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Using Interviews in a Research Project

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1. Introduction

The **interview** is an important data gathering technique involving verbal communication between the researcher and the participant. Interviews are commonly used in survey designs and in exploratory and descriptive studies. There is a range of approaches to interviewing, from completely **unstructured** in which the participant is allowed to talk freely about whatever they wish, to highly **structured** in which the participant responses are limited to answering direct questions.

The quality of the data collected in an interview will depend on both the interview design and on the skill of the interviewer. For example, a poorly designed interview may include leading questions or questions that are not understood by the participant. A poor interviewer may consciously or unconsciously influence the responses that the participant makes. In either circumstance, the research findings will be influenced detrimentally.

It is often assumed that if one is clinically trained and used to dealing with patients, that this is sufficient training to carry out interviews with patients and others for research purposes. Although there are some areas of overlap in terms of the basic communication skills required, it should be acknowledged that for research some different skills are required. The context is also important, since in a clinical setting, there is a particular relationship between a patient and a clinician. It is possible that in this routine setting the patient would not be prepared to answer all the questions in a completely honest manner. So it may well be worthwhile thinking about the interview from the respondent's point of view and considering carefully who would be the most appropriate person to conduct the interview and in what setting. There may be a conflict of roles, for example, therapeutic versus research; or even an unconscious adoption of roles that could affect the quality of the data collected.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Having successfully completed the work in this pack, you will be able to:

- Describe the features of, and differences between **structured, semi-structured or unstructured interview.**
- Summarise the advantages and disadvantages of **face-to-face** and **telephone** interviews, and of individual and group interviews.
- Prepare for, and conduct an interview

1.1 Working Through this Pack

The study time involved in this pack is approximately 10 hours. In addition to the written text, the pack includes exercises for completion. I suggest that as you work through the pack, you establish for yourself a 'reflective log', linking the work in the pack to your own research interests and needs, and documenting your reflections on the ethnographic method. Include your responses to the exercises plus your own thoughts as you read and consider the material. You will find answers to the exercises at the end of the pack.

2. Types of Interview

The interview design and question phrasing will influence the depth and freedom with which a participant can respond. Some interviews encourage lengthy and detailed replies while others are designed to elicit short and specific responses. The degree of structure imposed on an interview will actually vary along a continuum but it is useful to think of three main types: **structured**, **semi-structured** and **unstructured**.

2.1 Structured or Standardised Interviews

Structured interviews enable the interviewer to ask each respondent the same questions in the same way. A tightly structured schedule of questions is used and often the intention is to use a **quantitative** method of data analysis. In many structured interviews, not only will the questions be set in advance, but the possible choice of answers also. **Pre-coded responses** are important to allow for comparison across all respondents. It is usual for all responses to be noted or written down on the questionnaire. By minimising the number of **open-ended responses**, the amount of time required for coding and content analysis is greatly reduced and often the data can be directly entered onto a computer for analysis.

In carrying out a structured interview, it is important that the interviewer adheres closely to the interview instructions, namely:

- only interview those participants who fit the sampling criteria
- follow the correct order and filtering throughout the questionnaire
- keep personal opinions to oneself
- read out pre-codes and prompts where instructed
- do not read out pre-codes for questions requiring spontaneous answers
- write down open-ended responses in full.

Using a structured interview is a way of trying to ensure comparability across the sample. However it is important that respondents are trained to administer questionnaires and that they are well-briefed on the interview topic.

The questions in a structured interview may be phrased in such a way that a limited range of responses is elicited. For example:

"Do you think that health services in this area are excellent, good, average or poor?

This is an example of a **closed question** where the possible answers are defined in advance so that the respondent is limited to one of the **pre-coded** responses.

It is not unusual for otherwise structured interviews to contain a few **open-ended questions**. 'Catch-all' final questions are common, for example, 'Do you have anything more to add?' These questions are useful in helping capture as much information as possible but they increase the amount of time required for analysing the interview findings.

2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are similar to structured interviews in that the topics or questions to be asked are planned in advance, but instead of using **closed questions**, semi-structured interviews are based on **open-ended** questions.

Semi-structured interviews are useful when collecting attitudinal information on a large scale, or when it is not possible to draw up a list of possible **pre-codes** because little is known about the subject area. However semi-structured interviews are much more time-consuming than structured interviews, because of the requirement to draw up coding frames and carry out content analysis on a large number of interviews. Responses can either be tape-recorded or written down by the interviewer.

Obviously because of the use of **open-ended questions** it is difficult to establish uniformity across respondents. It is therefore all the more important then, that the interviewer refrains from influencing the respondent in any way and maintains a neutral manner.

With semi-structured interviewing, the open-ended nature of the question defines the topic under investigation, but also provides opportunities for the interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. If the interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer also has the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on the original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee. An example would be:

> **Interviewer**: I'd like to hear your thoughts on whether changes in government policy have changed the work of the doctor in general practice. Has your work changed at all?
>
> **Interviewee**: Absolutely! The workload has increased for a start.
>
> **Interviewer**: In what way has it increased?

However, analysing the interview data from open questions is more problematic than when closed questions are used as work must be done before often diverse responses from participants can be compared.

Well planned and conducted semi-structured interviews are the result of rigorous preparation. The development of the interview schedule, conducting the interview and analysing the interview data all require careful consideration and preparation.

2.3 Unstructured or In-depth Interviews

Unstructured or in-depth interviews (also sometimes referred to as qualitative interviews) are so called because they have very little structure at all. The interviewer approaches the interview with the aim of discussing a limited number of topics, sometimes as few as one or two, and frames successive questions according to the interviewee's previous response. Although only one or two topics are discussed, they are covered in great detail.

