed of participants, the researchers have a better chance to hear how well the interpretation fits their understandings. It also provides a chance for the researchers to seek explanations of unexpected findings and to clarify details.

Fuller discussion of issues in focus group research is provided by Morgan (1988), Krueger (1994), Greenbaum (1998) and Wilkinson (1998). The set of six books in the *Focus Group Kit* (edited by Krueger and Morgan, 1998) provides a comprehensive treatment in a practical and accessible way.

One-to-one interviews

Most interviews are conducted one-to-one. To illustrate the range of approaches to one-to-one interviewing, we review here telephone interviewing, as an example of survey interviewing, and oral history interviews to give a sense of less-focused alternatives.

Telephone interviewing Surveys produce data that are far more closely related to the quality of the questions that are asked than is the case with exploratory interviews, where rich data are often defined as those coming from people sharing easily what is foremost in their thinking. There, the exact wording of the questions is less important, given the great flexibility of qualitative approaches.

At first sight, self-administered questionnaires should be the preferred survey method, and it is hard to see why anyone would go to the expense of paying people to read out scripts that could be sent out as questionnaires. Yet, survey interviewing is often the method of choice in market research. We examine telephone interviewing to illustrate the case for survey interviewing.

Once, telephone interviews were treated with distrust, rather as internet-based research is now (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). Those with a phone were better off than others, so telephone surveys provided information about the attitudes and beliefs of more affluent people only. Now, telephone ownership is widespread, although the very poorest are still excluded, more so in the UK than in the USA, and telephone interviewing is now a major method in survey research in marketing, although it is still, in the opinion of Frey (1989), not sufficiently well known as a social science research technique.

In many ways, telephone interviewing does not feel like interviewing. The respondent cannot be seen and the visual cues that are so important in establishing an interviewing relationship are lost. The rapport depends on what is said and on the voice manner of the interviewer. For this reason, careful attention has to be paid to the introductory patter and to the interviewing schedule, and interviewers need to be chosen for the quality of their phone manner. Despite these impediments, Lavrakas (1987) hopes to gain a 90 per cent response rate from those of the target group who can be contacted.

Telephone interviewing has several advantages:

- It is well-suited to random and structured sampling, far more so than clipboarding (which is also known as 'intercept interviewing', where people are stopped in malls, going to football games, leaving churches, and so on. The major problem is that the people at those places are only representative of people who go to such places at such times).
- Telephone interviewing is ahead of its main rival, the questionnaire, because it is quicker.
- Telephone interviewing usually has higher response rates than do questionnaires, especially where people have had a letter saying that they will be called and outlining the purpose of the coming call. (It also means that people can have to hand any files they might need when they are telephoned.)
- The interviewer can help respondents who have difficulties with any question, which is not true of questionnaires.
- Literacy, which is necessary for questionnaire response, is not a limiting factor in telephone interviews.
- The conventions of phone use work for the interviewer, since people feel a pressure to answer the phone (but not to respond to an intercept interviewer), it is customary for the initiator to terminate the call, and there is an expectation that the person answering the phone will then participate actively in the conversation (Frey, 1989).
- It has the advantage over questionnaires that the interviewer can encourage reluctant phone subscribers to participate. Ways of doing that include having a good 'patter', by stressing how helpful it would be to have *their* opinions, by saying that the interviewer will call back at a more convenient time, by saying that the interview will be brief, by pointing out the value of having more information on an important issue, or by saying that cooperation helps the interviewer to earn a living (Lavrakas, 1987). Box 6.2 illustrates some of the things that the interviewer might say in these circumstances.

Box 6.2 Examples of explanations that phone interviewers give

(This material relates to the issue of informed consent, covered in Chapter 9)

The purpose of the survey

This is a short survey [*give a length of time here*]. The questions are about your attitude towards [*add name of topic*]. We want to know how you feel about this because it will help us to understand what people think. That will help us to get a better idea of [*what to do/how to improve things/what the firm, government etc. could concentrate on in the future*]. I'm doing this as a part of my work at [*name of institution*] and, as well as being useful to [*name the users of the findings*] it is a part of my coursework. Whatever you tell me will be confidential. Your cooperation is voluntary but it would be very helpful if you would answer these questions for me.

