

To Mark and Catherine

Denise Lac

Real World Research

*A Resource for Social Scientists
and Practitioner-Researchers*

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telephone surveys. Covers both practical guidelines and the underlying logical principles.

de Vaus, D. A. (1991) *Surveys in Social Research*, 3rd edn. London: UCL Press/Allen & Unwin. Short text covering design and practicalities. Very clear.

Dillman, D. (2000) *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 2nd edn. Chichester: Wiley. Full coverage of survey design and practice, including extensive treatment of internet surveys.

Hakm, C. (1987) *Research Design: Strategies and Choices in the Design of Social Research*. London: Allen & Unwin. See chapter on 'Ad Hoc Sample Surveys' for discussion of design of small surveys.

Hoinville, G., Jowell, R. and Associates (1985) *Survey Research Practice*, 2nd edn. London: Gower. Excellent text on the practical aspects of survey design and execution.

Marsh, C. (1982) *The Survey Method: The Contribution of Surveys to Sociological Explanation*. London: Allen & Unwin. Though primarily methodological, its interest is wider than the subtitle suggests. Very extensive annotated bibliography.

Mishler, E. G. (1991) *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Presents a powerful critique of the survey research interview. Suggests that the standard approach of decontextualizing questions and response leads to problems in analysis and interpretation.

Sapsford, R. (1999) *Survey Research*. London: Sage. Useful discussion of applied research in constrained circumstances and with limited resources. Also of the practicalities of sampling in the real world.

Turner, C. F. and Martin, E., eds (1986) *Surveying Subjective Phenomena*, 2 vols. New York: Russell Sage. Detailed reference on central methodological concerns of survey research.

9

Interviews

This chapter:

- discusses different types of interviews, differentiating them in terms amount of structure
- considers the circumstances under which the different types are appropriate
- reviews the advantages and disadvantages of interviews
- provides general advice for interviewers, including the kinds of questions avoid
- covers the phases of an interview
- gives particular attention to semi-structured interviews, including interview schedules
- reviews issues involved in running group interviews
- details advantages and disadvantages of focus groups
- concludes by reviewing the skills needed by interviewers

Introduction

Interviewing as a research method typically involves you, as researcher, asking questions and, hopefully, receiving answers from the people you are interviewing. It is very widely used in social research and there are many different types. A commonly used typology distinguishes among structured, semi structured and unstructured interviews. The different types can link to some extent to the 'depth' of response sought. The extreme example of a highly structured format is the survey interview discussed in the previous chapter. This is effectively a questionnaire with fixed questions in a pre-decided order and standardized wording, where responses to most of the questions have been selected from a small list of alternatives. Less structured approaches allow

the person interviewed much more flexibility of response, and at the other extreme is the 'depth interview' (Miller and Crabtree, 1999), where the respondent is largely free to say whatever they like on the broad topic of the interview, with minimal prompting from the researcher. Interviews are commonly one-to-one and face-to-face, but they can take place in group settings and, as discussed in the previous chapter, the telephone is increasingly being used because of the savings in time and resources it permits.

Interviews can be used as the primary or only approach in a study, as in a survey or many grounded theory studies. However, they lend themselves well to use in combination with other methods, in a multimethod approach. A case study might employ some kind of relatively formal interview to complement participant observation. An experiment could often usefully incorporate a post-intervention interview to help incorporate the participant's perspective into the findings.

The last chapter covered interview-based survey questionnaires. This chapter focuses on a range of other types of interview where open-ended questions are the norm. A typical scenario envisaged is the small-scale enquiry where you, working as a student, teacher, social worker, applied social researcher or what-ever, are wanting to carry out a study with limited resources and time, perhaps alone, perhaps with a colleague or some part-time assistance, possibly concerned with some situation in which you are already an actor. In these situations, such interviews can be a powerful tool, though they are not without potential problems – practical, theoretical and analytical, among others.

Types and Styles of Interviews

A commonly made distinction is based on the degree of structure or standardization of the interview:

- *Fully structured interview* Has predetermined questions with fixed wording, usually in a pre-set order. The use of mainly open-response questions is the only essential difference from an interview-based survey questionnaire.
- *Semi-structured interview* Has predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included.
- *Unstructured interviews* The interviewer has a general area of interest and concern, but lets the conversation develop within this area. It can be completely informal.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are widely used in flexible, qualitative designs. King (1994) refers to them as *qualitative research interviews* and suggests guidelines for the situations in which they might be used, presented as box 9.1.

Powrey and Watts (1987, ch. 2) prefer a different typology, making a basic distinction between *respondent interviews* and *informant interviews*. In respondent interviews, the interviewer remains in control (or at least that is the interviewer's intention) throughout the whole process. All such interviews are necessarily structured to some extent by the interviewer. In this type, or style, of interview, the central point is that the intention is that 'interviewees rule'; their agenda is what matters. Both fully and semi-structured interviews are typically, in this sense, respondent interviews.

