

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

Box 7.7 Note-taking while interviewing

One of us did a series of semi-structured interviews with well over 100 young children. The children were told stories or given a problem and then asked questions. The responses they could give were quite limited in number and could be simply summarized, there and then. They were also asked to explain their thinking, and it was simple to paraphrase the reasons they gave. Analysis of the notes gave a pattern and reference back to the tape recordings of the interviews supplied apposite quotations.

Interviews with 178 schoolteachers were routinely summarized in note form. For example, teachers were asked whether they thought teaching was a profession. Their answers were predictably 'yes', 'yes with reservations', 'not sure', 'no, but . . .' and 'no'. They were asked to explain their answers and notes were made of the ideas they used in those explanations: for example, one set of notes reads 'Yes: (a) training, (b) level of knowledge, (c) status, (d) ethics.' Again, these points could be fleshed out by reference to the subsequent transcripts and to the tape recordings, as the need arose. For most purposes, the notes were sufficient for data analysis and considerably speeded up the process.

'public' and 'private' accounts. (Cornwell, 1984.) In other words, without the tape recorder running he was prepared to disclose 'insider' information about the world of occupational injury claims. My on-the-spot decision was to put the machine away, produce a couple of sheets of paper and write furiously!

We both know of researchers who have 'lost' interviews in the sense that they ended up with either no recording or one which was inaudible. To try to ensure this does not happen to you, Box 7.8 gives hints on audiotaping.

Videotaping

Recent developments in video technology mean that it is now more widely available. None the less, videotaping is not commonly used to record interviews apart from, perhaps, focus groups. Its current limited role reflects factors such as the expense involved, the specialist training needed to operate the technology effectively, the vast amount of material to be analysed and the possible intrusion it may create in the actual interview setting. Certainly, it is questionable how *comfortable interviewees are about video recordings*. In one focus group Hilary knows of, the participants refused to take part in the event if it was going to be videoed.

Despite their disadvantages, video recordings produce a wealth of information, both verbal and non-verbal. And if facial and bodily expressions, gestures and the like are as important to the study as is the content of what is said, then this is the medium for you – assuming that you also have the time required to undertake

Box 7.8 Advice on audiotaping

- Read the operating instructions for the tape recorder.
- Practise using the equipment, trying out features like the pause and record buttons.
- Check the batteries, and change them frequently.
- Always carry spare batteries and spare cassette tapes. We find C90 tapes work best.
- Before each interview, test out the optimum setting for the recording level. A poor quality recording causes problems later on when it comes to transcribing.
- At the start of the interview, position the tape recorder and microphone close to those who will be speaking; there is more scope for this with battery operated machines.
- Try to eliminate background noise, for example ask for windows to be closed if there is heavy traffic outside.
- Turn the microphone on!
- After each interview, write down the informant's name, and the date of the interview, on each tape used. If any tapes are likely to be seen by people not directly involved in the research, use an identifier code in order to preserve anonymity. Other information might be useful, for example the length of the interview.
- If finances allow, make a second copy of the tape, especially if they are being sent away to outside transcribers. The duplicates can always be wiped and reused at a later date.

the subsequent analysis. (See Jordan and Henderson [1995] for a more detailed consideration of the use of video technology.)

Self-evaluation

Interviews, especially in the early days of a research study, can leave a lot to be desired. And regardless of how experienced you are, there is always a need to stand back and assess how the interview went. Accordingly, it is important that at regular intervals throughout the study you take stock to see what worked well, what did not work and where there is scope for improvement. Having diagnosed a particular problem area, see if you can think of how best to overcome or circumvent it. If it helps to talk with someone outside the study, then ask friends, your tutor or supervisor, or an experienced interviewer for assistance.

Some general advice about appraising your interviewing technique is presented in Box 7.9.

that you do not have to rely on inconvenient public telephones can be very reassuring. Before you set off for the interview, give a friend or colleague written details of your movements, including who you have arranged to interview (whilst emphasizing the need for confidentiality), where you are going, your route and when you expect to be back. If you are staying away overnight, leave the address and telephone number of your accommodation. You might choose to arrange to check in on your return from the interview. And if your plans change, then let someone know.

