Box 3.4 General structure for participants 1 (P1) and P2

For P1, failure to learn the implementation of a recently acquired skill occurred when he had to apply his knowledge unexpectedly and prematurely and without the presence of a reliable expert other to guide him, but in the presence of a waiting user. During the process, P1 was aware of auditory and visual discrepancies between a correct performance of the task and his own performance and did not have a detailed and precise memory available to correct this discrepancy. P1 had to rely upon faulty memories and unguided trial and error, and he had to cope with a self-imposed anxiety precipitated by the waiting user. In such circumstances, he managed to make a product, but he was uncertain of its effectiveness and frustrated by his performance.

For P2, the experience of failing to learn a skill occurred twice when she attempted a task that others claimed to be easy, but for her involved a fear structure and difficulties and lack of proper support, such that the attempt at the task was experienced as primarily frustrating and led her to feel ambivalent about continuing the task. P2 experienced the attitudes of significant others as constraining and the whole experience was situated within a context of acceptance of failure that indicates that P2 lacked confidence in herself.

significance does not suffer from this kind of generalization. Indeed, one could argue that it clarifies the psychological by lifting it out of potentially confusing empirical details.

Another purpose of the transformations was to render the implicit explicit. In meaning unit 2 of Box 3.2, participant 1 recognizes that since the person who ordinarily cut keys was not there, and a potential user was expecting the key, 'he had to do it', and in the transformations we added 'reluctantly', since it is clear from other parts of the description that participant 1 would have preferred handing the task over to the person who normally did it. In meaning unit 10, we made it explicit that participant 1 felt that he was doing a task that, from the perspective of the potential user, he was able to do. It seems that he did not clarify the situation to the potential user, and so he experienced the situation as one of failure to learn. In meaning unit 2 of Box 3.3, we made explicit the fact that participant 2 assumed, because of the attitude of others, that learning to ride a bike would be easy – as implied by her siblings – and even the environment suggested that to participant 2.

A third purpose of the transformations mentioned above was to make them more descriptively articulate and better able to be the bearers of psychological meanings. For example, in meaning unit 7 (third column) of Box 3.2, it is made explicit that participant 1 relied on his memory of the relationship between the original key and the duplicate in the absence of the expert other, and it is also noted that it is quite probable that the initial perception as lived by participant 1 was not as focused as it needed to be in

order for his recall to be successful in his present circumstances. For meaning unit 13 (third column of Box 3.2), we stated that participant 1 'had not truly appropriated the process in an embodied, self-directed way'. This was not explicitly stated by participant 1, but we would argue that this is the implicit psychological meaning embedded in the situation as he describes it. The psychological expressions articulated by the researchers help clarify the psychological meaning in a more direct and pertinent way.

In Box 3.3 meaning unit 5 (third column) makes explicit that the attitude of significant others has a constraining effect upon participant 2 and the last meaning unit (13) makes explicit the idea that participant 2 was not motivated to keep trying to learn to ride a bike. While the constraint imposed by others and the ensuing lack of motivation to continue further are both implied in the empirical data, specifically tying constraining influences to the attitude of significant others and the lack of motivation to keep trying to learn to her historical self-interpretations are psychologically revealing dimensions of the concrete experience being reported.

Therefore, method and data are highly correlated and both are related to the purpose of the research as well as assumptions regarding psychology. Our assumption is that psychology has to dip into the subjective world of the participant as much as possible. Collecting only behavioural data limits such access, although it is not without merit (in so far as behaviours reveal meanings), and the use of quantification tends to inhibit access to the sub-jective world of the other even more. One must not here confuse two separate issues: the world of the participant is subjective, but the means of capturing that world on the part of the scientist is intersubjective or objective.

The discussion of the structure of the experience also belongs to the relationship between data and method, and this is the fourth and last step of the procedures we are outlining. The structure is gained by going over the last transformations of meaning units and attempts to determine what con-stituents are typically essential in order to account for the concrete experi-ences reported. By 'typically essential', we mean that the structures obtained are not universal, but only general because of the role of context. One always tries to obtain one structure for all of the data, but that is not always possible, and one should not try to force the data to fit one structure. The necessity of several structures to account for the data means a fairly high degree of variability. For our examples in this chapter, a single structure was not possible; consequently, a structure was written for each example (see Box 3.4). However, usually, as more cases are added, the types of structures solidify, become enriched and trail far behind the cases. For example, one might have four or five types for 20 or 25 cases.

