

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.

Our experience is that people find topics by other means as well – sometimes it seems that more topics come from the less publicized sources of inspiration than from those that are commended in the research literature. For example:

- Interest. You've got a feeling for a topic, such as housing issues, single old people, children and the internet, discipline in high schools. Alternatively, a topic may be attracting a lot of media attention and seems to be ripe for a small-scale but systematic enquiry that is sensitive to the relevant academic literature.
- You sensibly believe that an important part of doing research is the relationship that can be created with the supervising tutor. Consequently, you pick a congenial academic and say that you want to work in the area in which she or he is expert.
- It is suggested to you that you might like to work in a certain area.
- You get no real choice. You have to do a piece of action research while on placement, or in your place of work. So, you might be expected to do something about the education of hospitalized children, about post-natal support for opiate-addicted mothers and neonates, or about prison health services. And you have to do it within the situation in which you are working, which may not be a very promising research setting.

Who cares? From topic to topicality

Social research may be valuable because:

- It gives the researcher a chance to practise and master research techniques – *apprenticeship*.
- The findings add to knowledge about the topic, or call into question existing concepts, assumptions or findings – *substantive value*.
- Research techniques are applied to new areas, or new techniques are developed – *methodological value*.

Research reports should generally have substantive or methodological value, even in the case of reports that come from apprenticeship research. In other words, they will be more than collections of information. It is not enough to have a topic to investigate, nor to collect a lot of information about it. Fair responses to that information would be 'So what?' 'What does the information mean?' 'Why is it significant or topical?' 'Who cares?' The true story in Box 4.1 is an example of a very poor choice of topic while Box 4.2 indicates the difference between information collection and useful research, a distinction that is developed in Box 4.3. The heart of the difference lies in purposefully connecting the information to a conceptual or theoretical base.

Once a topic is identified, it needs to be connected with relevant other work and thinking so as to make the value of the study clear. This is illustrated with reference to 'action research', which could be (uncharitably) described as all action and no research. It is done with the aim of trying to make a difference to a

Box 4.1 A proposed study with no obvious usefulness

A mature, overseas student, on a course concerned with the assessment of students' learning, insisted that he wanted to study the operation of the educational bureaucracy in his country. He agreed that there was nothing unexpected likely to come out of this study; that the Minister of Education already knew that his ministry was a featherbed for his family and friends (after all, the minister himself had lifted them gently into that bed); and that a research report would make no difference (except that the student, had he completed the study, would have probably been wise to make himself very scarce).

The story, which still puzzles Peter, illustrates the 'so what?' question, describing a study with no topicality and no usefulness. Nor was there any indication that new concepts would have been developed, or old ones applied and extended. It seemed quite pointless, an example of interest without thought.

Box 4.2 A way of answering the 'so what?' question

A research study, for example, would not be very interesting if the write-up said, 'I used x , y and z methods to gather information and the findings appear below.' Rather, it is the theoretical or conceptual base in which particular methods are couched that makes them interesting. Consider the following statement: 'Because I was interested in exploring the conceptual position taken by authors in this area, methods x , y and z helped me answer the following questions. The findings are presented below and are compatible with theories and ideas derived from the literature. The methods employed were adequate to answer the questions I had raised' (Grasha, 1996: 95).

situation. It typically involves examining practices and trying out ways of improving them. What this means is that the research needs to be purposeful and focused, not just information collecting. In fact, the need to be aware of the literature and other thinking is all the greater here, since other people's research and writing are a fruitful source of ideas about the most promising approaches to making a difference. Where work is purposeful, uses theory and research findings – when it is connected – then it is better, not least because it contains an answer to the 'so what?' question. And the more that answer is emphasized, the more attention is likely to be paid to the findings.