We have summarized the main points to bear in mind regarding personal safety in Box 9.3.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the risks of harm to both research participants and researchers, as well as presenting techniques aimed at reducing any negative effects. It could be argued that we accentuated the negative aspects of interviewing, and downplayed the positive. This was deliberate, in the sense that we wanted to concentrate minds on the issues that we think are important, and in this way encourage best practice. However, we now want to redress the balance by making one last key point: keep things in perspective. Do not dramatize the issues so that they assume a level of risk far higher than interviews – even those concerned with sensitive topics – typically entail (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

10 Transcribing the Data

... committing verbal exchanges to paper seems to result in their immediate deterioration: context, empathy, and other emotional dynamics are often lost or diminished, and the language seems impoverished, incoherent, and ultimately embarrassing for those who have cause to read back over their contributions (including the interviewer/researcher!). (Poland, 1995: 299)

Transcription is a part of the organization and management of the data. It is the production of a written record of the interview. However, recalling the discussions in Chapter 1, we observe that many social scientists would deny that there is one, real version of reality to be captured. Accordingly, a transcript is one interpretation of the interview, and no more than one interpretation. Furthermore, most transcripts only capture the spoken aspects of the interview, missing the setting, context, body language and 'feel'. In many, but not in all transcripts pauses and hesitations are edited out. Decisions are made about the ways in which speech is represented, there are invariably guesses about what was said, and there is the issue of how to turn speech into written prose, all of which extend the distance between a transcript and the interview event. Mishler (1991) draws a helpful parallel between a transcript and a photograph. Just as a photograph is one, frozen, contexted, printed and edited version of reality, so too with transcripts. So, in a sense, the question is not so much whether a transcript is accurate as whether it constitutes one, careful attempt to represent some aspects of the interview.

The transcription of data can be done at many levels of detail. The level of transcription will depend on the research purposes. With survey research, transcription is scarcely needed, and it is better to talk of data capture. With more qualitative interviews, notes summarizing the key points are sufficient for some purposes, although in other cases it is important to have transcriptions that include grunts, 'er', 'well . . .' and 'mmm', as well as timed estimates of the length of pauses. Mercifully, this level of transcription is not normally needed in many studies, where the researcher is interested only in the meanings and not in the hesitations, false starts and throat clearing that accompany them. However, these features are important to linguistics researchers and those interested in discourse analysis.

Consequently, transcription is neither neutral nor value-free. What passes from tape to paper is the result of decisions about what ought to go on to paper. Sometimes, 'bad' language gets edited out. Sometimes, a typist decides to type only words, not pauses and 'er', 'mmm' and 'huh!'. Similarly, there is the notorious problem of how to punctuate speech: where should full stops, semi-colons and commas go? What about paragraph marks? These decisions are the more acute the further one moves from closed questions to open questions, from concise

respondents to voluble informants. Transcriptions are, quite unequivocally, interpretations. For that reason, if for no other, it is wise to keep interview tapes as an archive to which reference can be made if transcriptions prove to be inadequate for the level of analysis that becomes necessary.

Data capture

With survey interviews, data are normally transcribed by the interviewer completing a schedule as the respondent answers. This is only possible because the schedule and interview have both been designed so that this transcription involves the interviewer in making few inferences about the meaning of what the respondent says. Interviewer training will also have provided training in interpreting responses and, where computer-assisted telephone interviewing is used (CATI), the reliability of the interviewer is monitored. So, transcription is relatively simple, although Dijkstra, van der Veen and van der Zouwen (1985) have shown that survey interviewers do vary in the way they ask questions and code (transcribe) responses.

There is another possible source of error in transcribing survey data. It has to be moved from the interviewer's schedule to a computer database. It is common to pay clerks to type the information on the schedules into a computer program, which is a potential source of error, the extent of which will be greater or lesser depending on the motivation and accuracy of the typist. There is a faster, cheaper and more accurate method available. It involves designing the schedule so that respondents' answers can be read by an optical mark reader (OMR). These machines are fast, as accurate as is the marking up of the schedule, put the data straight into a database and cost less to operate than a team of typists, although their capital cost needs to be taken into account.

Transcribing qualitative data

The commonest procedure is to make audio tapes of interviews and then produce a typed version of the words on tape. Video tapes are an alternative method of data capture and have their own additional transcription problems, discussed below.

The transcriber's work

Undergraduate and postgraduate students may not have the funds to pay for transcription and have to do it themselves. Transcribing the tapes yourself has undoubted advantages: you become familiar with the data; you are reminded of the tone of the interview; and you should get a transcript that is acceptable to you, whereas when someone else does the transcription it is always necessary to hunt out the mistakes and mistranscriptions. But, if you try to transcribe the tapes yourself, you need to be a skilled typist. 'Peck and hunt' typing, applied to transcription work, is a recipe for misery. Box 10.1 presents a further option that is becoming more attractive with the development of technology (see also Anderson, 1998).