It is important to realize that a structure refers not only to the key constituents but also to the relationships among them. It is also possible for structures to have common constituents but still not be identical. A holistic view has to be taken in order to appreciate the relationship among the

constituents. For example, frustration is part of each of the structures we are considering, but for participant 1, his frustration was over not getting right what he thought he knew. However, participant 2's frustration was related to the seeming impossibility of success, and it led her to have ambivalent feelings about continuing the task. In other words, the psychological meanings of the frustration were not identical. Moreover, participant 1 experienced pressure and anxiety, but participant 2 was fearful, and the significant others were actively detrimental for participant 2 whereas participant 1 was desiring an absent other, and while he felt pressure from the potential user, the latter was not vocally and actively detrimental. These differences are too great to be considered merely intrastructural, and, as interstructural, they require different structures to do justice to them.

Communicating Our Findings

The true closure of a research process is when the published material is read by a competent colleague. Without the reading of a research report, the entire process becomes practically useless. Thus, how the data are interpreted and communicated is also critical, and undoubtedly many contingencies enter into this process, especially for those who have a minority perspective. However, many of the difficulties encountered in this phase of the research process are not unique to phenomenology but are generally true for any minority perspective. Consequently, we do not think that these difficulties need to be discussed in this chapter.

Issues to Think About

All experienced researchers know that there is no perfect method. Each method has strengths and limits, and the research process itself can be enhanced only when limitations of methods are made explicit so that proper limits on ensuring interpretations of findings can be established. Obviously, this truth also holds for the phenomenological method as inspired by Husserlian phenomenology.

The first thing to be noted when retrospective descriptions are obtained as the raw data is the possibility of error or deceit on the part of the participant. Honest errors can obviously occur, but they are not as crucial for the psychological analysis as might at first appear. After all, the psychological perspective implies that the descriptions obtained are subjectively dependent ones, not objective reports. The interest is in how the participant experienced situations even if they come through memorial modes, because the manner in which situations stand out in memory is also psychologically revealing. This double possibility of error (memory and perception of

original situation) certainly should make the researcher wary, but it does not present an insurmountable obstacle in so far as no claims for the objective reality are made. Rather, epistemological claims are based solely on how situations were experienced or remembered by the participant. In phenomenological research, this step is heightened because of the use of the scientific phenomenological reduction. The reader should recall that within the reduction, strong epistemological claims are made only for how things presented themselves to the experiencers, not for how they actually were. But this is precisely what a psychological perspective tries to do – to depict how situations are experienced. With this emphasis, the objective reporting of a situation can serve as an aid in detecting the psychological profile, but the objective account should not serve as a substitute for the latter.

The question of deceit is more problematic in the sense that a research interviewer can be deceived over a short period of time or with descriptions that are as brief as the demonstrations presented in this chapter. However, with longer interviews such as are used in doctoral dissertations or sustained research, the fact that something is awry is usually detectable. One may not know just why the narratives are stilted or 'off', but the fact that a participant is trying to control a description usually comes through. Again, the use of the phenomenological reduction is helpful here since the epistemological claim is only for the experiential structure, not for the objective reality. Still, one was seeking authentic experiential structures, not deceitfully contrived ones. The latter only offer how someone construed the phenomenon to be.

Another possible prohibitor of deceit is the fact that in phenomenological research one is merely trying to find out what happened. That is, no specific hypothesis or theory is being advanced, so it is difficult to know why deceit would motivate the participant, unless it was simply to cover up personal failures or embarrassments. The research within the phenomenological attitude is usually discovery oriented rather than hypothesis proving or theory testing (Giorgi, 1986).

It would be fair to point out that these vulnerabilities are not unique to phenomenological research. All qualitative research dependent upon participant accounts of situations is equally vulnerable. Indeed, more objective approaches that depend on instruments such as questionnaires or test items would be equally vulnerable even though the participant only makes check marks on sheets of paper. There are checks and balances, but no foolproof strategy for detecting deception. In addition, one should not forget that all 'talk therapy' is equally vulnerable, although the establishment of a relationship over a lengthier period of time can establish a type of trust that research situations rarely allow.