It might be objected that progressive focusing was recommended in Chapter 1, whereas here we are commending clarity and focus from the start. There are two

Box 4.3 Commentary on a selection of research topics

Research topic	Comments
A study of a day care centre	Topic too big. Focus unclear. No indication of what the value of the study might be, nor of who might be interested by it
An action research project in Ward M1	Too general – what aspects of Ward M1 are going to be studied? Why? Who will be the audience and who will benefit? In what ways? And with action research, it is important to know that you can make changes, see them through and evaluate them
How effective is Social Work Team PR5?	More focused than the other questions but the notion of ‘effectiveness’ is a minefield – it is really too big to tackle in one undergraduate study. The concept of effectiveness also appears in Box 7.4
How effective do clients of Social Work team PR5 believe it to be?	Much better. With the right literature review this could be good, because work on effectiveness tends to be producer-centred, not client-centred. This could question the validity of that tendency
A study of teenagers’ attitudes to pollution	‘Pollution’ is too broad a topic. More seriously, this research is unlikely to tell us anything new – it is unlikely to have any value beyond apprenticeship
How do police deal with rowdy youths? An interview study of beat officers in two contrasting areas	Good to see a focus on contrasting areas and on a manageable sample. However, defining ‘rowdy’ is going to be tricky (but not impossible). The serious mistake is to forget that interviews do not give information about practice: <i>they tell us what people believe they do</i>
What is the best way of teaching the concept of place value to six-year-olds?	A well-formed question that will not yield to interview methods. A long-term, experimental design will give the most secure results
Under what circumstances do ‘empty nesters’ give to charity?	There is value in knowing why people think they give to charity but it is well known what people actually do is often quite different from what they believe they do: it is an area where the public voice tends to overwhelm the private voice. Unsurprisingly, then, research into

continued

altruism, of which this is an example, is dominated by experimental studies

A survey of the needs of recently bereaved unemployed men below retirement age

In many ways a well-defined study. However, is a survey the right way to proceed? Yes, if there has been a good reading of other research and some unstructured or semi-structured pilot work. Otherwise . . .

Your tentative research question

Your comment

responses to this apparent contradiction. The first is that progressive focusing should be seen as progressively focusing on the best ways to understand and investigate the research question, which will lead to some changes in the initial question and which might lead new questions to be brought into the research. This response is essentially that progressive focusing takes place from the start of research into a question of value. The second response sees progressive focusing coming from the topic. As you read more about the topic, talk to people and, perhaps, do some pilot research, questions arise, which are refined and developed as the project progresses. In this case progressive focusing leads you to the research question, which is then sharpened by further focusing. Often, it is only through progressive focusing that researchers identify the value and significance of their work. The difficulty is that can take up time: and time is always in short supply in research projects.

If research is to be valued, it needs to have a purpose, to be shaped by important substantive or methodological concerns. Making the case that these concerns are important involves relating them to the literature, as well as listening to stakeholders’ claims that this is an important issue for them. However, the research community is unlikely to be very interested in a story of significance to one social work team unless it is related to the prevailing research discourse – to the existing literature. The following advice on doing a literature review should be read in conjunction with that in Chapter 12 on writing up the results.

Reviewing the literature

To illustrate the importance of reviewing the literature, we introduce the action research approach to enquiry. It is usually small-scale research that is intended to help the researcher or practitioners to take actions that are planned to make a difference and whose impact will be evaluated. That evaluation will often set off a further round of research, leading to the analogy that action research is a spiral of activity, a process. Because the problem and situation are immediate, there is a temptation to jump straight in to the research, sometimes without thinking too carefully about the methods, let alone about the instrumentation in any detail. Understandable though that is, there are three major disadvantages:

- **Rediscovering the wheel:** the investigator has to invent instruments when perfectly good ones already exist. Furthermore, if they were used, the investigator would get data that could be directly compared with the study from which they were drawn, broadening the interest of the study's findings.
- **Missing significant findings:** the investigator does not realize that some good answers to this problem already exist; or that there are good conceptual frameworks that can profitably guide the research; or that this is an impossible enquiry because it demands large-scale and sophisticated research and analysis.
- **If the study is never connected to general thinking,** it stands alone. Readers can still draw their own conclusions, but they may remain unaware of some of the possible significances of the results.