In informant interviews (sometimes referred to as *non-directive*, in reference to the interviewer's role), the prime concern is for the interviewee's

Box 9.1

Circumstances in which a qualitative research interview is most appropriate

- 1 Where a study focuses on the meaning of particular phenomena to the participants.
- 2 Where individual perceptions of processes within a social unit – such as a work-group, department or whole organization – are to be studied prospectively, using a series of interviews.
- 3 Where individual historical accounts are required of how a particular phenomenon developed – for instance, a new shift system.
- 4 Where exploratory work is required before a quantitative study can be carried out. For example, researchers examining the impact of new technology on social relationships in a workplace might use qualitative interviews to identify the range of different types of experience which a subsequent quantitative study should address.
- 5 Where a quantitative study has been carried out, and qualitative data are required to validate particular measures or to clarify and illustrate the meaning of the findings. For instance, people with high, medium and low scores on a new measure of stress at work might be interviewed to see whether their experiences concur with the ratings on the measure.

(From King, 1994, pp. 16–17)

perceptions within a particular situation or context. From the point of view of the interviewer, such a session will almost inevitably appear unstructured, as he is unlikely to be privy to the interviewee's agenda. However, it could be much more structured as far as the interviewee is concerned.

Interviews can, of course, be used for purposes other than research. Aldridge and Wood (1998), for example, discuss the use of investigative interviews in the context of child care and child abuse. There are very substantial overlaps in the two approaches, in that in both cases the essential purpose is to seek answers to questions: research questions and questions of guilt or innocence respectively.

Question focus

Distinctions are commonly made among seeking to find out what people know, what they do, and what they think or feel. This leads, respectively, to questions concerned with *facts*, with *behaviour*, and with *beliefs* or *attitudes*.

Facts are relatively easy to get at, although errors can occur due to lapses in memory or to response biases of various kinds (age may be claimed to be less than it is by the middle-aged; inflated by the really aged). The best responses are obtained to specific (as opposed to general) questions about important things, in the present or recent past. The same rules apply to questions about behaviour, and of course the respondent is often in a uniquely favourable position to tell you about what they are doing or have done. Beliefs and attitudes form a very important target for self-report techniques, but are relatively difficult to get at. They are often complex and multidimensional, and appear particularly prone to the effects of question wording and sequence. These problems point to the use of multiple questions related to the belief or attitude and can be best attacked by the construction of appropriate scales (see chapter 10).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviews

The interview is a flexible and adaptable way of finding things out. The human use of language is fascinating both as a behaviour in its own right, and for the virtually unique window that it opens on what lies behind our actions. Observing behaviour is clearly a useful enquiry technique, but asking people directly about what is going on is an obvious short cut in seeking answers to our research questions.

Face-to-face interviews offer the possibility of modifying one's line of enquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying

motives in a way that postal and other self-administered questionnaires cannot. Non-verbal cues may give messages which help in understanding the verbal response, possibly changing or even, in extreme cases, reversing its meaning. To make profitable use of this flexibility calls for considerable skill and experience in the interviewer. The lack of standardization that it implies inevitably raises concerns about reliability. Biases are difficult to rule out. There are ways of dealing with these problems, but they call for a degree of professionalism which does not come easily. Nevertheless, although the interview in no sense a soft option as a data-gathering technique (illustrating once more that apparently 'soft' techniques, emphasizing qualitative data, are deceptively hard to use well), it has the potential of providing rich and highly illuminating material.

Interviewing is time-consuming. The actual interview session itself will obviously vary in length. Anything under half an hour is unlikely to be valuable; anything going much over an hour may be making unreasonable demands on busy interviewees, and could have the effect of reducing the number of persons willing to participate, which may in turn lead to biases in the sample that you achieve. Above all, don't say that it will take half an hour and then keep going for an hour and a half. It is up to you to terminate the interview on schedule, and you have the professional responsibility of keeping this, as well as all other, undertakings that you make. The reverse phenomenon is not unknown: that of the interviewee so glad to have a willing ear to bend that you can't escape. How you deal with this depends very much on your own 'closure' skills. Remember that, just as you are hoping to get something out of the interview, it is not unreasonable for the interviewee to get something from you.

All interviews require careful preparation – making arrangements to visit securing necessary permissions – which takes time; confirming arrangement rescheduling appointments to cover absences and crises takes more time. Notes have to be written up; tapes, if used, must be transcribed, in full or in part (allow something like a factor of ten between tape time and transcription time unless you are highly skilled: i.e. a one-hour tape takes ten hours to transcribe fully). Subsequent analyses are not the least of your time-eaters. As with other techniques, time planning and time budgeting is a crucial skill in successful enquiry in the real world.