Another vulnerability that is rather transparent with this method is the fact that the whole process seems to be dependent upon the researcher's subjectivity. This is especially true with respect to the third step of the

method, the one in which expressions take on psychological sensitivity. We have already explained why this transformation is necessary because all science transforms raw data in some fashion, either a priori through the research setting or instruments, or a posteriori. Since the phenomenologist's transformation is a posteriori, and since it is concerned with precise expressions of psychological meaning, it often appears to be arbitrary or heavy-handed. Nevertheless, there are rigorous guidelines for such transformations, but their processes cannot be intersubjectively checked; only the outcomes can. And, of course, through dialogue with other researchers, greater clarity can be achieved, but that usually requires a special effort beyond the primary purpose of the research.

The inevitable fact that all psychologists seeking a scientific pursuit of the subject matter must face is that 'neutral' total access to their subject matter is lacking. One may believe that one has full access to one's own experiential processes, but, even if true, this access is not fully shareable with the critical other, and this attitude does not account for unconscious dimensions. If one turns to the behaviour or experience of the other as subject matter, again total access of any type is lacking since experiences are not directly shareable. Traditional psychology has tried to overcome this gap by means of quantification – numbers are precise and exactly shareable – or by means of objectification. However, the conversion of psychological meaning to num-objectification. However, the conversion of psychological meaning to numbers loses a lot, and, in any case, to be psychologically rich, the process has to be reversed. That is, one has to go from the numbers back to the subjective psychological reality, and this is usually accomplished entirely subjectively by each researcher. Objectification participates in the same process, but perhaps not so radically. The difficulty is that the objectification of the subjective is not the same as comprehending the subjective as subjective. Ironically, to do so is closer to an authentic objective understanding of the subjective than the two previous strategies offer.

The phenomenological approach recognizes this lack of totalness. Consequently, since the critical other cannot directly share the phenomenological researcher's intuitions, meaning discriminations and transformations, the researcher leaves as complete a track record of the process as is possible. The phenomenological researcher shows the critical other the meaning unit discriminations that are made; the researcher shows the transformations that are correlated with each of the meaning units, although it is understood that contextual factors also operate with every transformation. Also clearly visible are the final transformations for each meaning unit that are the basis for the articulation of the structure of the experience. It is true that some critical processes remain invisible even though outcomes do not, but, through dialogue with the critical other, even some of these processes can become accessible.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the analysis should be done from an intersubjective attitude. That is, the researcher does not remain in a

purely biographical attitude. Rather, he or she assumes a psychological attitude, the researcher's role, and is constantly conscious of the fact that a critical other will be reviewing the intuitions being described. The intuitions are not so much *person* based as *role* based. Again, these are not guarantees, but they are checks and balances, and they offer principles for believing in the possibility of objective outcomes.

Basically, both traditional researchers and qualitative researchers recognize the same dilemma, but different strategies are employed to overcome the problem of lack of total access. The traditional laboratory or measurement psychologists following a pre-established tradition err on the side of getting intersubjective agreement among researchers (of course, even with this bias, problems persist), but often the price paid is the reduction of the psychological richness of a phenomenon. Qualitative researchers would rather err on the side of 'fidelity to the phenomenon' and struggle with intersubjective agreement. In any case, both biases have some legitimation and they ought to be able to coexist with each other. Arbitrary exclusion of one of these positions by the other is the great error that should be avoided. After all, psychology is still a developing discipline that is trying to find its essential definition.

Further Reading

Cloonan, T.F. (1971) 'Experiential and behavioral aspects of decision-making', in A. Giorgi, W. Fisher and R. van Eckartsberg (eds), *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press. pp. 112–31.

Another exemplification of the application of the descriptive phenomenological method on a different phenomenon.

Creswell, J.W. (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design. Choosing among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A comparison of five different qualitative methods with some theoretical foundation for each, along with concrete examples from each tradition.

Giorgi, A. (ed.) (1985) *Phenomenological and Psychological Research*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

The book within which Giorgi first articulated the phenomenological method, including a sustained theoretical justification in the second chapter.

Giorgi, A. (1994) 'A phenomenological perspective on certain qualitative research methods', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 25: 190–220.

A comparison of the phenomenological method with several other qualitative methods being utilized.

