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INTERVIEWS

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What is an interview?

Interviews are an attractive proposition for project researchers. At first glance, they do not seem to involve much technical paraphernalia and they draw on a skill that researchers already have – the ability to conduct a conversation. The reality, though, is not quite so simple. Although there are a lot of superficial similarities between a conversation and an interview, interviews are actually something more than just a conversation. Interviews involve a set of assumptions and understandings about the situation which are not normally associated with a casual conversation (Denscombe 1983; Silverman 1985). When someone agrees to take part in a research interview:

- *There is consent to take part.* From the researcher's point of view this is particularly important in relation to research ethics. The interview is not done by secret recording of discussions or the use of casual conversations as research data. It is openly a meeting intended to produce material that will be used for research purposes – and the interviewee understands this and agrees to it.

- *Interviewees' words can be treated as 'on the record' and 'for the record'*. It is, of course, possible for interviewees to stipulate that their words are *not* to be attributed to them, or *not* to be made publicly available. The point is, though, that unless interviewees specify to the contrary, the interview talk is 'on record' and 'for the record'.
- *The agenda for the discussion is set by the researcher*. Although the degree of control exercised by the researcher will vary according to the style of interviewing, there is a tacit agreement built into the notion of being interviewed that the proceedings and the agenda for the discussion will be controlled by the researcher.

Caution: interviews are not the same as a conversation

The superficial similarity between an interview and a conversation can generate an illusion of simplicity. We all have conversations and it is likely that most of us do not have too much difficulty with them. So an interview should be fairly straightforward. As long as we know to whom we are going to talk and what we want to ask, the rest should be plain sailing. Here lies the problem. The researcher can be lulled into a false sense of security. The superficial similarity can encourage a relaxed attitude to the planning, preparation and conduct of the method that would be unlikely were it to involve questionnaires or experiments. In reality, interviewing is no easy option. It is fraught with hidden dangers and can fail miserably unless there is good planning, proper preparation and a sensitivity to the complex nature of interaction during the interview itself.

When is it appropriate to use interviews?

Although interviews can be used for the collection of straightforward factual information, their potential as a data collection method is better exploited when they are applied to the exploration of more complex and subtle phenomena. If the researcher wants to collect information on simple and uncontroversial facts, then questionnaires might prove to be a more cost-effective method. But when the researcher needs to gain insights into things such as people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences, then interviews will almost certainly provide a more suitable method – a method that is attuned to the intricacy of the subject matter. To be specific, interviews – in particular *in-depth* interviews – lend themselves to the collection of data based on:

- *Opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences*. The nature of these means that they need to be explored in depth and in detail rather than simply reported in a word or two.
- *Sensitive issues*. When the research covers issues that might be considered sensitive or rather personal there is a case to be made for using interviews. Using a careful and considerate approach, participants can be encouraged to discuss personal and sensitive issues in open and honest manner.
- *Privileged information*. Here, the justification for interviews is based on the value of contact with key players in the field who can give privileged information. The depth of information provided by interviews can produce best 'value for money' if the informants are willing and able to give information that others could not – when what they offer is an insight they have as people in a special position 'to know'.

The decision to use interviews for a research project, of course, needs to take account of their feasibility as a data collection method. Before embarking on a programme of interviews the researcher needs to feel assured that:

- *It is possible to gain direct access to the prospective interviewees*. There is obviously no point in pursuing the idea of conducting interviews unless there are good grounds for believing that the necessary people can be accessed, and that some agreement can be obtained from all the parties involved in the research.
- *The interviews are viable in terms of the costs in time and travel involved*. With limited resources, the researcher needs to ensure that the people are not distributed too widely across a large geographical area and that conducting the interviews will not incur prohibitive costs.

Types of research interview

Structured interviews

Structured interviews involve tight control over the format of the questions and answers. In essence, the structured interview is like a questionnaire which is administered face-to-face with a respondent. The researcher has a predetermined list of questions, to which the respondent is invited to offer limited-option responses. The tight control over the wording of the questions, the order in which the questions occur and the range of answers that are on offer have the advantage of 'standardization'. Each respondent is faced with identical questions. And the range of pre-coded answers on offer to respondents ensures that data analysis is relatively easy. The structured interview, in this respect, lends itself to the collection of quantitative data.

Structured interviews are often associated with social surveys where researchers are trying to collect large volumes of data from a wide range of respondents. Here, we are witnessing the replacement of interviewers armed with clipboards and paper questionnaires with those using laptop computers to input information direct into a suitable software program. Such *computer-assisted personal interviewing* (CAPI) has the advantage of using software with built-in checks to eliminate errors in the collection of data, and it allows quick analysis of the data. However, its relatively large initial costs, caused by the purchase of the laptop computers, the development of suitable software and the training involved, mean that CAPI is better suited to large-budget, large-number surveys than to small-scale research.

Link up with **Questionnaires, Chapter 9**

Whether using a laptop computer, telephone or printed schedule of questions, the structured interview, in spirit, bears more resemblance to questionnaire methods than to the other types of interviews. For this reason, *this chapter focuses on semi-structured and unstructured interviews rather than structured interviews*.