How will the survey be used?

I shall write up a report for the course tutor. I will not use anyone's names in the report, or say anything that could identify anyone. A summary of the findings will also go to [*add name of user*]. The idea is that these findings should help us to understand [*insert name of the topic*] better so that better decisions can be made/better action can be taken. Your cooperation is voluntary but it would be very helpful if you would answer these questions for me.

How did you get my number? I'm not in the book

Your number was chosen by a computer which randomly generates a list of all the numbers that might be in use in this area. I then dial the numbers that the computer comes up with until I find one that is in use, like yours. This method is used because it is the only way we can be sure that I get to talk to a fair sample of people in [*add name of the area*]. If I do not talk to a fair cross-section, then my results will be misleading.

Why do you want to talk to [*someone of the opposite sex, someone younger or older*] and not me?

I need to make sure that I get to talk to a good mix of men and women, older and younger people. The computer helps me to do that by telling me who to ask for each time I make a call.

Hmm. I'm still not sure.

If you want to check that what I'm saying is accurate, why not call [*name and number of academic supervisor*] and I'll call you back afterwards.

- Interviewer reliability should be high, since a supervisor can monitor calls and spot cases where the interviewer diverges from the script.
- The researcher can quickly see how the work is progressing by reviewing the completed response forms as they are passed on by the interviewers.

The main disadvantages are more or less those common to survey methods:

- Respondents will not be prepared to spend a long time answering questions. There is a consensus (Frey, 1989) that the questions need to be fixed-response ones, since open-ended questions are harder to manage over the phone than face-to-face and answers tend to be less complex and shorter.
- The interviewer has little guarantee that the respondent's mind is really on the questions and not distracted by TV, children, pets, or the dinner that is burning. Phone surveys take more interviewer time than do questionnaires, involve phoning outside of normal work hours, and require repeated attempts to contact the right person at some numbers.
- They demand a lot of concentration and energy to keep to the script and to sound bright.
- Interviewer training is necessary and interviewer supervision is common.
- Each call is more expensive than the cost of sending out each questionnaire. (However, the cost *per response* of the two methods may favour telephone interviews.)
- And, of course, the data produced will be of the quality that comes from all survey methods.

In this balance of opportunities and problems, there is one important aspect of telephone interviewing that commands serious attention, and that is the construction of the sample. As with mailed questionnaires, careful construction of the sample is very important where the intention is to generalize with statistical confidence from the sample to the population. Using telephone interviewing, it is broadly possible to target specific groups of respondents, such as middle-income or low-income groups, by matching residential information (perhaps taken from census summaries) to phone codes, although this is complicated where the codes do not align with the residential districts to be surveyed. Computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) is a powerful way of generating *random* samples. The area codes that are to be surveyed are entered and a computer program randomly generates telephone numbers, within the range of numbers used by the telephone company. This random sampling will select numbers that are unlisted – a substantial proportion of numbers in some areas, especially in the inner city – but telephone subscribers can become quite irritated at being 'cold called' in this way and decline to participate in the survey. There are also manual ways of generating a sample of telephone numbers, although some of the numbers, whether generated manually or by computer, will not be in use, so the size of the sample will always be smaller than that pool of numbers.

If interviewers only speak to the adult who first answers the call, the sample will be systematically biased, since it has been found that older people and women

are more likely to be on hand. So, sometimes interviewers are told to ask to speak to the eldest adult male, or to the youngest adult female in the household. However, a request to speak to the youngest male, or to a female wage-earner (strategies designed to get a balanced sample of respondents) will often be met with the response that he or she is not available, so a further call will be needed.

Although the telephone interviewing method has many attractions, it is nevertheless little used in social science research. One reason is because social science researchers are often interested in people who have a characteristic that is not related to their phone number or address. For example, the phone numbers of single parents, widows, recent immigrants and highly educated people cannot be generated by computer or picked out from the phone book. Secondly, where a researcher is interested in people who share an occupation, such as nurses, shop workers, or laboratory technicians, it is not satisfactory to call them at work. Teachers, for example, usually share a staffroom phone, are seldom close to it, and have neither the time nor privacy to deal with a phone interview.