Kohák, E. (1978) *Idea and Experience: Edmund Husserl's Project of Phenomenology in Ideas, I*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

An excellent commentary on Husserl's *Ideas, I* expressed in terms that make the original work more graspable for non-philosophers.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn

The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants. The approach is phenomenological (see Chapter 3) in that it involves detailed examination of the participant's lifeworld; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself. At the same time, IPA also emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher in that process. One is trying to get close to the participant's personal world, to take, in Conrad's (1987) words, an 'insider's perspective', but one cannot do this directly or completely. Access depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions; indeed, these are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity. Thus, a two-stage interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, is involved. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. IPA is therefore intellectually connected to hermeneutics and theories of interpretation (Packer and Addison, 1989; Palmer, 1969; see also Chapter 2 this volume). Different interpretative stances are possible, and IPA combines an empathic hermeneutics with a questioning hermeneutics. Thus, consistent with its phenomenological origins, IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to take their side. At the same time, a detailed IPA analysis can also involve asking critical questions of the texts from participants, such as the following: What is the person trying to achieve here? Is something leaking out here that wasn't intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of? We would say that both styles of interpretation are part of sustained qualitative inquiry but that

the degree of emphasis will depend on the particularities of the IPA study concerned. The ordinary word 'understanding' usefully captures these two aspects of interpretation-understanding in the sense of identifying or empathizing with and understanding as trying to make sense of. Allowing for both aspects in the inquiry is likely to lead to a richer analysis and to do greater justice to the totality of the person, 'warts and all'. IPA also acknowledges a debt to symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1995) with its concern for how meanings are constructed by individuals within both a social and a personal world.

IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state. At the same time, IPA researchers realize this chain of connection is complicated – people struggle to express what they are thinking and feeling, there may be reasons why they do not wish to self-disclose, and the researcher has to interpret people's mental and emotional state from what they say.

IPA's emphasis on sense-making by both participant and researcher means that it can be described as having cognition as a central analytic concern, and this suggests an interesting theoretical alliance with the cognitive paradigm that is dominant in contemporary psychology. IPA shares with the cognitive psychology and social cognition approaches in social and clinical psychology (Fiske and Taylor, 1991) a concern with mental processes. However, IPA strongly diverges from mainstream psychology when it comes to deciding the appropriate methodology for such questions. While mainstream psychology is still strongly committed to quantitative and experimental methodology, IPA employs in-depth qualitative analysis. Thus, IPA and mainstream psychology converge in being interested in examining how people think about what is happening to them but diverge in deciding how this thinking can best be studied.

Indeed, we would argue that IPA's commitment to the exploration of meaning and sense-making links in quite closely to the original concerns of cognitive psychology in its rejection of the behaviourist paradigm that had thus far dominated the discipline. It is interesting to see how Bruner (1990), one of the founders of the cognitive approach, regrets how it swiftly moved from a central concern with meaning and meaning making into the science of information processing. For more on the theoretical foundations of IPA, see Smith (1996a).

The aim of this chapter is to provide for the reader new to this way of working a detailed presentation of the stages involved in doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. It gives details of each stage and illustrates them with material taken from a study conducted by the authors. At the same time, it should be recognized that, as is generally the case with qualitative research, there is no single, definitive way to do IPA. We are offering these suggestions, ways we have found that have worked for us. We hope these

Box 4.1   Examples of psychological research questions addressed in IPA studies

- How do gay men think about sex and sexuality? (Flowers et al., 1997)
- How do people with genetic conditions view changing medical technologies? (Chapman, 2002)
- What is the relationship between delusions and personal goals? (Rhodes and Jakes, 2000)
- How do clinical geneticists think genetic counselling should work? (Michie et al., 1999)
- How do people come to terms with the death of a partner? (Golsworthy and Coyle, 1999)
- How does a woman's sense of identity change during the transition to motherhood? (Smith, 1999)
- What model of the person do priests have? (Vignoles et al., in press)
- How do male partners respond to planned fetal termination? (Robson, 2002)
- What theoretical models do mental health nurses use? (Carradice et al., 2002)
- What does it mean to be a donor offspring? (Turner and Coyle, 2000)

will be useful in helping the newcomer to IPA to get under way, but remember that, as you proceed, you may find yourself adapting the method to your own particular way of working and the particular topic you are investigating. We would also point the reader to related writing on interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994; Van Manen, 1997).