The case has been that it is important, even in action research, to examine the relevant literature. How might this be done? Suppose this is to be a study of female washroom attendants. This is manual labour, performed by women, in circumstances that are full of taboos and symbols. It is a service occupation, poorly paid, held in low esteem and sometimes quite unpleasant. The way that female washroom attendants regard this work is related to their sense of self and self-esteem, which means that there is a greater or lesser interplay between their identity and culture as a washroom attendant and their other identities and cultures.

At first sight, it is rather hard to see why washroom attendants would be taken as a subject of intrinsic interest. However, there could be a lot of value if these people were studied in order to test out or develop theories about how women balance work and home lives; self-esteem; occupational motivation; taboos; or women's perceptions of their bodies. Different theoretical concerns imply different research questions, different methods and different ways of making the claim that the research is of value and significance. One aim of the literature review will be to see which methods and questions are normally applied when investigating any one theoretical line.

Another aim will be to see what the big issues and questions are in any theoretical stance. Suppose that the attendants' work is changing. They are now expected to cover two washrooms, not just the one they tended in the past; their pay is not increased annually, overtime is no longer available and job security is threatened as budget pressures grow. There is talk of introducing charges for the use of the facilities and also of having women cover both male and female washrooms, and of male attendants doing the same. These changes could be interpreted within the literature on the intensification of work, as well as within the often-related literature on women's work. Both are quite diverse and extensive fields of study, as a literature review will show. One question for the prospective researcher is which interpretations within the literature appear to be more convincing and more relevant, which implies a critique of the others on grounds such as they are incomplete, their conceptualization is inadequate, or there are problems with the empirical research. In turn, this will help to clarify the directions for the study and set the tone for the report.

This rather assumes that there is little problem in identifying the relevant literature. Nothing could be further from the case. Searches of CD-ROM or

on-line data bases can be infuriating. On the one hand, they can throw up too many references (it is a good idea to limit the first search to the past five years, or less). On the other, many references will be impossible to access and many will be trivial or of little interest. And there are all the valuable references that are missed because no human imagination would guess the right keywords to find them. A good technique is, first, to locate a couple of recent and quite comprehensive references and follow up some of their citations. Finally, keep in mind a sense of proportion. Within the time available, there are limits to how much can be read. Usually, the aim is not to produce an exhaustive literature review but one that links an enquiry to wider concerns and issues. In other words, the review is there for a purpose, to provide one answer to the 'so what?' question. It establishes the substantive significance of the investigation and, where the enquiry is methodologically innovative, it shows the reader what there is that is innovative about the methods – how they are an advance on the methods used by earlier researchers.

At some point, the reading will need to be written up and presented as a section of the research report. Table 4.1 is a guide to one way of doing that, but because the way you organize the literature review will have to depend on the research question, it has to be appreciated that other structures are feasible.

Three further points deserve mention:

- **Be sparing on historical background** (and one of us has had a career as a historian). It is legitimate to survey the history of an issue, but only when it is clear how this affects the proposed research. Where the purpose of a historical overview is unclear, it can damage a review by making the reader suspicious of a writer who appears to be inflating the report with irrelevant material.
- **The literature review may be concise.**
- **Reading the literature on a topic generates research questions** (see Box 4.4 for an example). However, research questions develop and new ones can emerge during the research. The implication for the literature review is that whatever is read and written early in the study will be re-written later in the study in the light of new emphases. Research manuals often imply that the review is done, then the fieldwork, and then the findings are found. In fact, the review, and the reading that goes with it, are usually revisited and rewritten after the findings are in.

Much more extensive advice about reading research reports is to be found in Locke, Silverman and Spirduso (1998). Cooper (1998) goes into considerable detail about the processes by which a set of research reports is drawn together into a synthesis, such as the literature review described here.

