6

The Use of Prompts and Probes

The use of 'open' questions doesn't mean that you have no control over the way the interviewee responds. Indeed, your (unobtrusive) control is essential if you are going to achieve your research aims, i.e. you need to 'steer' for the *direction* and also ensure that *key points* or topics are covered. The first of these involves the use of 'probes'; the latter the use of 'prompts', and we will deal with these first.

Developing prompts

These go hand in hand with the development of *questions*. As you trial your questions you will be adjusting the wording, eliminating some or combining them, changing their order.

What you need to do at the same time is to note the main *points* and *topics* that your try-out subjects come up with in their answers. While each interviewee comes up with elements that are unique or peculiar to them, there will be common components that *every* interviewee needs to address: these give you your prompts (where you simply ask: *what about . . .?*). Other aspects of your research (in policy documents, what you observe or overhear) will also suggest things that should go on your prompt list.

If in their response to your questions the interviewees cover those points then you obviously don't need to prompt

them – but they are there to remind you. Usually there is an obviously right moment to prompt, i.e. when they have been talking about a related topic so that the prompt can seem like a natural follow-on. It is not a matter of you asking the interviewee to deal with something that he or she doesn't want to talk about, or has nothing to say on; in the flow of conversation, things get overlooked.

For your research coverage it ensures a degree of standardization – of comparability from one interviewee to another. *This is critical when you come to do your content analysis* (see Chapter 8).

Prompts are quite simple to develop and easy to use: what is described here is a sufficient guide. The use of probes is another matter – the single most difficult thing in interviewing.

The use of probes

Probes are supplementary questions or responses which you use to get interviewees to feed you more – to expand on their response, or part of it.

The need to use a probe, and precisely what kind, depends on what the interviewee is saying. Since you can't predict what that will be, in any precise sense, you can't anticipate exactly when a probe will be necessary; and the form of it will have to 'fit' the kind of development you are seeking at that moment.

Probes – and good questions in general – have the qualities of good writing: simple, clear, direct and potent. They need to be uncomplicated because they need to have an immediately focusing, directing effect.

There are several different kinds of probes, but it should be mentioned here – because it will be dealt with last – that the most effective probe of all – *reflecting* – doesn't involve questioning at all, but simply bouncing back something the

interviewee has said (or part of it) so as to get him or her to focus on and expand that element. However, we shall work through different kinds of probes, dealing with the most obvious ones first.

Clarification

If you ask people to clarify things for you you are asking them to work on what they have just said. This way they will give you more material. You shouldn't ask for clarification as a 'device' (people soon pick up this kind of dishonesty). You may have a fair idea of what they mean – but you can't be sure; and it isn't for you to decide what they are trying to say or implying.

So you say something like: 'I don't quite understand that' or 'Can you spell that out for me?' Note that the actual form of words you use should be something that is 'natural' to you and comfortable for you to use. In normal conversation we have a repertoire of set phrases which we use flexibly, and in an unconscious process of selection, to fit a particular moment.

Getting people to explain things to you is a simple but effective way to encourage them to work on their own material. Doing so often leads them to insights that they wouldn't achieve without that demand. Therapists use this approach as a main technique for helping people to achieve insight into their psychological problems: whether it *changes* anything is, of course, another matter.

But asking people to clarify for you – and this is true of most 'probing' – in a sense puts them in control: they are telling *you* and helping *you* to understand. To an important degree they are 'owning' the interview. This does not contradict the earlier point about the interviewer being in control of the interview session. The interviewer's control is of direction, and topics covered, and their order; the actual *content* is determined by the interviewee.

Showing appreciation and understanding

This may not sound like a form of 'probing' but people will expand on what they are saying if you demonstrate these qualities. This works best if it is oblique; if it is too direct it comes across as patronizing. You also have to watch your tone of voice: the overtly 'caring' or 'compassionate' note can be offputting. A straightforward comment is all that is required, but an appreciative choice of words is important, e.g. 'How did you cope with that?', 'That must have been very difficult' or 'I can't see that you had any choice.'

Justification

In an interview people often make judgemental statements – about themselves, about others, about circumstances. There may well be a lot behind this ('I'm not good at that sort of thing', 'There's no use complaining to the management', 'You just can't work effectively because of the atmosphere in this place'). You ask something like: 'What makes you say that?' Again, this should be in a form that feels natural for you, and *appropriate* to what the interviewee has just said.

Judgemental statements are summary; *understanding* them means that what lies behind them has to be unpacked and examined. Judgements are also a stop on thinking, so that asking for justification leads to an active process of *re*thinking. If you are going to get to *meaning*, the major purpose of the interview, it has to be active in this sense.

Relevance

In an interview, as in conversation in general, people can be rather elliptical – making leaps from one thing to another which are connected in their minds but slightly bewildering to an outsider. You get them to explain to you ('I don't see how those two things join up?', 'You've lost me there' and so

on). This kind of probe conveys an important message: that you are listening, that you are trying to make sense; that it is up to *them* to explain things to *you*.

Giving an example

This is a variant of justification. The interviewee will use a term ('confusing', 'irrelevant', 'disruptive') and you say, for example, 'Give me an example' or 'What exactly do you mean when you say that's "irrelevant"?' The trouble is that these shorthand, abstract words mean different things to different people so that interpretation is speculative. A statement like 'He's very aggressive' is open to a wide variety of interpretations; only by asking for an example of the 'aggressiveness' can you determine how it is being used.