Box 10.1 Computer-assisted transcription

For some years Peter has been transcribing tapes by means of a voice dictation programme. He uses IBM's *Simply Speaking Gold* which has been superceded (and super-superceded) by more robust and powerful software. Affordable, entry-level programmes can be efficiently handled by all new multimedia PCs, although software affordability is at the price of sophistication. With these cheaper, older programmes each word has to be sounded out separately and distinctly whereas more sophisticated software does a reasonable job of recognising continuous speech. Then again, older PCs may falter with top-end software.

The process is to listen to a tape through the headphones and then, phrase by phrase, to dictate a 'clean' version directly into the word processor. This is cheaper than using audio typists, keeps the researcher in control of the transcription process and brings about greater familiarity with the data. However, some people find it hard to persuade the software to recognize their words accurately and feel that typing is faster. That has not, however, been Peter's experience.

The main snags are that the program makes mistakes, which have to be corrected manually, and that it still takes about four or five hours to transcribe an hour of tape. On the other hand, the researcher becomes more familiar with the data, which speeds analysis, and the programme produces a properly laid-out, correctly spelled transcript. As the sophistication of these programs increases, this is likely to become a preferred way of transcribing interview data.

Traditional means of transcription are mechanical, repetitive, fatiguing and can be stressful, especially when the recording quality is poor. As we said in Chapter 7, it is advisable to use the best recording equipment that funds can be stretched to. Even so, there are many reasons why parts of some tapes will be barely audible. Sooner or later, the interviewer will forget to switch a microphone on, the interviewing site will have poor acoustic qualities, or low battery power will produce a faint recording. Transcribers seldom have machines sufficiently sophisticated to overcome these problems, and not everyone can use a computer in conjunction with a hi-fi system so that the graphic equalizers lift the conversation from the background noise. Some parts will not be transcribable, and this should be noted in the transcript. Elsewhere, guesses will be made, and a good transcriber will be trained to alert the researcher to the fact that a section is a best guess.

Unsurprisingly, there are problems when there are hundreds of tapes to be transcribed. Very few people can work full time at audio transcription, and a 50:50 ratio of transcription to other activities is necessary if the audio typist is not to quit and if productivity and accuracy are not to plummet. Clearly, this sort of transcription can produce a serious bottleneck in the research process, something

of which both authors have experience. Transcription agencies offer an alternative solution for research teams with sufficient funds.

There are a number of transcription conventions, each designed to capture greater or lesser detail about different features of the interview – Mishler (1991), Silverman (1993) and Poland (1995) give examples of different conventions. To illustrate that transcription can be more than simply typing out the words, we reproduce a sliver of a transcript produced for discourse analysis (Potter, 1996: 137).

Counsellor: Wha_ (.). what happened at that point.

Woman: At that point, (0.6) Jimmy ha_ (.).

My_ Jimmy is extremely jealous.

Ex_ extremely jealous person.

Has always – been, from the da:y we met.

Transcribers need to be trained in using the convention that is most appropriate to your research purpose. They must be stopped from tidying up the tape in unhelpful ways. Patton (1990) tells of a student whose transcripts had all been put into good, transactional prose by a ‘helpful’ transcriber. The result was data that were unfit for the research purpose.

Box 10.2 provides some rules of practice that can mitigate some of the problems mentioned in this section – but nothing mitigates them like money does.

Partial transcripts

A partial transcript is where the researcher keeps full interview notes and has only key sections of the tape transcribed. If the purpose is to use the interviews to get understanding of the range of ideas used, then this may be acceptable, particularly if there were two researchers in the room. One of us has used this technique with focus groups, where the second researcher made notes and identified portions of the tape recording that were especially worth transcribing. However, in order to do this, the focus group’s discussions had to be quite tightly managed: fortunately, informants’ comments tended to be quite short and free of the complex, wandering and looping structure that is common with one-to-one, in-depth interviews. Since the purpose was to get a sense of the things that mattered to people, not to probe those things in depth, notes-and-partial-transcripts were fit for the purpose. It was also a relatively cheap approach and quick to do, both of which were important in this project.

The underlying assumption, in the context of the research purpose, is that the data are fairly unproblematic.

Full transcripts: the director’s cut?