Constructing a Research Question and Deciding a Sample

As will be apparent, IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world. IPA is especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty. Box 4.1 illustrates the type of research questions that have been addressed by IPA. Research questions in IPA projects are usually framed broadly and openly. There is no attempt to test a predetermined hypothesis of the researcher; rather, the aim is to explore, flexibly and in detail, an area of concern.

IPA studies are conducted on small sample sizes. The detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts takes a long time, and the aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims. This is not to say that IPA is opposed to more general claims for larger populations; it is just that it is committed to the painstaking analysis of cases rather than jumping to generalizations. This is described as an idiographic mode of inquiry as opposed to the nomothetic approach which predominates in psychology (Smith et al, 1995). In a nomothetic study, analysis is at the level of groups and populations, and one can make only probabilistic claims about individuals; for example, there is a 70 per cent chance that person x will respond in this way. In an idiographic study, because it has been derived from the examination of individual case studies, it is also possible to make specific statements about those individuals.

IPA researchers usually try to find a fairly homogeneous sample. The basic logic is that if one is interviewing, for example, six participants, it is not very helpful to think in terms of random or representative sampling. IPA therefore goes in the opposite direction and, through purposive sampling, finds a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant. How the specificity of a sample is defined will depend on the study; in some cases, the topic under investigation may itself be rare and define the boundaries of the relevant sample. In other cases where a less specific issue is under investigation, the sample may be drawn from a population with similar demographic/socio-economic status profiles. The logic is similar to that employed by the social anthropologist conducting ethnographic research in one particular community. The anthropologist then reports in detail about that particular culture but does not claim to be able to say something about *all* cultures. In time, of course, it will be possible for subsequent studies to be conducted with other groups, and so, gradually, more general claims can be made, but each founded on the detailed examination of a set of case studies. It is also possible to think in terms of theoretical rather than empirical generalizability. In this case, the readers make links between the findings of an IPA study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature. The power of the IPA study is judged by the light it sheds within this broader context. A final note on sampling: it should be remembered that one always has to be pragmatic when doing research; one's sample will in part be defined by who is prepared to be included in it!

There is no right answer to the question of the sample size. It partly depends on several factors: the degree of commitment to the case study level of analysis and reporting; the richness of the individual cases, and the constraints one is operating under. For example, IPA studies have been published with samples of one, four, nine and fifteen. As a rough guide, we suggest five or six as a reasonable sample size for a student project using IPA.

This provides enough cases to examine similarities and differences between participants but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated.

Collecting Data: Semi-structured Interviews as the Exemplary Method for IPA

IPA researchers wish to analyse in detail how participants are perceiving and making sense of things which are happening to them. It therefore requires a flexible data collection instrument. While it is possible to obtain data suitable for IPA analysis in a number of ways – such as personal accounts, and diaries – probably the best way to collect data for an IPA study and the way most IPA studies have been conducted is with the semi-structured interview. This form of interviewing allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants' responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise. Therefore, we will discuss semi-structured interviewing in detail in this chapter. The sections on interviewing draw on Smith (1995). For discussion of other data collection methods either used in or consonant with IPA, see Smith (1990) and Plummer (2000). It is useful first to contrast the primary features of a semi-structured interview with those of a structured interview.

The Structured Interview

The structured interview shares much of the rationale of the psychological experiment. Generally, the investigator decides in advance exactly what constitutes the required data and constructs the questions in such a way as to elicit answers corresponding to, and easily contained within, predetermined categories, which can then be numerically analysed. In order to enhance reliability, the interviewer should stick very closely to the interview schedule and behave with as little variation as possible between interviews. The interviewer will aim to:

* use short specific questions

* read the question exactly as on the schedule

* ask the questions in the identical order specified by the schedule

* ideally have precoded response categories, enabling the questioner to match what the respondent says against one of those categories.

Sometimes the investigator will provide the respondent with a set of possible answers to choose from. Sometimes the respondent is allowed a free response, which can then be categorized.

Thus, in many ways, the structured interview is like the questionnaire; indeed, the two overlap to the extent that often the interview is simply the investigator going through a questionnaire in the presence of a respondent, the interviewer filling in the answers on the questionnaire sheet based on what the respondent says.