Oral history interviews There is no reason why an oral history interview cannot take the form of a survey, although it is quite rare, since the historian is usually preoccupied by understanding the details and meanings of the particular rather than by trying to generalize (which can be a pretty risky business in history, given the effects of forgetfulness and decay, of time colouring the past, and of death carrying off witnesses). Unstructured interviews are avoided since they tend to produce a mass of incompatible data, which can be analysed, but which can leave the researcher wondering whether other informants would have endorsed or rejected points that some had made but which they themselves did not spontaneously volunteer. It is more usual for oral history to use semi-structured interviews that allow informants to depict the past in their own words, following their own sense of what was important. The researcher, guided by the literature, documents and other interviews, will have a loose agenda of questions to ask and themes to explore, but the answers will be open-ended, and the interview will not be dominated by the researcher in the same way as is the case with surveys. Yet, oral historians are often anxious to get a picture that looks as though it might credibly represent the experience of people other than those who were interviewed. For that reason, they may take considerable care to try to get a sample of informants that mirrors the structure of the past in some way, for example, in terms of social class, occupations, geographical area or gender. So, their work may combine careful but non-random sampling with a semi-structured format.

It might be expected that informants' memories of things that happened up to half a century ago might be particularly unreliable (and there are questions about the reliability of our memories of yesterday, let alone of 50 years ago). This has been investigated and the opinion of two authorities (Lummis, 1987; Thompson, 1988) is that informants can speak in detail about things that were salient to them, such as critical incidents and processes they lived day in and day out. In fact, their memory of distant times can, in some respects, be better than their memory of more recent times. However, nothing should be taken on trust, so as much as possible should be checked against other sources. This is a bread-and-butter

matter for historians, who were triangulating data long before social scientists had invented a geometrical term for the Renaissance practice of critical document study. Interestingly, oral historians have concluded that the errors they detect can, in themselves be revealing, showing a lot about myths and explanatory frameworks. Arguably, historians have an advantage here over social scientists. The social scientist investigates the contemporary world where informants may feel a need to put up a front. When the subject is something that happened half a century ago, that need is likely to be less strong.

As with social science researchers, oral historians tend to pay a lot of attention to building rapport in interviews so that they get the best quality data, although Lummis reports that he has 'had good open interviews with people with whom I felt little rapport and had no personal liking' (1987: 68). (We develop this theme of rapport in interviews in Chapter 7.) Since they will often interview the same informant repeatedly, there is a fair chance of confidence developing, so that the informant edges from 'public talk' to 'private talk'. A common aim in these interviews is to get as full a description of an event, milieu or time as possible, which means that the interviewer needs to be skilled at listening and probing. The list of probes and prompts is as long as the researcher's imagination. The important thing is to probe for clarification and detail *without* turning the interview into an interrogation and ceasing to listen. Box 6.3 shows some commonly used probes, which might be used by social science researchers as well as by oral historians.

Oral historians, like social science researchers, have considerable problems with data management and data analysis (see Chapter 11). However, the idea that there can be different readings of an archive is again a well-established one in history. The discipline handles this by requiring researchers to substantiate their claims with explicit, footnoted reference to an archive that is publicly available and submits interpretations to the test of the extent to which they are plausible to others in the disciplinary community. Again, there are parallels here with some social science approaches to establishing the credibility of research findings.

Lastly, the results of oral history work may most frequently appear in the form of a conventional academic report, but they also appear as broadcasts and sometimes lead to films, novels or other creative representations of a discovered past. Such practices are becoming more common in some social science departments.

Designing an interview study: an example

These first six chapters have concentrated on the design of interview research. The following account of a large-scale study in which Peter was involved in 1994–6 draws together a number of themes that have been developed in these chapters. As you read it, you might consider whether the study could have been better designed to address issues identified in the literature; whether a different interviewing approach would have been more productive; whether the research team should have taken seriously a more positivist approach to reliability and validity; and whether they could have done anything to allow them to make