Semi-structured interviews

With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer still has a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered. However, with the semi-structured interview the interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher. The answers are open-ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews go further in the extent to which emphasis is placed on the interviewee's thoughts. The researcher's role is to be as unintrusive as possible – to start the ball rolling by introducing a theme or topic and then letting the interviewee develop their ideas and pursue their train of thought.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are really on a continuum and, in practice, it is likely that any interview will slide back and forth along the scale. What they have in common, and what separates them from structured interviews, is their willingness to allow interviewees to use their own words and develop their own thoughts. Allowing interviewees to 'speak their minds' is a better way of discovering things about complex issues and, generally, semi-structured and unstructured interviews have as their aim 'discovery' rather then 'checking'.

One-to-one interviews

The most common form of interview is the one-to-one variety which involves a meeting between one researcher and one informant. One reason for its popularity is that it is relatively easy to arrange. Only two people's diaries need to coincide. Another advantage is that the opinions and views expressed throughout the interview stem from one source: the interviewee. This makes it fairly straightforward for the researcher to locate specific ideas with specific people. A third advantage is that the one-to-one interview is relatively easy to control. The researcher only has one person's ideas to grasp and interrogate, and one person to guide through the interview agenda. And a fourth advantage of conducting one-to-one interviews becomes evident when the researcher embarks on transcribing the interview tape: it is far easier to transcribe a recorded interview when the talk involves just one interviewee. There is only one voice to recognize and only one person talking at a time.

Group interviews

A disadvantage of the one-to-one interview is that it limits the number of views and opinions available to the researcher. Listening to one person at a time effectively restricts the number of voices that can be heard and the range of views that can be included within a research project. Group interviews, however, provide a practical solution to this. By interviewing more than one person at a time the researcher is able to dramatically increase the number and range of participants involved in the research.

A group interview can be undertaken very much like a one-to-one interview in the sense that the interviewer remains the focal point of the interaction that takes place. The questions and answers are channelled through the interviewer. The difference is that instead of each question prompting a response from just one interviewee the researcher can get perhaps four responses from four people during the interview.

Increasing the numbers involved can have benefits in terms of the representativeness of the data. The inclusion of more participants is likely to mean that a broader spectrum of people are covered by the research and that there might be a greater variety of experiences and opinions emerging from the investigation. Indeed, under certain circumstances researchers can deliberately select participants who are very different in order to gather widely differing views and experiences on the topic of the interview.

But, does this really constitute a *group* interview? Where the interviewer remains the focal point of the communication it suggests that the interview is actually conducted with a series of individuals who happen to have been collected together at one time and in one place to suit the convenience of the researcher and his/her wish to boost the number of interviewees in the research. The participants are a group in so far as they are grouped together, but the researcher does not interact with participants as a group – only as individuals.

An alternative vision of the group interview is one that stresses the 'group' characteristics of the interaction during an interview. It sees the group interview as distinctive in the way that it can get the participants to respond as part of a group, rather than as individuals. The researcher's incentive for using a group interview, in this case, is not a quantitative one concerned with increased numbers and improved representativeness. It is, instead, a qualitative one concerned with the way that group discussions can be more illuminating. The group discussion allows participants to listen to alternative points of view. It allows members to express support for certain views and to challenge views with which they disagree. The group interview, in this sense, trades on group dynamics. It uses the social and psychological aspects of group behaviour to foster the ability of participants to get involved, speak their minds and reflect on the views of others.

Focus groups

Focus groups consist of small groups of people who are brought together by a 'moderator' (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a specific topic. Typically they last for 1½ to 2 hours and are useful for gauging the extent to which there are shared views among a group of people in relation to a specific topic. Ideally, focus groups have six to nine people in them. This is a large enough number to allow a range of views and opinions to be present among the group but not too large as to be unmanageable in terms of the discussion. In small-scale research projects the numbers are often smaller. The reason for this is that focus groups can be costly and time-consuming to arrange. It is not easy to organize a venue for the meeting and get six or more people to turn up on time. Nor is it necessarily inexpensive if the researcher needs to fund travel and pay for the room.

Focus groups make particular use of group dynamics and have three distinctive features:

- there is a *focus* to the session, with the group discussion being based on an item or experience about which all participants have similar knowledge;
- particular emphasis is placed on the *interaction within the group* as a means of eliciting information;
- the moderator's role is to *facilitate* the group interaction rather than lead the discussion.

Link up with **Focus groups, Appendix 4**

Internet interviews

Interviews and focus groups can be conducted using the Internet. There is an obvious advantage in terms of eliminating the time and costs of travelling to meet interviewees face to face, and the technology is now easily available. Using Skype, for instance, it is possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with anyone who has an Internet connection at virtually no cost – provided, of course, that the interviewee has the required software. Using a webcam means that these interviews can include visual contact with the interviewee. There are some practical issues concerned with online interviews and there are, indeed, alternative ways of conducting them. These are outlined in a separate section later in this chapter. Conducting focus groups online can prove to be rather more difficult in terms of the necessary software and these issues are considered in Appendix 4.