General Advice for Interviewers

The interview is a kind of conversation, something that we have all had experience in doing. However, interviewing does demand rather different emphases in the social interaction that takes place from those in ordinary conversation

Your job as interviewer is to try to get interviewees to talk freely and openly. Your own behaviour has a major influence on their willingness to do this. To this end you should:

- *Listen more than you speak* Most interviewees talk too much. The interview is not a platform for the interviewer's personal experiences and opinions.
- *Put questions in a straightforward, clear and non-threatening way* If people are confused or defensive, you will not get the information you seek.
- *Eliminate cues which lead interviewees to respond in a particular way* Many interviewees will seek to please the interviewer by giving 'correct' responses ('Are you against sin?').
- *Enjoy it (or at least look as though you do)* Don't give the message that you are bored or scared. Vary your voice and facial expression.

It is also essential that you take a full record of the interview. This can be from notes made at the time and/or from a recording of the interview. Experienced interviewers tend to have strong preferences for one or other of these approaches. McDonald and Sanger have given a detailed account of their relative advantages and disadvantages (Walker, 1985, pp. 109-16 provides a summary). The literature (discussed in Hoinville et al., 1985) suggests that various kinds of questions should be avoided; these are summarized in box 9.2.

Content of the Interview

In interviews which are to a greater or lesser extent pre-structured by the interviewer, the content, which can be prepared in advance, consists of

- a set of items (usually questions), often with alternative subsequent items depending on the responses obtained;
- suggestions for so-called probes and prompts,
- and a proposed sequence for the questions which, in a semi-structured interview, may be subject to change during the course of the interview.

The items or questions

Three main types are used in research interviews: closed (or fixed-alternative), open and scale items. Closed questions, as the fixed-alternative label suggests,

BOX 9.2

Questions to avoid in interviews

Long questions The interviewee may remember only part of the question, and respond to that part.

Double-barrelled (or multiple-barrelled) questions, e.g. 'What do you feel about current pop music compared with that of five years ago?' The solution here is to break it down into simpler questions ('What do you feel about current pop music?'; 'Can you recall any pop music from five years ago?'; 'How do you feel they compare?').

Questions involving jargon Generally you should avoid questions containing words likely to be unfamiliar to the target audience. Keep things simple to avoid disturbing interviewees; it is in your own interest as well.

Leading questions, e.g. 'Why do you like Huddersfield?' It is usually straightforward to modify such questions, provided you realize that they are leading in a particular direction.

Biased questions Provided you are alert to the possibility of bias, it is not difficult to write unbiased questions. What is more difficult, however, is not (perhaps unwittingly) to lead the interviewee by the manner in which the question is asked, or the way in which you receive the response. Neutrality is called for, and in seeking to be welcoming and reinforcing to the interviewee, you should try to avoid appearing to share or welcome their views.

force the interviewee to choose from two or more fixed alternatives. Open questions provide no restrictions on the content or manner of the reply other than on the subject area (e.g. 'What kind of way do you most prefer to spend a free evening?'). Scale items, which may well not be in question form, ask for a response in the form of degree of agreement or disagreement (e.g. strongly agree/agree/neutral/disagree/strongly disagree). Logically they are of the closed or fixed-alternative type, but are sometimes regarded as a separate type.

As open-ended questions are probably more commonly used in interview than in other settings, it is appropriate to discuss them here.

The advantages of open-ended questions are that they

- are flexible;
- allow you to go into more depth or clear up any misunderstandings;

- enable testing of the limits of a respondent's knowledge;
- encourage co-operation and rapport;
- allow you to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes;
- can produce unexpected or unanticipated answers.

The disadvantages lie in the possibilities for loss of control by the interviewer, and in particular in being much more difficult to analyse than closed ones.

Probes

A probe is a device to get interviewees to expand on a response when you intuit that they have more to give. The use of probes is something of an art-form and difficult to transmit to the novice interviewer. Sometimes the interviewer may be given instructions to probe on specific questions. There are obvious tactics, such as asking 'Anything more?' or 'Could you go over that again?' Sometimes when an answer has been given in general terms, a useful probe is to seek a personal response, e.g. 'What is your own personal view on this?' There are also very general tactics, such as the use of

- a period of silence;
- an enquiring glance;
- 'mmhm . . .';
- repeating back all or part of what the interviewee has just said.

Zeisel (1984, pp. 140–54) gives an extended analysis of different types of probe.

Prompts

Prompts suggest to the interviewee the range or set of possible answers that the interviewer expects. The list of possibilities may be read out by the interviewer, or a 'prompt card' with them on can be shown (e.g. a list of names of alcoholic drinks for a question on drinking habits). All prompts must be used in a consistent manner with different interviewees (and by different interviewers, if more than one is involved), and form part of the interview record.

