'controlling' the interview through language. Instead, they should take their lead from informants and adopt the words and expressions they use. If interviewees have some sort of local, everyday vocabulary of their own, involving slang or colloquial terminology, ask for the term to be explained since it is likely that there could be a number of feasible translations (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). We have heard of one study examining drug misuse among young people in which it was not until the analysis stage, when problems and inconsistencies began to emerge in the findings, that the interviewer realized that she had misunderstood the diverse slang terms that the informants had used when talking about different drugs.

Similarly, interviewees might use phrases or concepts that are open to a variety of interpretations. In a research enquiry into marital breakdown, for example, someone might say, 'I just didn't know how I was going to manage; of the two of us, I'd always been the dependent one.' To understand the precise meaning behind the word 'dependent', the interviewer should encourage further clarification and elaboration by asking for the term to be explained more fully, together with examples for illustration.

The importance of mutual understanding of meaning cannot be over-emphasized. If meaning is not established, then the subsequent analysis stands to be flawed by unperceived misunderstandings or misinterpretations between the interviewer and the interviewee (see Chapter 11). One way to ascertain the accuracy of your grasp on interviewees' observations is occasionally to paraphrase or summarize what you understand from their answers, and invite feedback.

Researchers adopting a feminist approach to interviewing argue that conventional or standard language can act as a barrier to women fully expressing themselves: the prevailing terminology and concepts simply do not fit women's experiences. Devault (1990), for instance, draws on the terms 'work' and 'leisure' to claim that many of the household activities that women carry out do not sit happily in either classification. In these situations, one strategy is for the researcher and the interviewee to work together to construct a 'shared' language, terms that are either invented or given new meanings, and which seek more perfectly to represent individual experience. A major consequence, however, is that the researcher is actively involved in the production of data (Cunningham-Burley, 1985; Knight and Saunders, 1999).

Critical listening: As well as being competent in questioning, the skilled interviewer also needs to be an active listener. This involves attentive listening, not only to the actual words that are being said, but also to how they are being said, for instance emphases, and the emotional tone of the speaker. One way to check on the extent to which you listen rather than talk during an interview is to review a transcript, looking for how often and how much you actually speak yourself.

During the interview itself, you are essentially on the look-out for key words or signals that will help you get a handle on the interviewees' perspectives and experiences relating to the focus of study. The aim is to tease out what for them are significant, special or recurrent themes. By listening carefully, you can introduce new questions as unexpected topic areas are opened up by the informant. In addition, you might spot puzzles or contradictions in the account which you might wish to raise, but taking care not to do this in a manner that could be regarded as confrontational. Highlighting discrepancies in this way and asking for further elaboration has the potential to produce deeper and more insightful answers.

What is left out of a conversation can sometimes be as important as what is included. By drawing on your own background knowledge, you should be able to identify incomplete replies, omissions or gaps in what is being said. Alternatively, if you suspect the informant feels inhibited from expressing themself fully then, depending on the strength of the relationship that has been built up, you may like to suggest the issue yourself.

Our final point is to remind you that non-verbal signals such as eye contact, a smile, a nod of the head or hand gestures show you are attending to the interviewee. So, too, can brief utterances like 'hmm', 'I see', or 'right'. These messages all serve to indicate that you are listening, understand what is being said and want to hear more. But before you can exploit your communication skills to the full, you have first to persuade interviewees that they really do want to speak with you.

Building up good relationships

If you believe that the quality of data is dependent on the quality of the relationship built up between the interviewer and the interviewee, then it is crucial to know how best to go about creating and maintaining these ties. There are different aspects to inducing positive feelings; we discuss these under the headings of trust and rapport, background knowledge and personal appearance. The points we make are applicable to all three interview formats, although some are more pertinent to semi-structured and unstructured interviewing.

Trust and rapport

From the time of the initial meeting, which best takes place in comfortable and familiar surroundings, the researcher must attempt to establish rapport. Rapport refers to the degree of understanding, trust and respect that develops between the interviewer and the interviewee. Fostering trust is a continuous process, but given that many interviews in small-scale research are 'one-offs' and completed within less than two hours, what happens in the opening stage is especially crucial to the success of what follows. Depending on the sensitivity of the topic area, some informants might find the situation quite stressful. We look in detail at how to deal with emotional reactions in the next chapter; for now we would just say be alert to any signs of distress. Closing the interview appropriately is important. As well as saying 'thank you' for taking part, make sure you end on a positive note. In Box 7.6, we have compiled a list of what we see as fruitful ways to develop and maintain a good relationship.