Extending the narrative

The mobility of the interview, the number of issues that crop up, the nature of conversation itself, means that sometimes, having embarked on a 'narrative' – an account of something that happened – interviewees cut it short as something else occurs to them. Or they feel they have said enough when you can see there is some development there, or some need for further reflection. 'Tell me a bit more about that meeting' or 'What happened after that?' will keep the interviewee going in the direction that he or she had started; you can then decide whether to switch to something else.

Accuracy

For all of us accurate factual recall is a problem: as doctors know, taking a medical history presents special problems because of this. It is not just a matter of dates, or details like that, but also of the *order* of when things happened. One check on this is the *internal consistency* of what people tell you

and you can query them on that, e.g. 'I thought that was before you moved to your present post.' Or you can run over the sequence of events, e.g. 'Let me see if I've got things in the right order . . .'. It is necessary to remember that the interview can be a source of error: hence the importance of checking your understanding of what has been covered in the closure phase of the interview.

Accuracy of *self-knowledge* is a much more difficult one: people don't always understand their motives and feelings; and their behaviour or history may well contradict what they affirm. This issue is discussed in the Endnote (The Limits of Interview Data).

Reflecting as a special form of probing

Reflecting is the technique of offering back, essentially in the *interviewee's* own words, the essence of what they have just said. This can vary from repeating a 'key' phrase or word to focus the interviewee, to some sort of paraphrasing (perhaps including a reference to the apparent feelings involved), which is more usual.

It is difficult to do well and if it is done in a mechanical way can seem idiotic. As a technique it emerged from 'non-directive' therapeutic approaches, i.e. those based on the assumption that it is clients who have the answers to their problems and the therapist's job is to help them locate and express those personal solutions.

So what it encourages is a form of *self-reflection* that does not depend on a questioning stance on the part of the interviewer or therapist. If it is done effectively it allows interviewees to feel that the formulation that emerges is *theirs* – even if they couldn't have got there alone.

The goals of the research interview are not therapeutic, although it is not out of the question that the person being interviewed finds that he or she has learnt something.

Expressing yourself is part of the process of understanding yourself and people can sometimes feel impelled to make disclosures which are startlingly personal. As a researcher, one is not after that sort of material, but it is an index of how people can feel free to talk, even *want* to, at a level which gives you access to material that is normally not expressed at all.

Direct questioning does not easily convey empathy and understanding; and may actually inhibit disclosure. In a sense reflecting does not *add* to what the interviewee has said; but it does two things:

- by summarizing the overt content it focuses the interviewee on the essence of what he or she has just said so as to encourage its further exploration;
- it indicates an awareness of the emotional state behind what has been said.

In other words, it shows that you have been listening carefully, and that you are sensitive to the personal significance of what has been said. How does one achieve this as an interviewer? The answer is *not* to think too much in terms of *technique* (which means focusing on oneself) but to focus hard on the person you are interviewing. If you have a clear grasp of the principle that the *interviewee* owns the content and that your job is to help him or her to express that then the appropriate response will emerge almost naturally.

At this point an example is necessary (see Box 6.1). This example is fictional but it is sufficiently true-to-life to illustrate the different quality of *reflecting* compared with questioning, and how reflecting *builds on* what has been said and keeps things moving in a direction indicated by the interviewee (but still compatible with the overall research aims – in this hypothetical example the difficulties and support experienced by probationary teachers, and the relevance of training).

Reflecting encourages the interviewee to explore further,

Box 6.1

Reflecting at Work

- Well, when I had my first teaching post.... Well, no matter how much you prepare you feel 'I've got to get in there and take charge....' One of the classes had the reputation of being, well, not easy ...
- *You didn't feel you could plan how to control the class.*
- That's right ... and your training, well, it helped a bit I suppose ... and the senior staff in the school, well they had a lot to do, always busy. Friendly, you know ...
- *You didn't think you could get much help from them.*
- I'm not blaming them ... but, no. But there was another teacher ... been there years ... and she said: keep it simple. Do this and do that and that ... you haven't got time to be subtle ...
- *Only simple rules could work.*
- Exactly ... I mean the lecturers at college, would have been shocked! (laughs). But they weren't in there and I was.
- *You're not sure how practically useful your training was.*
- (Pauses) In that respect yes ...

perhaps developing previously uncoordinated elements. This is part of the work of an interview; and is one of the great strengths of the technique.

In questionnaires people are often asked their opinions (with tightly structured ways of responding) but this presumes that people have 'opinions' in a readily accessible and organized form. Quite often this is not the case and it is only in 'discussion' that people can work out and express what they feel or believe. Opinions and feelings are often vague and ill-defined.

This dynamic character of interviewing can be its most fascinating aspect, leading to genuine discovery – for both parties involved.

7

Piloting and Running the Interview

The pilot interview is an advanced stage of development: close to the real thing. You will have been coming near it as you 'trial' your questions – but that is concerned with getting the *questions* right rather than getting the *interview* right. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, there is a lot more to interviewing than asking questions. And getting these elements – essentially how to manage an interview and make it work – under control so that you feel reasonably fluent and confident requires practice.

So we can make a distinction between *practising* interviewing – as a skill – and *piloting* the interview so that you can concentrate on the specifics of that and make last minute adjustments and alterations. No matter what work you have put into the different parts of the interview, when it is all put together it is different: adjustments to content are required.

Most of the practising should come before piloting, but they can overlap and combine their functions to some extent. This is also true of *content analysis*: categorizing and sorting what the interviewee has said to you. That is dealt with separately in Chapter 9 because it is a big topic in its own right. But in the chronology of interview development it has to start being practised well in advance of the pilot interview stage.

Content analysis proper comes *after* you have carried out the research interviews (though you transcribe each