The sequence of questions

A commonly used sequence is as follows:

- 1 *Introduction* Interviewer introduces herself, explains purpose of interview, assures of confidentiality, asks permission to tape and/or notes.
- 2 *'Warm-up'* Easy, non-threatening questions at the beginning to set down both of you.
- 3 *Main body of interview* Covering the main purpose of the interview in what the interviewer considers to be a logical progression. In structured interviewing, this order can be varied, capitalizing on responses made (ensure 'missed' topics are returned to unless this seems inappropriate or unnecessary. Any 'risky' questions should be related late in the sequence so that, if the interviewee refuses to continue, information is lost.
- 4 *'Cool-off'* Usually a few straightforward questions at the end to defuse any tension that might have built up.
- 5 *Close* Thank you and goodbye. The 'hand on the door' phenomenon, sometimes found at the end of counselling sessions, is also common in interviewing. Interviewees may, when the recorder is switched on the notebook put away, come out with a lot of interesting material. There are various possible ways of dealing with this (switch on and reopen the book, forget about it) but in any case you should be consistent, *and* note how you dealt with it.

Carrying Out Different Types of Interview

Structured interviews

In virtually all respects the procedures and considerations for carrying out structured interviews are the same as those discussed for survey interview in the previous chapter (p. 251). However, you do need to ensure that responses to open-ended questions are captured word for word. The easiest way of ensuring this is by taping the interview. As always, the consent of the interviewee must be obtained and the practicalities of recording have to be sorted out (p. 376).

Structured interviews of this kind do not fit easily into flexible designs. They are more likely to be contributing to a fixed design along with other methods. While no one form of data analysis is called for, con-

analysis (which effectively transforms the data into quantitative form) is commonly used: see chapter 12 (p. 351).

Semi-structured interviews

This type of interview is widely used in flexible designs, either as the sole method or in combination with others. In Powney and Warr's (1987) terminology, this is still a respondent interview. Interviewers have their shopping list of topics and want to get responses to them, but they have considerable freedom in the sequencing of questions, in their exact wording, and in the amount of time and attention given to different topics.

The *interview schedule* can be simpler than the one for the structured interview (p. 251). It will be likely to include the following:

- introductory comments (probably a verbatim script);
- list of topic headings and possibly key questions to ask under these headings;
- set of associated prompts;
- closing comments.

It is common to incorporate some more highly structured sequences (e.g. to obtain standard factual biographical and other material). One strategy is to have the different topics and associated questions and prompts on a series of cards. The interviewer will have an initial topic but will then be to some extent guided by the interviewee's responses as to the succeeding sequence of topics. Cards can be put on one side when they have been covered. Notes should be made during the interview, even if it is also being taped (in part as a fall-safe in case of a taping problem). Allow a substantial amount of space for each topic as you won't know in advance how much material you will obtain in any particular area. The prompts may not be necessary, but they provide a useful structure for organizing your notes. Box 9.3 gives an example of an interview schedule for semi-structured interviews.

Unstructured interviews

One type of unstructured interview is non-standardized, open-ended and in-depth. It has been compared to a lengthy, intimate conversation, as a research tool, it is not an easy option for the novice. Ely et al. (1991) give a graphic account of what is involved, with related references.

Lofland and Lofland (1995), who prefer the term 'intensive interviewing', stress the importance of an interview *guide* when working in this way:

**Box 9.3
Example of interview schedule for
semi-structured interview**

Thank you for being willing to take part in a follow-up interview to the previous survey. Can I first of all assure you that you will remain completely anonymous and no records of the interview will be kept with your name on them.

1 Can I first ask you if you are now in employment?

If *yes* take details of:

- a Job
- b How person came to hear of job
- c Application procedure
- d Selection procedure
- e Why this one was successful in contrast to previous attempts
- f What problems did the person experience in previous attempt (Probe until topic exhausted)
- g Advance to 2.

If *no* take details of:

- a Last job applied for
 - b How person came to hear about job
 - c Application procedure
 - d Selection procedure
 - e Why was this one unsuccessful?
 - f If person not interviewed, ask above questions about the last job they got as far as interview. If none, ask above questions about the careers they felt they got nearest to
 - g What problems does the person in general experience in relation to finding work? (Probe until topic exhausted)
 - h Advance to 2.
- 2 What careers advice have you received:
- a At school?
 - b From local careers service?
 - c From any other source including informal sources?
- 3 How would you evaluate that advice? (Ask in relation to all sources identified in 2.)
- 4 Have you taken part in any of the services for the unemployed provided locally? (Probe this and explain but do not prompt with examples at this stage.)