Box 7.6 Some ways of fostering a climate of trust in interviews

Opening the interview

- Be friendly, polite and open. However, this is culturally specific! Elderly people can take poorly to being addressed by their first name, and can see modern casual dress as quite inappropriate.
- Indicate the significance of the study, its potential benefits and that the interviewee's comments will be valuable.
- Refer in positive terms to other interviews you may have conducted during the study.
- Explain how the interview will be conducted, for example how long it should last, and the general areas to be covered.
- Give the interviewee the opportunity to ask questions.
- Confirm your commitment to research ethics (see Chapter 9): make guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity; ask interviewees to sign an informed consent form.
- Ask for permission to audiotape, rather than assume agreement.
- In the case of follow-up interviews, begin those with an appreciation of what was said in earlier ones.

During the interview

- Listening, making eye contact, and saying encouraging things all help to make the interview develop in ways that encourage the informant to disclose more.
- Be sensitive to signs of emotional reaction.
- Avoid conveying a sense of urgency or impatience.

Closing the Interview

- Leave people with a feeling of success, for instance indicate how valuable and insightful the observations generated have been.
- Confirm what will happen next: how and when the results will be made available; whether interviewees will be offered the chance to check transcripts, or a draft of the research report; if and when people are likely to be contacted for follow-up work.

After the Interview

- Write to thank the interviewee for taking part in the study.

Researcher self-disclosure has been proposed as one way to foster trust, although opinion is divided about how much of your own life and interests should be revealed. Some scholars advocating feminist approaches to interviewing argue that interviewers and interviewees should share experiences and points of contact (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984). In contrast, others believe that over and above a certain level, self-disclosure can be intimidating and may produce a negative reaction in informants (Measor, 1985; Ribbens, 1989). It is also important to remember a point to be elaborated later, which is that overuse of self-disclosure can be misinterpreted by the interviewee and may risk jeopardizing your personal safety (see Chapter 9). We would suggest that you follow your own intuition, which means you will probably vary the amount you disclose about yourself from one interview to the next. The obvious rule of thumb is to offer information if you think it will encourage trust and openness, but not if you think it may obstruct data collection. Because self-disclosing about your own life has the potential to downplay professional status and diminish power, this tactic may not be especially appropriate when interviewing élites (see Chapter 8).

The notion that informants might be difficult or troublesome does not sit comfortably with efforts to establish good relations, yet as Oakley (1981: 56) notes: 'Interviewees are people with considerable potential for sabotaging the attempt to research them.' Cotterill (1992) is one researcher who, during her examination of maternal relationships between women, found she sometimes had to deal with reluctant and uncooperative informants. Morse (1991) similarly notes that informants may impede the data collection process by resisting the interviewer's agenda, speaking superficially or exaggerating real experiences in efforts to hold the researcher's attention. For people who do insist on pursing their own concerns rather than yours, it is vital to try to drag them back to the business in hand. This is easier said than done, but watching skilled interviewers try to get politicians to answer the questions put to them can sometimes be a useful learning exercise. If the facilities are available, there is much to be gained from observing and reviewing your performance on a video tape.

Maintaining a well-mannered attitude is difficult if the researcher opposes what interviewees say, or feels they are being evasive, deceptive, aggressive or whatever. In the interests of the research, though, this may be the time to adopt an instrumental and calculating attitude (see Chapter 9). Collinson (1992) describes the dilemma he found himself in as interviewees' accounts 'generated in me a mixture of amazement, disagreement, and antagonism' but at the same time he had to acknowledge that 'they were also very "useful" for the project' (p. 104). What should be realized is that negative reactions may have implications for the reliability of the study. This is because the way we react to people influences the questions we ask, what we hear and how we interpret what is said. In other words, the researcher's own responses can distort or bias the analysis. From this point of view, it is useful to keep a log book recording personal feelings and reflections on the interview (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). These written comments can act as pointers, and signal where any bias may enter into the analysis.