The interviewer effect

Personal identity

Research on interviewing has demonstrated fairly conclusively that people respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions. In particular, the *sex*, the *age* and the *ethnic origins* of the interviewer have a bearing on the amount of information people are willing to divulge and their honesty about what they reveal. The data, in other words, are affected by the personal identity of the researcher. This point applies whether the interview is conducted face to face or online. In the case of online interviews, although interviewees might not be able to see the interviewer, their *perception* of the person who is collecting the data can still influence their willingness to divulge information.

The impact of the researcher's personal identity, of course, will depend on who is being interviewed. It is not, strictly speaking, the identity in its own right that affects the data, but what the researcher's identity means as far as the person being interviewed is concerned. *Interviewees, and interviewers come to that, have their own preferences and prejudices, and these are likely to have some impact on the chances of developing rapport and trust during an interview*.

The effect of the researcher's identity, in practice, will also depend on the nature of the topic being discussed. On sensitive issues or on matters regarded as rather personal, the interviewer's identity assumes particular importance. If the research is dealing with religious beliefs, with earnings, with sexual relationships, with personal health or any of a host of similar issues, the sex, age and ethnicity of the interviewer in relation to the sex, age and ethnicity of the interviewee are very likely to influence the nature of the data that emerge – their fullness and their honesty. On some questions people can be embarrassed. They can feel awkward or defensive. Whenever this is the case, there is the possibility that interviewees might supply answers which they feel fit in with what the researcher expects from them – fulfilling the perceived expectations of the researcher. Or the answers might tend to be tailored to match what the interviewee suspects is the researcher's point of view, keeping the researcher happy. Either way, the quality of the data suffers.

From the perspective of the small-scale project researcher there is a limit to what can be done about this. Although interviews conducted over the Internet, and to a lesser extent interviews conducted by phone, do provide some possibilities for disguising who we are, there are definite limits to the extent that researchers can disguise their 'self' during face-to-face interviews. We bring to such interviews certain personal attributes which are 'givens' and which cannot be altered on a whim to suit the needs of the research interview. *Our sex, our age, our ethnic origin, our accent, even our occupational status, all are aspects of our 'self' which, for practical purposes, cannot be changed.* We can make efforts to be polite and punctual, receptive and neutral, in order to encourage the right climate for an interviewee to feel comfortable and provide honest answers. What we cannot do is change these personal attributes.

Good practice: being aware of the interviewer effect

Social researchers should consider the following questions:

- What are the social status, educational qualifications and professional expertise of the people to be interviewed, and how do these compare with my own? Is this likely to affect the interviewer–interviewee relationship in a positive or negative manner?
- Is there likely to be an age gap between myself and the interviewee(s) and, if so, how might this affect the interview?
- In relation to the topic being researched, will interviewing someone of the opposite sex or a different ethnic group have an impact on their willingness to answer questions openly and honestly?

Self-presentation

Conventional advice to researchers has been geared to minimizing the impact of researchers on the outcome of the research by having them adopt a passive and neutral stance. The idea is that the researcher:

- presents himself or herself in a light which is designed not to antagonize or upset the interviewee (conventional clothes, courtesy, etc.);
- remains neutral and non-committal on the statements made during the interview by the interviewee.

Passivity and neutrality are the order of the day. The researcher's 'self', adopting this approach, is kept firmly hidden beneath a cloak of cordiality and receptiveness to the words of the interviewee. To a certain degree, this is sound advice. The researcher, after all, is there to listen and learn, not to preach. The point is to get the interviewee to open up, not to provoke hostility or put the interviewee on the defensive.

Personal involvement

One line of reasoning argues that a cold and calculating style of interviewing reinforces a gulf between the researcher and the informant, and does little to help or empower the informant. Now, if the aims of the research are specifically to help or empower the people being researched, rather than dispassionately learn from them, then the approach of the interviewer will need to alter accordingly (Oakley 1981). Under these circumstances, the researcher will be inclined to show emotion, to respond with feeling and to engage in a true dialogue with the interviewee. The researcher will become fully involved as a person with feelings, with experiences and with knowledge that can be shared with the interviewee. A word of warning, though. This style of interviewing remains 'unconventional', and the researcher needs to be confident and committed to make it work. The researcher also needs to feel sure that his or her audience understand and share the underlying logic of the approach rather than expecting the researcher to adopt the cool and dispassionate stance.

Planning and preparation for interviews

The topics for discussion

With the use of unstructured interviews, it might be argued that the researcher should not have preconceived ideas about the crucial issues and direction the interview should take. In practice, however, it is not very often that researchers operate at the extreme end of the continuum with unstructured interviews. In the vast majority of cases, researchers approach an interview with some agenda and with some game-plan in mind. In such cases it would be tempting fate to proceed to a research interview without having devoted considerable time to thinking through the key points that warrant attention. This does not necessarily mean that the researcher needs to have a rigid framework of questions and issues in mind – though this will be the case when using structured interviews. It does mean that there is likely to be more benefit from the interview if he or she is well informed about the topic and has done the necessary homework on the issues that are likely to arise during the interview.