Making your research credible

Readers want to know that the research has been carefully done, so that findings can be trusted. Within the positivist tradition, this involves taking care to maximize validity and reliability, while taking steps to ensure that the findings

TABLE 4.1 *A literature review template*

Focus	Example
Preview of the issue	<i>Throughout the Western world, those in full-time employment have found that they are frequently being expected to work longer, to do more . . . This has often been called intensification</i>
Main literature findings – empirical	<i>Studies have been conducted in a number of countries, involving both low- and high-status occupations. The findings have generally been that . . .</i>
Are there any notable exceptions to the general trend?	<i>However, . . . [You may not need this section]</i>
Are there any explanations that need to be considered? [Be ruthless here: your study may not be much concerned with <i>why</i> so much as with <i>what</i> , or with the <i>effects</i>]	<i>[There is general agreement that economic factors are the major cause of intensification, although ideological factors also need to be considered]</i>
Are there any problems with the ways in which existing research has been conceptualized?	<i>A major problem with the notion of intensification is that it assumes that objective changes, such as requiring workers to take more responsibility, are perceived in just one way (as an imposition rather than as, say, empowerment)</i>
Are there any problems with the sampling?	<i>Attention has been concentrated on professional groups, and not on low status groups, such as women who do manual work. It is not clear, then, whether intensification is a widespread phenomenon, or a concern of the 'chattering classes' alone</i>
So, explain what issues you are going to examine: what are your research questions? Who cares about your findings?	<i>This study will therefore . . . The findings will help to decide whether . . .</i>
What methods have been used? Are they suitable? Would other methods enrich understanding of the phenomenon? Justify this claim	<i>Much of the research has taken place on the assumption that demonstrating increases in the demands made on employees is the same as demonstrating the existence of intensification, which has largely been done on the basis of documentary sources and survey research. However, whether changes are seen as intensification is a matter of individual perception. Exploring these perceptions requires the use of interview methods . . .</i>

from the sample can be readily generalized to the population. First, we discuss validity and reliability within that tradition, since they are important prompts to thinking well about research design and they are directly applicable to survey research. However, they cannot be straightforwardly applied to qualitative research,

Box 4.4 From research topic to research questions

(This is based on a study in which Peter was involved)

The researchers became interested in the occupational socialization of new higher education lecturers. The topic is important, since patterns established in the first years in the job persist. They approached the topic with three principles in mind: that it was necessary to consider the 'whole person' when studying academic staff; that socialization should not be seen as a one-way process; and that informal socialization and professional development were likely to be more significant than formal processes (this point came from a major study of schoolteachers in which Peter had been involved). These principles were to be tested against the evidence collected in the research.

The literature review threw up far more research questions than the duo could pursue. The research guide included those that could be fairly pursued through long, loosely structured interviews; which would shed light on the three principles; and which seemed to have the potential to advance thinking about the topic. As the research progressed, the researchers continued to find new literature, which influenced their interviewing, although it was not necessary to revise the interview guide.

Typical interview questions were: Which of four views of academic work (taken from the literature) is closest to yours? Which of four views of the goals of undergraduate teaching (taken from the literature) is closest to yours? How would you describe the relationship between your work and your out-of-work life? (Prompts taken from the literature.) Were there any formal induction arrangements? If so, please describe them and say how good you found them. Have you got a mentor? If so, please describe the mentoring process and evaluate it.

so this is followed by a summary of thinking about the credibility of qualitative research. The last section of this chapter concentrates upon the way in which findings can be generalized from surveys, action research and case studies to more general contexts.

Validity

We take validity to raise the question of whether you are actually investigating what you claim to be investigating. Campbell and Stanley (1963) give the classic account of threats to validity. Many of them we just have to live with, on the principle that flawed information is better than none, and there is sometimes little that can be done about some threats. So, while survey research aims to be reliable and valid, because the survey format itself constrains respondents, it compromises validity. It is a matter for judgement whether the cost to validity is large (and it

will be least where the survey instrument has grown out of piloting that has included qualitative interviews) and acceptable.