Full transcription is expensive. Estimates of the time it takes to transcribe an hour of tape vary between seven and ten hours, and poor sound quality will mean that even longer may be needed. Someone working on piecework rates is unlikely to charge less than £50 per hour of tape for this. Operating on tight budgets, researchers often have full transcripts made of the first ten or so interviews and of a sample thereafter. Notes and partial transcriptions are used for the rest. While this can be

Box 10.2 Some hints on transcription practices

If you are to transcribe your own tapes

- Use C60 or C90 tapes – C120 tapes are more likely to break.
- Knock out the tabs on the cassette so that you cannot inadvertently record over your interview (you can always use sticky tape to cover them later).
- When typing, don’t be mean with space. Leave at least a line between each paragraph. If you will be using software for the data analysis, check the format your transcript needs to be in. For example, with the NUD*IST software package (see Chapter 11), it is a good idea to begin each sentence on a new line (or type it normally and save as ‘Text with line breaks’). If you will be using software for analysis, don’t waste time with **Bold**, Underline, *Italic*, or any other effects.
- When the interviewer speaks, begin the paragraph in capitals, in a standard and consistent way, with letters that show it is the interviewer speaking: ‘INT: How did you feel about that, then?’ for example. Do the same for the interviewee(s).

If someone else is doing the transcription for you, also

- Make it clear that they are not to tidy up the prose. Tell them how you want pauses, repetitions, laughs, hesitations and the like handled.
- Get them to use a standard, non-usual symbol to show where they’ve not been able to hear what was said, or they’re unsure that they transcribed correctly. Peter uses ** or zx, which can rapidly be located using the ‘Find’ function of a word processor.
- Try to give them one interview to do at a time and set a deadline for its return (on disk and in hard copy).
- Make sure you check the first couple of transcripts quickly, so that you can act if the transcriber is unsatisfactory.
- Insist that the transcriber makes at least two disk copies of the files.
- Impress upon the transcriber that the transcripts are confidential.

One way of getting transcriptions done is to send the tapes to an agency. As long as the tape doesn’t contain an identification of the informant, confidentiality is secured. It can be more difficult to be as confidential when the transcriber is a person who lives or works more locally. It is your responsibility to see that transcribers are not given anything that would identify informants or those connected with informants *and* to insist that transcribers do not discuss their work with other people.

pragmatically justified, the price is that many meanings are reduced to the neatness of note summaries, disguising the complexity and subtlety of the interview.

The transcripts then need to be checked for accuracy and suitability. Both have to be done by the person who did the interview, and this can be time-consuming. There are two main approaches to checking for accuracy. One, the faster, is to read the transcript and if it makes sense, leave it at that, correcting only the obvious errors. Up to an hour of checking for an hour of taping is needed for this method, depending on the quality of the tape and of the work. Alternatively, read the transcript while playing the tape. This is more scrupulous and more time consuming. Probably, the decision about which checking method to use rests on a decision about how much it matters if the faster method misses points that the slower method would pick up. In other words, is 95 per cent accurate transcription acceptable, or does it have to be 99.5 per cent? Notice that 'accuracy' is necessarily a relative concept. Even where the aim is faithfully to put words into print, decisions about punctuation mean that more than one 'accurate' transcription could be produced.

However, a bigger question is whether the transcription is a suitable representation of the interview, in terms of the research purposes. Conversation has features that seldom make it into print. For example:

- Abbreviations (isn't, aren't, weren't) – *sometimes* transcribed as 'is not' etc.
- Verbal tics, like 'er' and 'um' – usually ignored.
- Pauses – either cut or shown simply by three dots (...).
- Repetitions (for example, 'What I mean ... I mean ... what I want to say is ... I mean that it is a real problem') – this might simply be rendered as 'It is a real problem'.

There is a good case for weeding these features out during transcription. For example, a senior education official gave an excellent and stimulating interview. When transcribed literally, it was full of 'er'. This tic broke the flow of the prose and made the person seem dumb. He was embarrassed when he saw the transcript. What did we gain by retaining the 'er'? In this case, nothing. Where other people silently pause for a moment's thought, he kept his voice going with the 'er' sound. We understood it as a sign of thought, not of uncertainty. Unless the level of intended analysis needs transcriptions that retain tics, pauses and the like, they can be excised. Does that matter?

For most social science purposes, where it is the ideas, logic, beliefs and understandings that are wanted, this editing is acceptable. It may be that a straight prose transcription is unsuitable, and that pauses, hesitations and tones of uncertainty, weeded out of the transcript, need to be restored. There are some areas of research, notably linguistics, where it is vital that transcripts are literal records of the sounds on the tape, or as nearly as possible, and that pauses are exactly timed and recorded. Unfortunately, the tone of voice – enthusiastic, bored, confrontational, mocking – easily and routinely does not make it into the transcript. So too with body language. There is no reliable way of conveying either in transcripts, although it is usual to put, for example, [*he/she/interviewer laughs*], if that can be

heard. The question is whether it is more suitable to try for richer descriptions of the interview, or whether it is acceptable to settle for an 'accurate' rendering of the spoken words.