- 5 How would you evaluate these services? (Ask in relation to all sources identified in 4.)
- 6 Take respondents through the following list and ask them if they are aware of the service, what is provided, if they have had direct experience, and if they had, how they would rate that experience. (Omit from the list any services already covered in 4 and 5 above.)
- a Adult training
 - b Youth training
 - c Training Access Points
 - d Worklink
 - e Kirklees Community Enterprise Training Agency (KCEITA)
 - f Start-up business units
 - g Business Access Scheme
 - h Workers' co-operatives
 - i Careers and Education Advice Service for Adults (CEASA)
 - j Careers service
 - k Redundancy counselling.
- 7 What kinds of services could be provided that would help you personally to get a job (or would have made it easier if in employment)? Probe and direct to less obvious areas such as child minding and transport – pick up on factors mentioned in 1 and 2 above – but do not neglect more obvious direct services.
- 8 Have you been helped by any informal organizations? Probe on community-based initiatives, job clubs, local support networks, etc. Do not neglect simply the help and advice of relatives, friends and neighbours.
- 9 How do the factors identified in 8 compare to help received through formal services? Probe in what ways better, similar, worse or different.
- 10 Do you have a regular routine to organize your time for the week? Probe the extent to which this includes finding employment or perhaps precludes it. NB if now employed ask in relation to time when unemployed.
- 11 Do you find your present income adequate and fair? If in employment contrast with time when out of employment.
- 12 Some people see the society we live in as a ladder to climb to greater rewards: others see it as divided between the haves and have-nots. How do you see society? Probe on social imagery.
- 13 Thank you very much for helping us and giving up your time. Can I finally ask you if you think there is any aspect of your experience of looking for work that has not been covered in this interview?

(From Cliff et al., n.d.)

a guide is *not* a tightly structured set of questions to be asked verbatim as written accompanied by an associated range of preworded likely answers. Rather, it is *list of things to be sure to ask about when talking to the person being interviewed* ... You want interviewees to speak freely in their own terms about a set of concerns you bring to the interaction, plus whatever else they might introduce (p. 85, emphasis in original)

They also reproduce an excellent set of self-instructions for introducing on prior to an intensive interview, given here as box 9.4. These were originally developed by Davis to introduce himself to persons with handicaps, but a general relevance.

McCracken (1988) advocates the use of what he calls the *long intro*. By this he means not simply an interview which takes a long time, but ethnographic style which might be substituted for participant observation situations where the latter is impossible because of time or other constraints (see chapter 6, p. 186).

BOX 9.4

Introducing yourself: a list of self-instructions

- 1 Explain purpose and nature of the study to the respondent, telling him or through whom he came to be selected.
- 2 Give assurance that respondent will remain anonymous in any written reports growing out of the study, and that his responses will be treated strictest confidence.
- 3 Indicate that he may find some of the questions far-fetched, silly or difficult to answer, for the reason that questions that are appropriate for one person are not always appropriate for another. Since there are no right or wrong answers, he is not to worry about these but to do as best he can with them. We are only interested in his opinions and personal experience.
- 4 He is to feel perfectly free to interrupt, ask clarification of the interviewer, criticize a line of questioning, etc.
- 5 Interviewer will tell respondent something about himself – his background, training, and interest in the area of enquiry.
- 6 Interviewer is to ask permission to tape-record the interview, explaining why he wishes to do this.

(From Davis, 1960; see also Lofland and Lofland, 1995, pp. 84–5.)

A further type of unstructured interview is the *informal interview*. This is where one takes an opportunity that arises to have a (usually short) chat with someone in the research setting about anything which seems relevant. In an ethnographic-style study, this might arise after a period of observation to try to seek clarification about the meaning or significance of something that took place. It is not appropriate as the main data collection method but, used in conjunction with other methods, can play a valuable part in virtually all flexible design research. It is not usually feasible to tape-record such interviews (getting out the recorder, asking permission etc. is highly likely to get rid of the spontaneity and informality) but it is important that you make a detailed note of the interaction as soon as possible afterwards.

Telephone interviews

These were discussed in the previous chapter (p. 253) in the context of surveys, but can be used more widely. They share many of the advantages of face-to-face interviewing: a high response rate; correction of obvious misunderstandings; possible use of probes, etc. Rapport may be more difficult to achieve, but this is compensated for by evidence of smaller interviewer effects and a lower tendency towards socially desirable responses (Bradburn and Sudman, 1979). The lack of visual cues may cause problems in interpretation. The major advantage, particularly if the sample to be reached is geographically dispersed, is the lower cost in terms of time, effort and money. They can be safer as well: you won't get physically attacked over the phone.

Informant Interviews

Informant interviews are not simply casual conversations. In one version, known as the *non-directive interview*, the direction of the interview and the areas covered are totally in the control of the informant (the interviewee). Carl Rogers (1945) has used this approach widely in therapeutic settings, and it has had a considerable influence on interviewing style. However, there are important differences between clinical and research purposes. In Rogerian therapy, the interview is initiated by the client, not the therapist; the motivation, and hence the purpose of the interview, is to seek help with a problem, and the extent to which it is helpful is the index of success. Because of this, Whyte (1984) has claimed that a genuine non-directive interviewing approach is not appropriate for research. Powney and Watts (1987, p. 20) suggest that Piaget's type of clinical interviewing, as used in his studies of cognitive development (e.g. Piaget, 1929, 1930), where he is insistent that the child must

determine the content and direction of the conversation, fits better research purposes. There is a certain irony here, as experimental psychology while recognizing Piaget's theoretical contributions, have been very distrustful of his methodology.