In both quantitative and qualitative approaches, threats to validity are legion, although some qualitative researchers would use alternative terms to 'validity'. For example, your study may claim to look at the attitudes of young people towards the police. Research based on interviews with 15-year-olds at school might have validity problems because those playing truant, whose attitudes towards the police might be quite distinctive, would be missed. Another threat to validity is when we fail to create a situation in which the respondent feels easy and able to talk. One report tells of a researcher who talked to business executives on train journeys:

What struck [the researcher] was the extent to which the views and opinions of the managers, off-guard and to a person they were unlikely to meet again, contradicted the 'reality' contained in much contemporary management literature. Had the interview taken place in the manager's office, the results might well have been quite different. (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991: 78)

Validity is enhanced by:

- Interviewing techniques that build rapport, trust and openness and which give informants scope to express the way they see things.
- Schedules that contain questions drawn from the literature and from pilot work with respondents.
- A set of questions that fully covers the issues raised by the research question – key aspects are not ignored.
- Not asking questions that are irrelevant to the research topic – a waste of scarce interview time.
- Prompts that encourage informants to illustrate, expand and clarify their initial responses, talking in detail and about specifics.
- A sample that is fit for the purpose of the research. If the work is preliminary, opportunity samples and snowballing (see below) are acceptable. If the aim is to make claims about a group, or to give a rounded account of an event, sampling needs to ensure that all points of view are appreciated. Big samples, preferably selected at random, are needed if you want to claim that your findings are very likely to hold good for the population.
- Thinking about the possible effects of interview times and settings. Ideally, respondents should be interviewed more than once, with the setting changing.
- Interviews that are long enough. Interviewers often find themselves pressed for time (see Box 3.4). However, no matter how long an interview, we have found that 'one of the most basic rules of interviewing is that the most interesting material emerges when the recorder is switched off' (Powney and Watts, 1987: 139).

Reliability

If it is assumed that there is a stable reality 'out there', which is to be precisely measured and described, then it is important that the findings are not corrupted by

the research process: the design and tools need to be reliable. Some qualitative researchers would want to talk in terms of the consistency, trustworthiness and authenticity of the research, although they would still find themselves addressing many of the issues covered here. In survey research, reliability is mainly about trying to reduce interviewer bias so that we can trust that the findings are neither the product of the research instruments, nor of the interviewer's quirks and improvisations. It is likely to be important to make sure that all informants are asked exactly the same questions and given similar sorts of clarification. The findings would be unreliable if it turned out that some questions were explained to some respondents who were puzzled by them but not to other puzzled respondents. This is especially important where several interviewers might be involved in a large-scale survey.

Complete reliability is not attainable, although the guidelines for survey researchers (Box 4.5) show how it may be maximized by limiting variations in interviewing practice (see also Brenner et al., 1985). There is also further discussion of reliability in the context of telephone interviewing, which is described in Chapter 6. Reliable data analysis is covered in Chapter 11.

Box 4.5 Typical guidelines for survey interviewers

- Look interested.
- Stick to the schedule: read the questions exactly as printed, in that order; read all of them.
- If there are pictures, cue cards or other apparatus, use them as scheduled.
- Try not to signal approval or disapproval of any answer.
- Do repeat the question if asked.
- If the respondent refuses to answer a question, that has to be accepted, and without any signal of irritation.
- Make sure that you understand a response.
- If not, probe in a non-directive manner ('Would you tell me more about that, please?'); if need be repeat (*but* do not alter) the question.
- If an answer is not adequate (it is an answer to a different question), thank the respondent for the answer and repeat the original question ('Thank you. And could you tell me . . .').
- Do not answer for the respondent, explain the question, or give any other new information, unless the schedule allows it.

The schedule should give guidance on the clarification you can give if asked, and that should be based on the experience of piloting the schedule. Practice varies from being allowed to repeat questions but not to clarify, to being able to explain the meaning of words or phrases, to, sometimes, being allowed to re-phrase the question (which compromises reliability).

The assumptions that underpin qualitative research mean that classic concepts of reliability do not sit very well with this approach:

Qualitative research is not looking for principles that are true all the time and in all conditions, like laws of physics; rather the goal is understanding of specific circumstances, how and why things actually happen in a complex world. Knowledge in qualitative interviewing is situational and conditional. (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 38)

The quest for situational and conditional understanding is quite different from the quest of positivist social science. Consequently, the concepts of reliability and validity cannot be imported from positivist approaches to qualitative ones. 'Reliability', based on assumptions that phenomena are regular and unchanging, is particularly inappropriate in epistemologies that see situated cognition, complexity and change as pervasive and normal features. Therefore, it is important to recognize the futility of imagining that 'if you could strip the interview of all of these [biasing] factors, the "real" or "true" or "unbiased" response would emerge' (Briggs, 1986: 21). Yet, it can be a useful exercise for the qualitative researcher to ask traditional reliability and validity questions as a way of getting a fresh perspective on the research design.