The alleged advantages of the structured interview format are control, reliability and speed. That is, the investigator has maximum control over what takes place in the interview. It is also argued that the interview will be reliable in the sense that the same format is being used with each respondent, and that the identity of the interviewer should have minimal impact on the responses obtained.

The structured interview has disadvantages which arise from the constraints put on the respondent and the situation. The structured interview deliberately limits what the respondent can talk about – this having been decided in advance by the investigator. Thus, the interview may well miss out on a novel aspect of the subject, an area considered important by the respondent but not predicted by the investigator. And the topics which are included are approached in a way which makes it unlikely that it will allow the unravelling of complexity or ambiguity in the respondent's position. The structured interview can also become stilted because of the need to ask questions in exactly the same format and sequence to each participant.

This section has offered only a brief introduction to the structured interview, the aim being to provide a context in which to place a discussion of semi-structured interviewing. For more on the different types of interview used by researchers, see Brenner et al. (1985).

Semi-structured interviews

With semi-structured interviews, the investigator will have a set of questions on an interview schedule, but the interview will be guided by the schedule rather than be dictated by it. Here then:

• There is an attempt to establish rapport with the respondent.

• The ordering of questions is less important.

• The interviewer is freer to probe interesting areas that arise.

• The interview can follow the respondent's interests or concerns.

These differences follow from the basic concerns of an approach such as IPA. The investigator has an idea of the area of interest and some questions to

pursue. At the same time, there is a wish to try to enter, as far as possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent. Therefore, the respondent shares more closely in the direction the interview takes, and the respondent can introduce an issue the investigator had not thought of. In this relationship, the respondents can be perceived as the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their own story.

Thus, we could summarize the advantages of the semi-structured interview. It facilitates rapport/empathy, allows a greater flexibility of coverage and allows the interview to go into novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data. On the debit side, this form of interviewing reduces the control the investigator has over the situation, takes longer to carry out, and is harder to analyse.

Constructing the Interview Schedule

Although an investigator conducting a semi-structured interview is likely to see it as a co-determined interaction in its own right, it is still important when working in this way to produce an interview schedule in advance. Why? Producing a schedule beforehand forces us to think explicitly about what we think/hope the interview might cover. More specifically, it enables us to think of difficulties that might be encountered, for example, in terms of question wording or sensitive areas, and to give some thought to how these difficulties might be handled. Having thought in advance about the different ways the interview may proceed allows us, when it comes to the interview itself, to concentrate more thoroughly and more confidently on what the respondent is actually saying. For example, Box 4.2 presents a schedule from a project one of us conducted on kidney disease patients' response to their illness. The participants are undergoing treatment regimen for their kidney disease – an extremely demanding treatment regimen which involves going to hospital three or four times a week and being attached to a dialysis machine for about three hours.

The following list suggests a sequence for producing an interview schedule. This is intended to be only suggestive, not prescriptive. Note also that doing this sort of work is often iterative rather than linear, and you may find your ideas of what the interview should cover changing or developing as you work on the schedule.

1. Having determined the overall area to be tackled in the interview, think about the broad range of issues you want your interview to cover. The three issues in the kidney dialysis project are description of dialysis, effect on the self and coping strategies.

Box 4.2   Interview schedule: patient's experience of renal dialysis

A. *Dialysis*

1) Could you give me a brief history of your kidney problem from when it started to your beginning dialysis?

2) Could you describe what happens in dialysis, in your own words?

3) What do you do when you are having dialysis?

4) How do you feel when you are dialysing? *prompt: physically, emotionally, mentally.*

5) What do you think about?

6) How do you feel about having dialysis? *prompt: some people/relief from previous illness/a bind.*

7) How does dialysis/kidney disease affect your everyday life? *prompt: work, interests, relationships.*

8) If you had to describe what the dialysis machine means to you, what would you say? *prompt: What words come to mind, what images? Do you have a nickname for it?*

B. *Identity*

9) How would you describe yourself as a person? *prompt: What sort of person are you? Most important characteristics: happy, moody, nervy.*

10) Has having kidney disease and starting dialysis made a difference to how you see yourself? *prompt: if so, how do you see yourself now as different from before you started dialysis? How would you say you have changed?*

11) What about compared to before you had kidney disease?