An approach which allows people's views and feelings to emerge, but gives the interviewer some control, is known as the *focused interview* (Neuman et al., 1956). It can be used where we want to investigate a particular phenomenon or event (e.g. a youth training programme, an X-ray or a TV programme). Individuals are sought who have been involved in a situation (e.g. they are all in an open prison and have been subjected to 'short, sharp, shock' treatment).

The first task is to carry out a *situational analysis*, by means of observational documentary analysis or whatever. Typically this covers:

- the important aspects of the situation to those involved;
- the meaning these aspects have for those involved; and
- the effects they have on those involved.

An interview guide is then developed covering the major areas of concern and the research questions. The interviews concentrate on the subject experiences of those involved. This approach demands considerable experience and skill on the part of the interviewer and great flexibility. In particular probe is a crucial aspect. Zeisel (1984, ch. 9) provides detailed and useful suggestions.

Group Interviews

Interviews can take place in a group context as well as one-to-one. Interviews can fall into any of the types previously discussed and, in particular, may be highly structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Fontana and Frey (1994) give details of five different types. The more common version have a substantial degree of flexibility and are effectively some form of focus group with characteristics of a discussion as well as of an interview. Even in general topics, and sometimes specific questions, are presented by the researcher, the traditional interview format of alternate question and answer is both difficult to maintain and eliminates the group interaction which is a particular strength of the group interview.

The generic term 'group interview' has tended recently to be used interchangeably with 'focus group' because of the latter's popularity, even though it has specific characteristics, as discussed below.

Focus groups

Focus groups originated in market research in the 1920s, arising from the recognition that many consumer decisions were made in a social, group context (Bogardus, 1926). They are now widely used by political parties seeking to assess the likely response to proposed policies, and are currently a very popular method of data collection in many fields of applied social research. Johnson (1996) argues from a critical realist perspective that they have considerable potential to raise consciousness and empower participants. Focus groups show signs of taking over from questionnaires as the automatic stock response to the question 'What method should we use?' This is in part because they share with postal questionnaires the advantages of being an efficient way of generating substantial amounts of data, and apparently being easy to carry out. However, as with questionnaires, these perceived advantages are offset by considerable disadvantages. For example, it is difficult or impossible to follow up the views of individuals; and group dynamics or power hierarchies affect who speaks and what they say. A particular problem is when one or two persons dominate. Focus groups are not easy to conduct well. Box 9.5 lists some of the advantages and disadvantages.

A focus group (sometimes referred to as a *focus group interview* – which emphasizes the fact that this is a particular type of interview) is a group

Box 9.5

Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Advantages

- 1 A highly efficient technique for qualitative data collection since the amount and range of data are increased by collecting from several people at the same time.
- 2 Natural quality controls on data collection operate; for example, participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other and extreme views tend to be weeded out.
- 3 Group dynamics help in focusing on the most important topics and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a consistent and shared view.
- 4 Participants tend to enjoy the experience.
- 5 The method is relatively inexpensive and flexible and can be set up quickly.

6 Participants are empowered and able to make comments in their own words, while being stimulated by thoughts and comments of others in the group.

7 Contributions can be encouraged from people who are reluctant to be interviewed on their own, feel they have nothing to say or may not usually participate in surveys.

8 People who cannot read or write or who have other specific difficulties are not discriminated against.

9 Facilitation can help in the discussion of taboo subjects since less inhibited members may break the ice or provide mutual support.

Disadvantages

1 The number of questions covered is limited. Typically fewer than ten major questions can be asked in an hour.

2 Facilitating the group process requires considerable expertise.

3 The interview process needs to be well managed or the less articulate may not share their views, extreme views may predominate, and bias may be caused by the domination of the group by one or two people.

4 Conflicts may arise between personalities. Power struggles may detract from the interview and there may be conflicts of status within the procedure.

5 Confidentiality can be a problem between participants when interacting in a group situation.

6 The results cannot be generalized as they cannot be regarded as representative of the wider population.

7 The live and immediate nature of the interaction may lead a researcher or decision-maker to place greater faith in the findings than is actually warranted.

(Adapted and abridged from Robinson, 1999, pp. 909–10.)

interview on a specific topic; which is where the 'focus' comes from. It is a open-ended group discussion guided by the researcher, typically extending over at least an hour, possibly two or more. Opinion varies on the optimum size of the group. Figures of eight to twelve are usually thought suitable (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990), although smaller group sizes have been used

There is debate about whether the groups should be homogeneous (e.g. a study of the client perspective on the working of a health service might consist of a group of people who have recently used the service) or heterogeneous (e.g. a study within a firm might include shop-floor workers, secretarial staff, managers, etc.). The pros and cons of the two approaches are presented as box 9.6. Market researchers traditionally brought together groups of strangers on the assumption that this would lead to a greater focus on the designated topic. However, this is not feasible for many real world research projects. MacDougall and Fudge (2001) provide highly practical advice on the planning and recruiting of samples for focus groups, based on a synthesis of the literature and their research experience.