This view of the inappropriateness of traditional notions of reliability and validity in much qualitative research does not imply that qualitative researchers are cast into the pit of relativism:

The ethnographer is not committed to 'any old story', but wants to provide an account that communicates with the reader the truth about the setting and the situation, as the ethnographer has come to understand it. (Altheide and Johnson, 1994: 496)

By and large, qualitative researchers have responded to the problem of demonstrating the credibility or trustworthiness of non-positivist research in two ways. First, by recognizing the value of continuing to ask, but not to be bound by, the questions raised by classic accounts of validity; and secondly, by developing their own criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), which have a lot of common ground with the rules of historical enquiry. The three most relevant concepts here are:

- *Consistency*: this is akin to 'reliability'. The requirement is that the researcher shows how the research has been done and decisions have been made, so that the reader could conduct an 'audit trail', examining the good sense and plausibility of the researcher's thought and actions. There should be evidence that the inevitable inconsistencies in the data had been considered and there should be some account of how they have been handled. This largely embraces what Rubin and Rubin (1995) call transparency and consistency. It implies that researchers will describe their findings and their analysis, and their own work in detail – 'thick description' as it is sometimes called.
- *Truth value*: this involves providing evidence that what the researcher has captured is recognizable as a fair representation of things as informants see them. It involves triangulation of methods and triangulation by examining

different perspectives on the research topic (see Chapter 2). It involves checking with interviewees that what they said is what they meant, and that interpretations make sense to them. It should come from immersion in the research and, to some, it implies participant research. Inevitably, differences and inconsistencies will be highlighted, and, following the principle of consistency, the researcher should show how they have been dealt with.

- *Neutrality*: this is a requirement that the researcher considers their own role in the research. Patton (1990) has remarked that in qualitative research, the research is the instrument. Clearly, the researcher cannot be the objective agent depicted in some positivist views of scientific enquiry. The researcher has an influence, and a different researcher would have a somewhat different influence. The aim is not to try to standardize researchers, but to have them reflect on the ways in which their background (class, gender, race, special concerns), personality (which is critical to achieving rapport and trust), mind set (assumptions and preconceptions), and actions have contributed to their account. The aim is to check the 'rampant subjectivity inherent in more phenomenologically based paradigms that will prove to be the nemesis of new paradigm research' (Lather, 1986: 68): *the aim is to check, not to obliterate.*

Reliability and validity in qualitative research

In a nutshell, the qualitative response to the issue of reliability and validity is to require researchers to demonstrate that what they do is fit for their research purpose. Invariably, this shades into questions about the characteristics of good research. It is not possible fully to define these in general terms, for good research consists of adequate response, in the research setting, to the questions raised in the checklist at the back of this book (pages 185–191). Nevertheless, a number of features have been identified and should be borne in mind, including:

- The value of the outcomes for action (in action research), for programme development (in evaluation research), for policy and for the research community in general. This implies evidence of a clear answer to the 'so what?' question.
- Consideration of issues of power and of structural inequalities in the research setting (especially in feminist research [Blackmore, 1996] and studies influenced by critical theory [Robinson, 1996]).
- The incorporation of ethical considerations into the work (is it possible for unfair work to be good work?).
- The achievement of a situational equality between interviewer and informant (Benney and Hughes, 1956) or of closeness between interviewer and interviewee (especially in much feminist research – but compare this with the distance that the historian Lummis [1987] advocates). This is important if the researcher is to hear 'private talk', which discloses meanings that are absent from 'public talk', to hear an authentic voice that might tell of things subversive or discreditable, rather than to hear the socially sanitized accounts of the public voice (Cornwell, 1984).
- Sampling adequacy.

- The appropriateness and power of the interview questions.
- Design flexibility: this means that the researcher was responsive to unanticipated meanings and opportunities.
- Transcript quality (see Chapter 10).