12) What about the way other people see you? *prompt: members of your family, friends? changed?*

C. *Coping*

13) What does the term 'illness' mean to you? How do you define it?

14) How much do you think about your own physical health?

15) Do you see yourself as being ill? *prompt: always, sometimes? Would you say you were an ill person?*

16) On a day-to-day basis, how do you deal with having kidney disease (the illness)? *prompt: do you have particular strategies for helping you? ways of coping, practical, mental.*

17) Do you think about the future much?

2. Put the topics in the most appropriate sequence. Two questions may help here. What is the most logical order in which to address these areas? Which is the most sensitive area? In general, it is a good idea to leave sensitive topics until later in the interview to allow the respondent to become relaxed and comfortable speaking to you. Thus, an interview on political affiliations might begin with questions on what the different political parties represent, and then move on to the question of societal attitudes to politics before, in the final section, asking about the person's own voting behaviour – thus leaving the most personal and potentially most sensitive area until last. In the dialysis project, one could say that all the material is sensitive – but then the respondents know the project is about their health condition and have agreed to talk about it. It was decided that talking about the illness itself was the best way into the interview, and to allow discussion of the effect on the respondent's sense of self to come later.

3. Think of appropriate questions related to each area in order to address the issue you are interested in.

4. Think about possible probes and prompts which could follow from answers that might be given to some of your questions (see below).

Constructing Questions

A strategy often employed in this type of interviewing is to encourage the person to speak about the topic with as little prompting from the interviewer

as possible. One might say that you are attempting to get as close as possible to what your respondent thinks about the topic, without being led too much by your questions. Good interview technique therefore often involves a gentle nudge from the interviewer rather than being too explicit. This aspect of the methodology runs counter to most of the training received for more orthodox psychology methodologies. Thus, you may well find that in the course of constructing your schedule, your first draft questions are too explicit. With redrafting, these become gentler and less loaded but sufficient to let the respondents know what the area of interest is and recognize that they have something to say about it. It may be useful to try out possible questions with a colleague and get some feedback on the level of difficulty and tone.

Sometimes this initial question will be insufficient to elicit a satisfactory response. This may be for various reasons – the issue is a complex one or the question is *too* general or vague for this particular participant. To prepare for this, you can construct *prompts* that are framed more explicitly. Indeed, some of your first draft questions may serve as these prompts. You do not have to prepare prompts for every question, only those where you think there may be some difficulty. So, for example, after question 4 in the dialysis schedule (Box 4.2), there is a prompt to remind the interviewer to ask about each of these domains. After question 8, a prompt is provided in case the respondent has difficulty with the main question itself.

Thus, the interviewer starts with the most general possible question and hopes that this will be sufficient to enable the respondent to talk about the subject. If respondents have difficulty, say they do not understand, or give a short or tangential reply, the interviewer can move to the prompt, which is more specific. Hopefully, this will be enough to get the participant talking. The more specific level questions are there to deal with more difficult cases where the respondent is more hesitant. It is likely that a successful interview will include questions and answers at both general and more specific levels and will move between the two fairly seamlessly. If an interview is taken up with material entirely derived from very specific follow-up questions, you may need to ask yourself how engaged the respondent is. Are you really entering the personal/social life world of the participants, or are you forcing them, perhaps reluctantly and unsuccessfully, to enter yours?

Funnelling is a related technique. For certain issues, it may well be that you are interested in eliciting both the respondents' general views and their response to more specific concerns. Constructing this part of the schedule as a funnel allows you to do this. Thus, in Box 4.3, the first question attempts to elicit the respondent's general view on government policy. Having established that, the interviewer probes for more specific issues. The general point is that by asking questions in this sequence, you have allowed the respondents to give their own views before funnelling them into more

specific questions of particular concern to you. Conducted in the reverse sequence, the interview is more likely to produce data biased in the direction of the investigator's prior and specific concerns. Of course, it is possible that when answering the first question, the respondent may also address the targeted issue and so make it redundant for you to ask the more specific questions.

Below we provide some more tips on good practice for constructing the interview schedule:

- *Questions should be neutral rather than value-laden or leading.*

  Bad: Do you think that the prime minister is doing a good job?
  Better: What do you think of the prime minister's record in office so far?