Complex studies can have several different focus groups. Brown (1999) describes several studies using focus groups in clinical research. A typical study involved a total of seven focus groups, consisting of two groups of senior citizens, two informal carer groups and three health care provider groups,

Box 9.6

Homogeneous or heterogeneous groups?

Homogeneous groups

Have a common background, position or experience, which

- facilitates communication;
- promotes an exchange of ideas and experiences;
- gives a sense of safety in expressing conflicts or concerns;
- may result in 'groupthink' (unquestioning similarity of position or views).

Heterogeneous groups

Differ in background, position or experience, which

- can stimulate and enrich the discussion;
- may inspire other group members to look at the topic in a different light;
- may risk power imbalances;
- can lead to lack of respect for opinions expressed by some members;
- can lead to a dominant participant destroying the group process.

(Derived from Brown, 1999, p. 115.)

representing each of the three primary care areas – medical, home-based public health.

Uses of focus groups Focus groups can be, and have been, used as the primary data collection method in a study. Examples include examining risk-take behaviour in relation to HIV infection (Kirtzinger, 1994); the information needs of partners of women with breast cancer (Rees et al., 1998); the role of crime among lower socio-economic status Latina women in New Madrid, 1998); respect for elders in current Singapore society (Mehra, 1996) and facilitating self-help in young persons with arthritis (Barlow and Harrington, 1996). They are, however commonly used in conjunction with other methods for example, with observation and individual interviews (Cash et al., 1999) or with questionnaires (Sloan, 1999).

Other uses include the focus group as a precursor to the development of more structured instrument. Hyland et al. (1994), for example, used them to help in the construction of a quality of life questionnaire. The reverse sequence is also possible, for example using focus groups to amplify and understand findings from a survey (Evason and Whittington, 1997). Further discussion on different types of multimethod study is presented in chapter 12.

The moderator role The person running a focus group is usually referred to as the *moderator* (sometimes the *facilitator*). The terms signal two aspects of their role: to moderate in the dictionary sense of regulating, or keep within measures or bounds; to facilitate in the sense of helping the group run effectively.

These are not easy tasks, and call for considerable skills and experience they are to be done well. A balance between an active and a passive role is needed. 'The moderator has to generate interest in and discussion about particular topic, which is close to his or her professional or academic interest without at the same time leading the group to reinforce existing expectations or confirm a prior hypothesis' (Sim, 1998, p. 347). Acting as a moderator in a focus group run for research purposes may be particularly difficult for social professionals. Those from helping and caring professions must appreciate that it is not being run for therapeutic purposes: they are not running a support group, although it may be that participants get a great deal from the experience (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 1993).

There are considerable advantages in having a second researcher or co-researcher person involved in the running of the group. These include:

- it provides coverage of both the substantive area of interest and the focus group experience (often not possible to combine in a single person);

- a second person can make notes on who is speaking (difficult to determine if audio-taping is used; video-taping can be obtrusive);
- the second person can note non-verbal interactions and
- can give feedback on the moderator's performance (e.g. talking too much; over-prompting; inhibiting discussion; allowing one person to dominate; etc.).

Data collection in focus groups Audio-taping is generally recommended, although there are some situations where this may affect the working of the group (perhaps because of the sensitivity of the topic, or the characteristics and expectations of group members). It is good practice to have written notes made even if the session is recorded. Groups are notoriously difficult to get good recordings from, recorders fail, etc. This is a task for the second researcher; keeping the session going well is a sufficiently demanding task for the moderator.

Data analysis and interpretation This should follow the general principles and processes for qualitative data analysis discussed in chapter 14. As with other flexible designs generating qualitative data, analysis and interpretation of data from focus groups must take account of the context and circumstances in which the data are gathered.

The group context leads to some issues which are relatively specific to focus groups. Group dynamics obviously play a major part in what happens during the session, and hence in determining the data you obtain (Cohen and Garratt, 1999 argue for the use of insights from group work theory and practice, as possessed by social workers and other 'helping and caring' professionals). It is dangerous to interpret an absence of dissenting voices as indicating consensus. Silence may indicate consent, but it could reflect an unwillingness to express dissent. In this connection advantages have been claimed for *computer-mediated focus groups* (Walston and Lissitz, 2000), where all communication occurs at the computer, much as in an internet chat room (note that this has similarities to the Delphi Method discussed in chapter 3, p. 57; see also Adler and Ziglio, 1996).