Choice of informants

In principle, there is nothing to stop researchers from selecting informants on the basis of random sampling. In practice, though, this is unlikely to happen. Interviews are generally conducted with lower numbers than would be the case with questionnaire surveys, and this means that the selection of people to interview is more likely to be based on non-probability sampling. People tend to be chosen deliberately because they have some special contribution to make, because they have some unique insight or because of the position they hold. It is worth emphasizing, though, that there is no hard and fast rule on this. It depends on whether the overall aim of the research is to produce results which are generalizable (in which case the emphasis will be on choosing a representative sample of people to interview) or the aim is to delve in depth into a particular situation with a view to exploring the specifics (in which case the emphasis will be on choosing key players in the field).

In the case of group interviews, researchers can decide to select interviewees in order to get a cross-section of opinion within the group, or, perhaps, to ensure that group members hold opposing views on the topic for discussion.

Authorization

In many, if not most, research situations, it will be necessary to get approval from relevant 'authorities'. This will be necessary in any instance of research where the people selected to participate in the interviews are either:

- working within an organization where they are *accountable to others* higher up the chain of command;
- or potentially vulnerable, and therefore *protected by responsible others* – the young, the infirm and some other groups are under the protection of others whose permission must be sought (e.g. school children).

Organizations, authorities and Internet moderators who grant permission will wish to be persuaded that it is *bona fide* research, and they will also be influenced by the personal/research credentials of the researcher. Letters of contact, therefore, should spell out the range of factors which will *persuade the organization or authority that the researcher is both (1) trustworthy and*

(2) capable. Research which can call on suitable referees or which will be conducted under the auspices of a suitable organization (e.g. a university) is at an advantage for these.

To emphasize what ought to be obvious, such authorization to conduct the interviews must be gained *before* the interviews take place.

Arranging the venue

In the case of face-to-face interviews, securing an agreement to be interviewed is often easier if the prospective interviewee is *contacted in advance*. This also allows both parties to arrange a mutually convenient time for the interview. At this point, of course, the researcher will probably be asked how long the interview will take, and should therefore be in a position to respond. It is most unlikely that busy people will feel comfortable with a suggestion that the interview will 'take as long as it takes'. The researcher needs to make a bid for an *agreed length of time* whether it be 15 minutes, half an hour, 45 minutes or an hour.

Where a face-to-face interview takes place 'on site', the researcher cannot always control events as they might want. This means there is an added danger that things can go wrong. Through whatever means, though, the researcher needs to try to get a *location for the interview* which will not be disturbed, which offers privacy, which has fairly good acoustics and which is reasonably quiet. This can prove to be a pretty tall order in places like busy organizations, schools, hospitals, and so on. But at least the desirability of such a venue should be conveyed to the person arranging the interview room.

Within the interview room, it is important to be able to set up the *seating arrangements* in a way that allows comfortable interaction between the researcher and the interviewee(s). In a one-to-one interview the researcher should try to arrange seating so that the two parties are at a 90 degree angle to each other. This allows for eye contact without the confrontational feeling arising from sitting directly opposite the other person. With group interviews, it is important to arrange the seating to allow contact between all parties without putting the researcher in a focal position and without hiding individuals at the back of the group or outside the group.

Interview skills

- *The good interviewer needs to be attentive*. This may sound obvious, but it is all too easy to lose the thread of the discussion because the researcher needs to be monitoring a few other things while listening closely to what the informant has to say: writing the field notes, looking for relevant non-verbal communication, checking that the recorder is working.

- *The good interviewer is sensitive to the feelings of the informant*. This is not just a matter of social courtesy, though that is certainly a worthy aspect of it. It is also a skill which is necessary for getting the best out of an interview. Where the interviewer is able to empathize with the informant and to gauge the feelings of the informant, they will be in a better position to coax out the most relevant information.
- *The good interviewer is able to tolerate silences* during the talk, and knows when to shut up and say nothing. Anxiety is the main danger. Fearing that the interview might be on the verge of breaking down, the researcher can feel the need to say something quickly to kick-start the discussion. Worrying about cramming in every possible gem of wisdom in the allotted time, the interviewer can be inclined to rush the informant on quickly to the next point. But, most of all, feeling uncomfortable when the conversation lapses into silence, the interviewer can be all too quick to say something when a more experienced interviewer would know that the silence can be used as a wonderful resource during interviews (see below).
- *The good interviewer is adept at using prompts*. Although silences can be productive, the interviewer needs to exercise judgement on this. There are times during an interview when the researcher might feel that it is necessary to spur the informant to speak. Listed below are some examples of how this can be done. What the examples share is a degree of subtlety. It is not normally acceptable for research interviewers to *demand* that the informant answers the questions. Research interviews are not police interviews. The idea is to nudge the informant gently into revealing their knowledge or thoughts on a specific point.
- *The good interviewer is adept at using probes*. There are occasions during an interview when the researcher might want to delve deeper into a topic rather than let the discussion flow on to the next point. An informant might make a point in passing which the researcher thinks should be explored in more detail. Some explanation might be called for, or some justification for a comment. Some apparent inconsistency in the informant's line of reasoning might be detected, an inconsistency which needs unravelling. Examples of how this can be done are listed below. Again, they attempt to be subtle and avoid an aggressive stance.
- *The good interviewer is adept at using checks*. One of the major advantages of interviews is that they offer the researcher the opportunity to check that he or she has understood the informant correctly. As an ongoing part of the normal talk during interviews, the researcher can present a summary of what they think the informant has said, which the informant can then confirm as an accurate understanding, or can correct if it is felt to be a misunderstanding of what has been said. Such checks can be used at strategic points during the interview as a way of concluding discussion on one aspect of the topic.
- *With focus groups, the good facilitator manages to let everyone have a say*.