A postmodern problem

Questions of the credibility of the research become problematic once it is assumed that informants' accounts are shifting and shaped by the time and circumstances of the interview, and if it is accepted that the interviewer will construct the meanings of the interviews. It is difficult to give advice on judging the credibility of such research. In the literature, the emphasis is on the researcher providing plenty of data on how the research was done so that readers can judge whether this appears to be an honest attempt to explore it systematically. There are no rules for judging, only the requirement that the researcher make the research process transparent, being explicit about what was done and why:

While the transfer of findings from one case study to another is done by the reader, the researcher has an obligation to provide rich, detailed, thick description about the case. (Firestone, 1993: 18)

When such research is presented in non-conventional forms (Chapter 12), problems multiply, since there is no consensus on judging these research 'reports', although many academics suspect that they – and postmodern research stances – can be licences for the slack exercise of subjectivity and relativism. In such cases it is prudent to establish, in advance, what your sponsor or supervisor would regard as evidence that the research is credible.

Sampling and generalizing from the study

The question of the ways in which generalizations can be made from interview studies has been touched upon in Chapter 1. Table 4.2 extends that discussion by showing how different interviewing purposes are associated with different sampling strategies and thence with the confidence with which the researcher might make claims about the generalizability of the findings from the sample to the population. (A population is the group from which the sample is drawn: on the basis of samples of trainee midwives, football supporters, or retired men, researchers might make claims about the populations of trainee midwives, football supporters, and retired men.)

Sampling always needs to be done thoughtfully, since the sample of respondents or informants affects the information that will be collected and determines the sort of claims that can be made about the meaning of that information. For example, if the aim is to generalize from a sample to a population, then the sample must be representative of the population and large enough for generalizations to be made with confidence. There is a considerable technical literature on the confidence with which generalizations can be made from a sample to a population

TABLE 4.2 *Interviews, sampling and generalizing from the sample to a population*

	Interview purpose	Sampling strategy and generalization
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;"> Researcher makes claims about generalizability </div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;"> Reader makes inferences about generalizability </div>	Survey	Random sample. Size as large as possible. See Oppenheim (1992) for example, for advice on sample size. Researcher makes strong claims about the generalizability of the findings
	Survey	Structured sample. Used where there is a danger that random sampling might lead to key groups being unrepresented. The larger the sample, the greater the confidence when generalizing from it, although some consider that structured sampling is not as powerful a basis for generalization as is random sampling
	Survey plus qualitative questions	If the survey is the most important element, follow rules above. If the exploration is the most important, see below. Take advice on generalizability from appropriate section of this table
	Survey-like	For example, intention is to survey and generalize but not possible to control sampling – use opportunity sample. Researchers are on shaky ground if they try to claim the findings are generalizable
	Qualitative – researching an event or time	Assuming no great concern to generalize, use opportunity sampling, look for good informants, increase sample size by snowballing. Keep adding to sample until you are hearing nothing new. But, also take care to hear the story from different perspectives – seek out people who may have a different slant on what happened
	Qualitative – cultural interviews (finding out about beliefs, understandings and feelings)	As above, taking care not to concentrate on high-status informants and those who readily come forward to be interviewed – danger of not hearing the private or silent voices
	Exploratory – getting into a field	Converse with anyone who might be able to help you get oriented. At best, the researcher can suggest that readers might consider implications of the findings for a population
	Exceptions to the rule	A sample of one (for example, Boyle and Woods, 1996) is enough to show that some research generalizations can be too sweeping

(for example, Oppenheim, 1992). Research undertaken in the 1970s looked at the characteristics of people volunteering for research (quoted in Holden et al., 1993). The authors came to the conclusion that in comparison with non-volunteers, volunteers tended to be: better educated; of higher social class status; more intelligent; in greater need for social approval; more sociable. Although nothing is said relating specifically to volunteers for interview studies, it is important to realize that the act of volunteering to be interviewed is, in itself, a sign that the person may be in a minority in the group in which you are interested.