- *Avoid jargon or assumptions of technical proficiency.* Try to think of the perspective and language of the participants in your study and frame your questions in a way they will feel familiar and comfortable with.

  Bad: What do you think of the human genome project?
  Better: What do you know about recent developments in genetics?

  Obviously, the first question would be fine if one were talking to biologists!

Box 4.3　Funnelling

1) What do you think of current government policies?

2) What do you think of the current government policies towards health and welfare issues?

3) Do you think the government record in this area is okay, or should it be doing anything different?

4) If so, what?

5) It has been suggested that government policy is moving towards one of self-reliance, the welfare system being there only as a safety net for people unable to finance their own provision. What do you think of this as a policy?

- *Use open, not closed, questions.* Closed questions encourage Yes/No answers rather than getting the respondent to open up about their thoughts and feelings.

  Bad: Should the manager resign?
  Better: What do you think the manager should do now?

Having constructed your schedule, you should try and learn it by heart before beginning to interview so that, when it comes to the interview, the schedule can act merely as a mental prompt, if you need it, rather than having constantly to refer to it.

It all depends on intent and context, however. It is possible to ask what seems like a closed question in such a way and at such a point in the interview that it is actually unlikely to close down the response.

Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews generally last for a considerable amount of time (usually an hour or more) and can become intense and involved, depending on the particular topic. It is therefore sensible to try to make sure that the interview can proceed without interruption as far as possible, and usually it is better to conduct the interview with the respondent alone. At the same time, one can think of exceptions where this would be neither practical nor sensible. For example, it may not be advisable with young children. The location of the interview can also make a difference. People usually feel most comfortable in a setting they are familiar with, as in their own home, but there may be times when this is not practicable and a different venue will need to be chosen.

It is sensible to concentrate at the beginning of the interview on putting respondents at ease, to enable them to feel comfortable talking to you before any of the substantive areas of the schedule are introduced. Hopefully, then, this positive and responsive 'set' will continue through the interview.

The interviewer's role in a semi-structured interview is to facilitate and guide, rather than dictate exactly what will happen during the encounter. If the interviewer has learnt the schedule in advance, he or she can concentrate during the interview on what the respondent is saying, and occasionally monitor the coverage of the scheduled topics. Thus, the interviewer uses the schedule to indicate the general area of interest and to provide cues when the participant has difficulties, but the respondent should be allowed a strong role in determining how the interview proceeds.

The interview does not have to follow the sequence on the schedule, nor does every question have to be asked, or asked in exactly the same way, of each respondent. Thus, the interviewer may decide that it would be appropriate to ask a question earlier than it appears on the schedule because it follows from what the respondent has just said. Similarly, how a question is phrased, and how explicit it is, will now partly depend on how the interviewer feels the participant is responding.

The interview may well move away from the questions on the schedule, and the interviewer must decide how much movement is acceptable. It is quite possible that the interview may enter an area that had not been predicted by the investigator but which is extremely pertinent to, and enlightening of, the project's overall question. Indeed, these novel avenues are often the most valuable, precisely because they have come unprompted from respondents and, therefore, are likely to be of especial importance for them. Thus quite a lot of latitude should be allowed. On the other hand, of course, the interviewer needs to make sure that the conversation does not move too far away from the agreed domain.

Here are a few tips on interviewing techniques.

- *Try not to rush in too quickly.* Give the respondent time to finish a question before moving on. Often the most interesting questions need some time to respond to, and richer, fuller answers may be missed if the interviewer jumps in too quickly.

- *Use minimal probes.* If respondents are entering an interesting area, minimal probes are often all that is required to help them to continue, for example: 'Can you tell me more about that?' or 'How did you feel about that?'

- *Ask one question at a time.* Multiple questions can be difficult for the respondent to unpick and even more difficult for you subsequently, when you are trying to work out from a transcript which question the respondent is replying to.

- *Monitor the effect of the interview on the respondent.* It may be that respondents feel uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning, and this may be expressed in their non-verbal behaviour or in how they reply. You need to be ready to respond to this, by, for example, backing off and trying again more gently or deciding it would be inappropriate to pursue this area with this respondent. As an interviewer, you have ethical responsibilities toward the respondent. For more on interviewing, see Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and Burgess (1984).