It is vital to avoid the situation where a dominant personality hogs the discussion and bullies others in the group to agree with his or her opinion.
- *The good interviewer is non-judgemental*. As the researcher enters the interview situation they should, as far as is possible, suspend personal values and *adopt a non-judgemental stance* in relation to the topics covered during the interview. This means not only biting your lip on occasion, but also taking care not to reveal disgust, surprise or pleasure through facial gestures. The good researcher must also *respect the rights of the interviewee*. This means accepting if a person simply does not wish to tell you something and knowing when to back off if the discussion is beginning to cause the interviewee particular embarrassment or stress. This is a point of personal sensitivity and research ethics.

Good practice: tactics for interviews – prompts, probes and checks

Remain silent	(prompt)
Repeat the question	(prompt)
Repeat the last few words spoken by the interviewee	(prompt)
Offer some examples	(prompt)
Ask for an example	(probe)
Ask for clarification	(probe)
Ask for more details	(probe)
Summarize their thoughts	(check)
('So, if I understand you correctly . . .	
What this means, then, is that . . .')	

Conducting the interview

In the intensity of a research interview it is not easy to attend to all the points that should be remembered and, in any case, interviews are 'live' events which require the interviewer to adjust plans as things progress. Nevertheless, there are some pretty basic formalities that need to be observed. There are also a number of skills the researcher should exercise and, despite the fluid nature of interviews, it is worth spelling out a list of things that go towards a good interview.

Introduction and formalities

At the beginning there should be the opportunity to say 'Hello', to do some introductions, to talk about the aims of the research and to say something about the origins of the researcher's own interest in the topic. During the initial phase, there should also be confirmation that you have permission to record the discussion and reassurances about the confidentiality of comments made during the interview. The aim is to set the tone for the rest of the interview – normally a relaxed atmosphere in which the interviewee feels free to open up on the topic under consideration. *Trust* and *rapport* are the keywords.

During the pre-interview phase, the interviewer should do two other things:

- prepare the recording equipment;
- as far as possible, arrange the seating positions to best advantage.

Starting the interview

The first question takes on a particular significance for the interview. It should offer the interviewee the chance to settle down and relax. For this reason it is normally good practice to *kick off with an 'easy' question*: something on which the interviewee might be expected to have well-formulated views and something that is quite near the forefront of their mind. Two tactics might help here.

- Ask respondents, in a general way, about themselves and their role as it relates to the overall area of the interview. This allows the researcher to collect valuable *background information about informants* while, at the same time, letting informants start off by covering familiar territory.
- *Use some 'trigger' or 'stimulus' material*, so that the discussion can relate to something concrete, rather than launch straight into abstract ideas.

Monitoring progress

During the interview, the researcher should keep a discreet eye on the time. The good researcher needs to wind things up within the allotted time and will have covered most of the key issues during that time. While doing this, the good interviewer also needs to attend to the following things during the progress of the interview itself:

- *Identify the main points being stated by the interviewee* and the priorities as expressed by the interviewee. With focus groups, what consensus is emerging about the key points?
- Look for the underlying logic of what is being said by the informant. *The interviewer needs to 'read between the lines'* to decipher the rationale lying beneath the surface of what is being said. The interviewer should ask 'What are they really telling me here?' and, perhaps more significantly, 'What are they *not* mentioning?'
- *Look for inconsistencies* in the position being outlined by the interviewee.

If such inconsistencies exist, this does not invalidate their position. Most people have inconsistencies in their opinions and feelings on many topics. However, such inconsistencies will be worth probing as the interview progresses to see what they reveal.

- Pick up clues about whether the informant's answers involve an element of *boasting* or are answers intended to *please the interviewer*.
- *Be constantly on the look-out for the kind of answer that is a 'fob-off'.*
- *Get a feel for the context* in which the discussion is taking place. The priorities expressed by the interviewee might reflect events immediately prior to the interview, or things about to happen in the near future. They might be 'issues of the moment', which would not assume such importance were the interview to be conducted a few weeks later. The researcher needs to be sensitive to this possibility and find out from the interviewee if there are events which are influencing priorities in this way.
- Keep a suitable level of eye contact throughout the interview and *make a note of non-verbal communication* which might help a later interpretation of the interview talk.

Finishing the interview

Interviews can come to an end because the interviewee has run out of things to say and the interviewer cannot elicit any more information from the person. This is not a good state of affairs unless the interview has no outside time limit. It is better for the interview to come to a close in some orderly fashion guided by the interviewer. Having kept an eye on the time, and having ensured that most of the required areas for discussion have been covered, the interviewer should draw events to a close making sure that:

- the interviewee is invited to raise any points that they think still need to be covered and have not been covered so far;
- the interviewee is thanked for having given up the time to participate in the interview.