For qualitative researchers in particular, sampling is an exercise of judgement which balances practical concerns (time, money, access), with the research foci, and with the degree to which *the researcher* wants to generalize from the data. Two important principles to use in making those judgements are:

- Try to get a sample that allows you to see things from all *relevant* perspectives (what is relevant will be closely related to your research foci).
- Keep trying to increase the sample size, or the size of sub-samples that represent different perspectives, until you are not hearing any new points. For intensive interviews designed to explore a topic, a sample of eight is often sufficient, according to McCracken (1988), although survey methods should then be used to check out the findings.

Although most discussions of generalization are about the conditions under which researchers can claim that findings from a sample are likely to hold good for a population, readers also make inferences about the significance of a research report for situations and groups that are of interest to them. It is not possible to prevent readers from generalizing, since that sort of thinking is embedded in the act of reading itself. It is, though, desirable to draw their attention to the generalizations that you regard as secure and – or – significant. In addition, Firestone (1993) argues that it is possible to generalize to theories, as well as to populations; that is to say that your research may give insights into the strength of theoretical positions. For example, the study in Box 4.4 provided data that permitted a re-appraisal of the theory that socialization is a one-way process in which the social environment shapes the new group member.

Generalizing from cases In qualitative research, especially if it involves one case study, or is an action research project, the researcher may be reluctant to suggest that it is wise to generalize to a population. However, that does not mean that no generalization is possible, since the general is always present in the particular. So, a study of a single high school (for example Ball, 1981) can show processes at work that may or may not be present in all high schools but which are likely to be present in many if not all of them. Readers could be prompted to consider whether they recognize these processes as ones that are at work in schools they know, although it is a further research task to explore the extent to which those processes operate in high schools in general. The considerate researcher identifies findings that seem to have implications for other settings, and, as often happens with case studies, suggests that it is for the reader to generalize on the basis of

correspondence between the research and the reader's understandings and experiences (Stenhouse, 1980; Walker, 1983).

Similarly, even a single case study can call into question the assumptions of a theory, as Boyle and Woods' study of one primary headteacher shows (1996). Some researchers had suggested that increasing and increasingly complex workloads, the growth of managerialism and an emphasis on bureaucratic tasks had transformed primary headteachers' roles at the expense of the caring and educational priorities that used to characterize the job. The study of a single headteacher showed that these generalizations were too sweeping and was the basis for a critique of theories that say that changes to social structures determine people's behaviour. Boyle and Woods invoked social interactionist theory to argue that people have choices in the ways in which they respond to structural changes. All of this is based on the study of one headteacher.

Furthermore, if it is possible to do several case studies on a topic, then a process of analytical generalization (Firestone, 1993) can be used to test theories more strenuously. For example, the study of educational markets in three areas, which centred on case studies of 12 schools, provided a very powerful test of existing theories about the effects of what the authors called 'public-markets' on educational practices and has generated new theories (Woods et al., 1998).

All research, then, has some generalizability. Problems come when researchers try to make generalizations that go beyond what the research design can support. They also arise when, through failing to answer the 'so what?' question, the researcher gives readers little help in seeing how they, not the researcher, might generalize from the findings.

Conclusion

Early thinking about the design of the research governs the sorts of claims that can be made on the basis of the evidence collected through interviewing. It is one thing to speculate on the claims that might have been made had the reliability and validity (or their equivalents) been differently framed, or if another sampling strategy had been employed, or if the focus were somewhat altered. That is legitimate and desirable. It is another thing entirely to make claims based on a research design that is not fit for the purpose.

However, research design, especially in qualitative research, is not just an armchair, pre-fieldwork matter. It has to be fitted to the research setting, which frequently curbs the best intentions (as when it is impossible to get a sample with the right characteristics), and sometimes offers fresh opportunities (as when an informant offers access to hitherto unknown sources). A research design that is fit for the purpose will be one that has emerged as the best response to practical considerations. Practicalities whittle away the best research intentions. That is not your failure. It is a fact of research life, as the next chapter argues. Good researchers explain clearly how their project is worthwhile and represents the best response to a problem in particular circumstances which are never, ever, ideal.