Transcribing video tapes Video tapes are used because interviewers recognize that an enormous amount of interaction takes place in non-verbal ways, and this channel of information is completely lost on audio tape. Here, video recordings give a better record of the interview. This is especially true of focus groups where the researcher wants to know who said what, and cannot infer it from an audio recording.

Needless to say, there are problems, the most frequently mentioned of which is the obtrusiveness of the camera. It can also be hard to site a camera in a focus group so that everyone is in frame. But, if there are problems with making a video record, the problems of transcribing it are greater.

Since video recording has been done to capture information that gets missed by audio recording, it follows that the transcript must be designed to capture that information. It might then be in two columns, one for the words and the other for non-verbal material taken from the video. But how is that non-verbal material to be reliably captured? Should there simply be a description of behaviours that need little inference, such as sitting upright, looking at the interviewer, or gesticulating? Or should there be more subtle readings of body language and inferences about mood and attitude? The problem is that it is hard to make these inferences and they are disputable. How are they to be made reliably? The classic answer is that two researchers watch the tape and code the behaviour, discussing disagreements until agreement is reached. Leaving aside the point that all this shows is that two people can come to an agreement (but not that a third, fourth or *n*th person would reach the same conclusion), the main objection is the cost of doing this. It can only be justified, we suggest, under three conditions:

- Where the techniques exist to describe non-verbal information accurately and then to analyse it in ways that offer purchase on the research problem.
- Where the research demands that such extensive data are collected (that is rarely the case).
- Where the aim is to produce excerpts that can be used for training or illustrative purposes, or that look as though they will have exceptional significance in the findings.

Here, we are in essence repeating the message that the decision to use video tape and thinking about how to transcribe it depend upon what would count as the best way of discharging the research purpose.

Conclusion

The way that transcription is done reflects the research purpose and design and is also effectively a part of data analysis. The form of transcription affects the ways

in which the data can be analysed. The case of transcribing video tapes has been used to highlight the way in which transcription is an act of interpretation. This can even hold good for surveys, where the interviewer may need to use judgement in order to decide which pre-specified category best captures a respondent's words.

It is to full-blown data analysis that we now turn.

11 Meanings and Data Analysis

Literary structuralists have concentrated on the formal stylistic filters in communication between people, to the extent that some seem trapped in an impossibilism . . . too often these theories are phrased in deliberate obscurity, self-referring in their complexity . . . it is easy to forget the important messages that do get across . . . to forget that the informant had something to say; in short, to stop listening. (Thompson, 1988: 246/7)

If I were to try and put my finger on the single most serious shortcoming relating to the use of interviews in the social sciences, it would certainly be the commonsensical, unreflexive manner in which most analyses of interview data are conducted. (Briggs, 1986: 102)

In qualitative research, little is ever usually written about the process of analysis at all . . . little is said about who the analysts are, . . . which particular perspectives they adopt . . . how are disagreements resolved . . . whether full transcripts are used, how much is reported, what level of uncodable or unsortable data is tolerable, what basis is used for filtering data . . . (Powney and Watts, 1987: 174)

The analysis of data is perhaps the most demanding and least examined aspect of the qualitative research process. (McCracken, 1988: 41)

The analysis of the data gathered in a naturalistic inquiry begins the first day the researcher arrives at the setting. The collection and analysis of the data obtained go hand-in-hand as theories and themes emerge during the study. (Erlandson et al., 1993: 109)

The message of the quotations with which this chapter starts is one that most qualitative researchers have learned the hard way: data analysis is difficult and can take the novice – and the more experienced researcher as well – longer than expected. That is an unwelcome discovery when analysis has been planned to fit a short space of time before the report is finalized and presented. To a lesser extent, it is also true of the analysis of survey data as well.

We begin this chapter from the position that one reason why data analysis can be so complex is because there are embedded difficulties with knowing what it is that the data could plausibly be said to mean. From there, we proceed to look at the analysis of data from closed questions, including the use of statistics, to indicate meanings that we see in the data. This is followed by an extended discussion of procedures involved in analysing data from open-ended questions, focusing on the analysis of interview transcripts. We review the use of computer software to support this process.