Recording the interview

The researcher wishing to capture the discussion that happens during the interview can rely on memory. However, the human memory is rather unreliable as a research instrument. As psychologists tell us, human memory is prone to partial recall, bias and error. Interviewers, instead, can call on other more permanent records of what was said.

Field notes

Under certain circumstances researchers will need to rely on field notes written soon after the interview or actually during the interview. Sometimes interviewees will decline to be recorded. This means that what was actually said will always remain a matter of recollection and interpretation. There will never be an objective record of the discussion. This suits the needs of certain interviewees, particularly where the discussion touches on sensitive issues, commercially, politically or even personally. Notes taken during the interview, however, offer a compromise in such situations. The interviewer is left with some permanent record of their interpretation of what was said, and can refer back to this at various later stages to refresh the memory. The notes also act as some form of permanent record. However, from the interviewee's point of view, it is always possible to deny that certain things were said and to argue that the researcher might have 'misinterpreted' a point should the interviewee wish to dissociate himself/herself from the point at some later date. A crucial advantage of taking field notes at an interview, however, is that they can fill in some of the relevant information that a recording alone might miss. Field notes can cover information relating to the context of the location, the climate and atmosphere under which the interview was conducted, clues about the intent behind the statements and comments on aspects of non-verbal communication as they were deemed relevant to the interview.

Good practice: making field notes

Field notes need to be made during the interview itself or, if this is not feasible, as soon afterwards as possible. They need to be made while events are fresh in the mind of the interviewer.

Audio recording

In practice, most research interviewers rely on *audio recordings backed up by written field notes*. Initially, interviewees can feel rather inhibited by the process of recording but most participants become more relaxed after a short while. When used sensitively, audio recording does not pose too much of a disturbance to interview situations, and it has certain clear benefits. Audio recordings offer a permanent record and one that is fairly complete in terms of the speech that occurs. They also lend themselves to being checked by other researchers. However, the downside is that they capture only speech, and miss non-verbal communication and other contextual factors. Video recordings, for their part, capture non-verbal as well as verbal communications and offer a more complete record of events during the interview. And, as with audio recordings, they provide a permanent record that can be checked by other researchers. The use of video recordings, however, tends to be the exception rather than the rule. It is not the cost factor that explains this because video equipment is not particularly expensive. Generally, it is the intrusiveness of video recordings that deters researchers from using them. For practical purposes, most interviewers would consider that audio recordings provide sufficient data, data that are good enough for the purpose of research, and that benefits gained through the video recording of an interview are outweighed by the extra disruption that video recording brings to the setting.

Link up with **Transcribing audio recordings of interviews, p. 277**

Good practice: recording equipment

- Use equipment which is good enough to supply adequate sound (or visual) reproduction.
- Be certain that the equipment is functioning well before the interview.
- Have a reliable power source plus back-up in case of emergency.
- Choose storage devices that have enough memory, or last long enough, to cover the planned duration of the interview without the need to 'reload' the recorder.

The validity of interview data: how do you know the informant is telling the truth?

This is a crucial question facing the researcher who uses interview data. When the interview is concerned with gathering information of a factual nature, the researcher can make some checks to see if the information is broadly corroborated by other people and other sources. When the interview concerns matters such as the emotions, feelings and experiences of the interviewee, it is a lot more difficult to make such checks. Ultimately, there is no absolute way of verifying what someone tells you about their thoughts and feelings. Researchers are not 'mind readers'. But there are still some practical checks researchers can make to gauge the credibility of what they have been told. It should be stressed, though, that these are not watertight methods of detecting false statements given during interviews. They are practical ways of helping the researcher to avoid being a gullible dupe who accepts all that he or she is told at face value. They help the researcher to 'smell a rat'. By the same token, if the following checks are used, the researcher can have greater confidence in the interview data, knowing that some effort has been made to ensure the validity of the data.

Check the data with other sources

The researcher should make efforts to corroborate the interview data with other sources of information on the topic. *Triangulation* should be used. Documents and observations can provide some back-up for the content of the interview, or can cast some doubt on how seriously the interview data should be taken. Interview content can even be checked against other interviews to see if there is some level of consistency. The point is that interview data should not be taken at face value if it is at all possible to confirm or dispute the statements using alternative sources.

Link up with **Triangulation, Appendix 3**

Checking the transcript with the informant

Where possible, the researcher should go back to the interviewee with the transcript to check with that person that it is an accurate statement. Now, of course, checking for accuracy is not strictly what is going on here. Unless the interviewer also sends a copy of the recording, the interviewee has no way of knowing if what appears on the transcript is actually what was said. The point of the exercise is more to do with 'putting the record straight'. If the researcher is solely concerned with gathering facts from the interview, this is an opportunity to ensure that the facts are correct and that the interviewer has got the correct information. That is a nice safeguard. If, alternatively, the interview is concerned with a person's emotions, opinions and experiences, the exercise invites the interviewee to confirm that what was said at the time of the interview was what was really meant, and not said 'in the heat of the moment'. Either way, there is an initial check on the accuracy of the data.