Problematic methodological issues Much of the literature on focus groups is methodologically naive. This perhaps reflects its roots in market research, where concerns have tended to be highly practical; the literature focuses on how to do it, rather than worrying overmuch about the warrant for the assertions made and conclusions drawn. Some aspects needing consideration from a research perspective are listed in box 9.7. See also Kidd and Parshall (2000), who suggest procedures for enhancing the rigour of analysis, and the reliability and validity of focus group findings.

BOX 9.7 Methodological issues arising from focus groups

- 1 The skills and attributes of the moderator and the manner of data recording will exert a powerful influence on the quality of the data collected in a focus group.
- 2 Focus groups explore collective phenomena, not individual ones. Attempts to infer the latter from focus group data are likely to be unfounded.
- 3 Focus group data may be a poor indicator of a consensus in attitudes, though they may reveal a divergence of opinion and the extent to which certain issues recur across groups.
- 4 Focus groups can reveal the nature and range of participants' views, but less so their strength.
- 5 Generalization from focus group data is problematic. If feasible it will be theoretical generalization (see p. 176) rather than empirical or statistical generalization.
- 6 Focus groups tap a different realm of social reality from that revealed by one-to-one interviews or questionnaire studies. Each of these methods should be selected in terms of its relative appropriateness for the research question concerned, and should not be expected to fulfil objectives for which it is methodologically unsuited.

(Derived from Sim, 1998, p. 351.)

Analysis of Interview Data

The ways in which research interviews have been reported have not in general been noteworthy for their standards of rigour or detail. Typically, accounts are strong on content and its interpretation, much weaker on providing sufficient information to judge the reliability and validity of those accounts.

Taping and transcribing

Whenever feasible, interviews should be audio-taped (exceptions include informal interviews where taping is likely to be intrusive). The tape provide

a permanent record and allows you to concentrate on the interview. Whether or not you make a full transcript of the tape depends on the resources at your disposal, the number of tapes to be transcribed and the way you will analyse the data.

Kvale (1996, ch. 10) discusses what he terms the '1,000 Page Question': 'How shall I find a method to analyze the 1,000 pages of interview transcript?' His answer is simple. The question is posed too late. As discussed earlier in relation to fixed designs (chapter 6), it is too late to start thinking about analysis after the interviewing is done. In flexible design research, the implications for analysis of amassing large amounts of interview (or any other) data have to be thought through before you commit yourself to the data collection. It makes little sense to have mounds of data that you have neither the time nor resources to deal with. Kvale reformulates the 1,000 page question in various ways, including:

- How shall I conduct my interviews so that their meaning can be analysed in a coherent and creative way?
- How do I go about finding out what the interviews tell me about what I want to know?
- How can the interviews assist in extending my knowledge of the phenomena I am investigating?

An alternative to full transcription is to be selective, picking out relevant passages, and noting the tape counter numbers where there are particular quotations, examples, etc.

Chapters 13 and 14 provide a discussion of the issues involved in analysing interview data, covering quantitative and qualitative aspects respectively.

Skills in Interviewing

You don't become a good interviewer just by reading about it. Skills are involved which require practice, preferably under 'low risk' conditions where it is possible to receive feedback on your performance.

The skills involved in structured interviews are relatively low-level. Is the script being kept to? Are standard questions being asked in the same way to all interviewees? Are the 'skips' depending on particular answers carried out correctly? Are all interviewees responded to in the same way? And so on. The less the degree of structure in the interview, the more complex the performance required from the interviewer.

It is highly desirable that the pilot (or a pre-pilot) stage includes explicit interviewer assessment and training. Clearly, if you are totally alone as a

researcher, this may be problematic, but it is possible to ask the interviewee in the pilot to comment on your performance as well as on the interview schedule. A recording (audio or video) will facilitate the interviewer's evaluation of their performance.

If you are working with colleagues, then mutual (constructive) assessment of each other's interview performance is feasible. This type of feedback information is not only helpful for training purposes but also helps in the general task of viewing the interview situation as a complex social interaction with characteristics have to some extent to be captured by the analysis.

Further Reading

- Aldridge, M. and Wood, J. (1998) *Interviewing Children: A Guide for Child Care Forensic Practitioners*. Chichester: Wiley. Very practical and helpful guide for practitioners in these fields. Not primarily research interview focused, but contains much of relevance to researchers interviewing children.
- Fontana, A. and Frey, J. H. (2000) The interview: from structured questions to rated text. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, eds, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage. Useful overview of a wide range of types of interview.
- Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage. Very comprehensive review of both the theoretical underpinnings and practical aspects of qualitative research interviewing.
- Krueger, R. A. and Casey, M. A. (1998) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage. Good coverage of the practical issues in planning and running focus groups.
- Mishler, E. G. (1991) *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Challenging critique of the standard approach to the survey interview. Advocates alternative methodologies based on narrative analysis.
- Weiss, R. (1994) *Learning from Strangers: the Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press. Excellent introduction to actually carrying out qualitative interviews.