Background knowledge

Competent interviewing and listening are closely associated with background knowledge (see Chapter 8). Where is this sort of information available? The literature review is an excellent source of background reading. If your study is topical, newspaper and magazine articles can provide insights into popular viewpoints. Alternatively, if it is to do with policy making, find out whether minutes of relevant meetings are public documents, and if so, read them.

Having some prior understanding with regard to individual interviewees, and their own set of circumstances, is also important. For example, when I (Hilary) was interviewing people with physical disabilities, I did not always understand the seriousness and full implications of the disease or condition they were suffering from. Looking back, some of the questions I asked must have seemed inane and meaningless. In a subsequent project involving disabled children, I prepared for each interview by reading about the child's particular medical condition and was then able to ask informed questions.

Demonstrating that you are knowledgeable about the area in which you are interviewing is valuable in two ways. First, you will have more credibility with the interviewee if you can demonstrate in your questions that you are familiar with the context of the study. This is an especially important factor when 'interviewing up', that is interviewing people higher in status than yourself. Secondly, there are implications in terms of the trustworthiness of the study. It is less likely that interviewees will try to be misleading or deceitful because they will fear being detected.

Personal appearance

Dress and personal appearance may affect an interview, in the sense that the interviewee may be assessing and making judgements about the (ability of the) interviewer on the basis of what they can see. The literature (Warren, 1988) is full of examples of research projects where investigators have adopted different kinds of dress and hair style in an attempt to establish rapport and gain acceptance.

Collinson (1992) describes how he was concerned to look 'professional' and 'competent' when interviewing managers. Looking 'well dressed' was particularly important, and involved wearing a suit, polished shoes and carrying a leather briefcase. In marked contrast, for his interviews with members of the shopfloor workforce he wore 'relaxed' and 'informal' clothes, joked and swore as the men did, and generally tried to lessen any class or status differentials. Collinson's attire was acceptable to the respective groups, which in turn encouraged people to talk. The strategy worked for him, and there is every reason to think it will work for you. This may well mean you will have to invest in outfits that include the casual and informal, the fashionable and trendy, and also conservative-looking suits that signal you are a professional.

Recording the data

We have given you some advice about asking questions, and persuading people to answer them. Now it is time to think about how to record responses in an accurate and retrievable form. As the first section indicated, with survey work this is generally a case of ticking boxes, or circling numbers in (pre-coded) answer blocks on the interview schedule. Alternatively, answers can be entered directly on a computer. The options available when qualitative data are involved include hand-written notes, audio- and videotaping.

Note-taking

Note-taking is cheap; you need only paper and a couple of pens or pencils. On the other hand, it can be slow, is open to charges of selective recording and requires practice and skill. It might be that you take notes as a 'fall-back' measure, as Hilary did when she was interviewing someone whose voice box had been removed because of cancer of the throat. However, if you envisage taking notes on a regular basis then it might be worthwhile devising your own shorthand or other form of customized speedwriting. Another useful aid is a simple form containing sections or headings that reflect the main topic areas to be covered during the interview. Key words, significant terms and the occasional verbatim comment can be written down in the relevant space. As soon as possible after the interview use these 'triggers' to help you expand on what was said. Bear in mind, though, that the longer you wait the more detail you are likely to forget.

The use of hand-written notes, in conjunction with tape recordings, is described in Box 7.7.

Audiotaping

Audiotaping is probably the most popular method of recording qualitative interviews. There are a number of advantages. The interviewer can concentrate on what is said. There is a permanent record that captures the whole of the conversation verbatim, as well as tone of voice, emphases, pauses and the like (but note that when agreeing to a study taking place, ethics committees sometimes make it a condition that the tapes are destroyed afterwards; see Chapter 9 for further discussion about obtaining ethical approval). Using a tape recorder demonstrates to informants that their responses are being treated seriously. Finally, the costs involved in purchasing a good quality tape recorder, microphone and cassette tapes are not too prohibitive.

There are disadvantages, though. In particular, transcribing the tapes can be a lengthy process; as we have noted before, a one-hour tape can take up to ten hours to transcribe fully. Further, the idea of taping the interview might increase nervousness or dissuade frankness. When I (Hilary) asked a prominent ergonomist whose work involved acting as an expert witness in personal injury litigation cases whether I could tape our interview, he agreed but indicated that his responses would then be 'public' rather than 'private', elaborates the distinction between