Check the plausibility of the data

Some people are interviewed specifically because they are in a position to know about the things that interest the researcher. The 'key players' are picked out precisely because they are specialists, experts, highly experienced – and their testimony carries with it a high degree of credibility. This is not necessarily the case with those chosen for interview on some other grounds. When assessing the credibility of information contained in an interview, the researcher needs to gauge how far an informant might be expected to be in possession of the facts and to know about the topic being discussed. The researcher should ask if it is reasonable to suppose that such a person would be in a position to comment authoritatively on the topic – or is there a chance that they are talking about something of which they have little knowledge?

Look for themes in the transcript(s)

Where possible, avoid basing findings on one interview – look for themes emerging from a number of interviews. Where themes emerge across a number of interviews, the researcher does not have to rely on any one transcript as the sole source of what is 'real' or 'correct'. A recurrent theme in interviews indicates that the idea/issue is something which is shared among a wider group, and therefore the researcher can refer to it with rather more confidence than any idea/issue which stems from the words of one individual.

Link up with **Qualitative data, Chapter 14**

Internet interviews

Internet interviews can be conducted with anyone who has access to a computer with a webcam, who is online and who has communication software like Skype installed. The costs are negligible and this mode of conducting interviews allows the researcher to interview people across the world without worrying about the time and costs of travel. This is obviously an attractive proposition. The interviews take place in real time and, include visual contact between the interviewer and the interviewee. The same can be said of videoconferencing links but here the costs of the equipment and communication can prove to be substantial.

There are other ways of conducting interviews online which are low cost. At its simplest an 'online interview' can consist of an exchange of email correspondence. Internet interviews can also make use of things like chat rooms. Chat rooms allow messages to be sent back and forth, in turn, as in a conversation. To this extent, chat rooms provide synchronous communication in 'real time'. Connection is made through an Internet service provider (ISP) and normally involves a process of registering when first joining. On entering a chat room a newcomer will normally wait and watch from the sidelines as the participants exchange messages. This is known as 'lurking'. It allows the newcomer to get a feel for the discussions that are going on before joining in with something relevant and constructive. Bear in mind the fact that any comment that is written to a chat room becomes visible to anyone (across the world) who happens to be visiting the chat room at that time. Any of these can reply to you. The reply, again, is public. However, chat rooms also allow individuals to communicate with one another on a one-to-one basis where others will not see the messages. This is known as 'whispering'.

A form of interviewing can also be conducted using mailing lists. Mailing lists operate through an automated email program that, when it receives a message, simply forwards that message on to the email addresses of all the subscribers to the list. The mailing list contains email addresses for those who share an interest in specific topics or items. Some lists are moderated, some are not. And some list servers keep on file all the messages that are posted – thus being able to trace, and deter, the sending of messages that are rude, offensive or inappropriate for the specific list.

Bulletin boards or newsgroups have become a readily accessible resource for researchers, who can identify, and make contact with, special interest groups on just about any imaginable topic. Subscribing to a newsgroup is much like putting yourself on a mailing list to receive news and information about a particular item of special interest. When subscribers log on to a particular group they automatically get sent the messages that have been posted by other members. Although they appear much like email, newsgroups rely on sites maintained on a server computer, with different software being used to make the system operate. To add a contribution to the newsgroup, users send a message much as they would on email. And, as with email, the communication is 'asynchronous' – not in 'real time'. Some newsgroups are moderated – others are not.

From the researcher's point of view, the use of bulletin boards or newsgroups has some distinct benefits:

- The responses do not depend on who happens to be visiting the site at any one specific moment (an advantage over the use of chat rooms).
- The responses tend to come from those with a strong interest in the topic. Newsgroups tend to be information-based forums, compared with the more social nature of chat rooms, and have a more serious side to them that means members might be better disposed to assisting researchers.
- The responses are likely to reflect a 'considered opinion' rather than an instant 'off-the-cuff' remark, since the respondent has time to reflect on the issue.
- It is possible to trace archive material that records past discussions – often over several years.

There is, however, a significant component of the conventional interview that is missing when using emails, chat rooms, mailing lists, bulletin boards or newsgroups. There is a *loss of visual clues*. The interviewer and the interviewee cannot see one another. There can also be a *considerable time gap* between the question and the answer – more than would normally be associated with a face-to-face interview. At one level, these two features of Internet interviews can be regarded as an impediment to the collection of data. The absence of visual clues prevents the interviewer from picking up on important facial expressions and other non-verbal communication that could be valuable for understanding the interviewee's thoughts. The time lapse can stultify the flow of interaction, depriving the interview of its natural qualities.

The other side of the coin, as advocates of Internet interviewing point out, is that these features of Internet interviews can reduce the *interviewer effect*. They can:

- *Reduce the culture and gender effects of interaction*. The absence of visual clues means that what is stated by the interviewees is less likely to be affected by status factors linked to the respective age, sex, ethnicity, accent and social class of the interviewer and the interviewee. It acts as an 'equalizer' in terms of the communication.
- *Overcome embarrassment on some topics*. The lack of face-to-face contact helps to make the interviewee less uncomfortable when responding to questions on sensitive topics. The contact, being less 'personal', is likely to be less embarrassing when covering issues where factors like the interviewer's sex and age might otherwise affect the response.
- *Allow interviewees time* for reflection on and consideration of the question. The quality of their answers might be improved as a result of them having time to think through the issues.

Advantages of interviews

- *Depth of information*. Interviews are particularly good at producing data which deal with topics in depth and in detail. Subjects can be probed, issues pursued and lines of investigation followed over a relatively lengthy period.
- *Insights*. The researcher is likely to gain valuable insights based on the depth of the information gathered and the wisdom of 'key informants'.
- *Equipment*. Interviews require only simple equipment and build on conversation skills which researchers already have.
- *Informants' priorities*. Interviews are a good method for producing data based on informants' priorities, opinions and ideas. Informants have the opportunity to expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what *they* regard as the crucial factors.
- *Flexibility*. As a method for data collection, interviews are probably the most flexible. Adjustments to the lines of enquiry can be made during the interview itself. Interviewing allows for a developing line of enquiry.
- *High response rate*. Interviews are generally prearranged and scheduled for a convenient time and location. This ensures a relatively high response rate.
- *Validity*. Direct contact at the point of the interview means that data can be checked for accuracy and relevance as they are collected. In the case of Internet interviews, there is also the elimination of errors at the data entry stage. The researcher is no longer faced with passages in a tape-recorded interview where voices cannot be heard clearly and where there is consequently some doubt about what was actually said. Using the Internet, interview responses come in the form of text – text constructed directly by

the interviewee. This eliminates inaccuracies in the data arising from the process of transcription.
- *Therapeutic*. Interviews can be a rewarding experience for the informant. Compared with questionnaires, observation and experiments, there is a more personal element to the method, and people tend to enjoy the rather rare chance to talk about their ideas at length to a person whose purpose is to listen and note the ideas without being critical.

Disadvantages of interviews

- *Time-consuming*. Analysis of data can be difficult and time-consuming. Data preparation and analysis are 'end-loaded' compared with, for instance, questionnaires which are pre-coded and where data are ready for analysis once they have been collected. The transcribing and coding of interview data are a major task for the researcher which occurs after the data have been collected.
- *Data analysis*. The interview method tends to produce *non-standard responses*. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews produce data that are not pre-coded and have a relatively open format.
- *Reliability*. The impact of the interviewer and of the context means that consistency and objectivity are hard to achieve. The data collected are, to an extent, unique owing to the specific context and the specific individuals involved. This has an adverse effect on *reliability*.
- *Interviewer effect*. The data from interviews are based on what people say rather than what they do. The two may not tally. What people say they do, what they say they prefer and what they say they think cannot automatically be assumed to reflect the truth. In particular, interviewee statements can be affected by the identity of the researcher. Internet interviews, with their lack of visual and verbal clues, can go a long way towards avoiding this problem. The absence of visual and verbal clues, some researchers argue, democratizes the research process by equalizing the status of researcher and respondent, lowering the status differentials linked with sex, age, appearance and accent, and giving the participant greater control over the process of data collection. The lack of such clues, equally, can help to overcome embarrassment on topics and allow the respondent to open up in a way that is unlikely to happen in the physical presence of a researcher.
- *Inhibitions*. In the case of face-to-face interviews, the audio recorder (or video recorder) can inhibit the informant. Although the impact of the recording device tends to wear off quite quickly, this is not always the case. The interview is an artificial situation (as, of course, are experiments) where people are speaking for the record and on the record, and this can be daunting for certain people.

- *Invasion of privacy*. Tactless interviewing can be an invasion of privacy and/ or upsetting for the informant. While interviews can be enjoyable, the other side of the coin is that the personal element of being interviewed carries its own kinds of dangers as well.
- *Resources*. With face-to-face interviews the *costs* of interviewer's time and travel can be relatively high, particularly if the informants are geographically dispersed.

Checklist for the use of interviews

When conducting interviews you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions: ☑

1. Is it clear which type of interview is being used and why (structured, semi-structured or unstructured)? ☐
2. Is it clear whether the research is based on one-to-one interviews, group interviews or focus groups? ☐
3. Have field notes been written to provide supplementary information about the interaction during the interview? ☐
4. Have relevant details been collected about the context within which the interviews took place (location, prior events, ambience, etc.)? ☐
5. Has consideration been given to the effect of the recording equipment on the openness with which informants replied? ☐
6. During the interviews was the discussion monitored appropriately in terms of:
   - informants' key points? ☐
   - reading between the lines of what was said? ☐
   - trying to identify any inconsistencies? ☐
   - being aware of the 'fob-off' answer? ☐
   - looking for boastful or exaggerated answers? ☐
   - looking for answers intended simply to please the interviewer? ☐
7. During the interviews were prompts, probes and checks used to gain worthwhile, detailed insights? ☐
8. Has consideration been given to the way the researcher's self-identity might have affected:
   - the interaction during the interview? ☐
   - the interpretation of the data? ☐
9. In the case of interviews conducted via the Internet, has consideration been given to the impact of Internet research in terms of:
   - the loss of visual clues during the interaction? ☐
   - the use of non-real-time communication? ☐