The method of analysis also differs with in-depth interviewing, because no effort is made to collate and quantify participants' responses. Rather, the intention is to gain a 'rich picture' of what is happening in a setting by talking at length and in detail to participants involved.

When we talk about the application of in-depth interviews, we might be exploring how patients in a hospital out-patient clinic experienced the consultations that they had with a doctor. The objective of the researcher would be to glean as much information as possible from the patients who are interviewed, in order to gain the fullest understanding possible of what it was actually like for the patients to be in that situation.

Generally, a researcher will try to understand the informants' worldview in an unstructured interview. The relationship between the interviewer and the informant is important. Some characteristics of depth interviewing are that the researcher has a general objective and may use an **interview guide,** but the respondent provides most of the structure of the interview. The researcher uses this guide, but follows up on 'cues' or leads provided by the informant.

Typically an interview of this kind will last from 30 to 60 minutes in length, and there may be a series of interviews with a single participant, so you can see that it is an intensive approach to gathering data. In depth interviews:

- enable extended data collection from participants;
- enable researchers to probe aspects of what a participant says, in ways that a more structured approach such as an interview may not, in order to get a fuller picture of an experience;
- can explore the experiences of different participants, who may be selected to reflect a range of experiences. For example, young and old, educated and less educated people may have different expectations of treatment in a hospital;
- allow people to 'speak for themselves' and thus increase the validity of the data.

The disadvantages of in depth interviews are that they:

- are costly in time, both for participants and researcher, and therefore may have to be limited in number undertaken during a study;
- may be inefficient, as participants may not restrict themselves to the area in which the researcher is interested;

- may not be generalisable, and are not amenable to statistical analysis to test hypotheses;
- may be subject to biases (invalidity and unreliability), both because participants may not tell the truth or may hide aspects of their experiences, and because the interviewer may have an unintended influence on what participants say.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) summarise the circumstances under which in-depth interviews are appropriate as follows:

- When there is a clear and well-defined research interest
- Participant observation in a setting is not possible
- There are constraints on time for the research
- The research depends on data from a wide range of people or settings
- The focus is on subjective human experience

3. Interview Methods

The first thing that you will need to consider is whether you wish to conduct individual or group interviews (also known as focus groups).

3.1 Individual Interviews

Individual interviews are valuable to provide detailed information about the meaning of an event, situation or social context to each participant in a setting. They will be appropriate where we may expect a variety of different stories to be told concerning a setting or context, and where we are interested to learn about this variety. They are also appropriate where the topic to be discussed is sensitive, where a respondent may be unwilling to speak about some aspect of their experience in front of others, or where there is a possibility that the story told could contaminate other participants' stories, and so you need to ensure interviews are conducted in private. If interview data is to be subjected to statistical analysis, it is necessary to conduct individual interviews, to ensure independence of respondents.

3.2 Group Interviews

Group interviews (sometimes known as 'focus groups') are only really appropriate for qualitative approaches, and can be used where there is some benefit in getting a 'group story' about a setting or incident (Morgan 1998). The kinds of circumstances where this may be of value include:

- To generate a research question by tapping into the shared wisdom of participants

- Where the researcher does not have sufficient knowledge to conduct appropriately detailed individual interviews, and wishes to encourage conversation between participants to provide relevant information about the setting.
- Where there may be a range of views, and the extent to which participants agree or disagree about something is of interest to the researcher.
- To assess the theoretical proposition of the researcher, based on previous data collection and analysis
- To come to a consensus between participants about the 'best way' to do something (the 'Delphi' technique).

Individual and group interviews may be used in conjunction. Sometimes individual interviews may inform a subsequent focus group, or vice versa.

Having decided on individual or group approaches, you now need to decide which method of interviewing you wish to use. The three ways to conduct interviews are:

3.3 Face-to-face

Here the researcher and respondent meet together. This is the most frequently used technique, and enables attention to be paid to non-verbal behaviour and establish a rapport over an extended period of time.

Face-to-face or personal interviews are very labour intensive, but can be the best way of collecting high quality data. Face-to-face interviews are preferable when the subject matter is very sensitive, if the questions are very complex or if the interview is likely to be lengthy. Interviewing skills are dealt with in more detail later in this pack.

Compared to other methods of data collection, face-to-face interviewing offers a greater degree of flexibility. A skilled interviewer can explain the purpose of the interview and encourage potential respondents to co-operate; they can also clarify questions, correct misunderstandings, offer prompts, probe responses and follow up on new ideas in a way that is just not possible with other methods.

3.4 Telephone and Video Links

This can be used where a face-to-face interview is not possible, and may be appropriate where the topic is not sensitive and non-verbal behaviour is less important. Telephone conferencing may enable focus groups, but there are major problems in 'turn taking' and ensuring all are able to participate. Video conferencing adds a further dimension to this kind of distance interviewing.

Telephone interviews can be a very effective and economical way of collecting data where the sample to be contacted are all accessible via the telephone. They are not an appropriate method of data collection for a very deprived population where telephone ownership is likely to be low or where respondents may be ex-directory. However telephone interviewing can be ideally suited to busy professional respondents, such as general practitioners, when the telephone numbers can be easily identified and timed appointments set up. Telephone interviews are also particularly useful when the respondents to be interviewed are widely geographically distributed.

One of the main disadvantages of a telephone interview is that it is difficult to incorporate visual aids and prompts and the respondents cannot read cards or scales. The length of a telephone interview is also limited, although this will vary with participant area and motivation. Nevertheless it is possible to make prior appointments for a telephone interview and send stimulus material for the respondent to look at in advance of the interview. A prior appointment and covering letter may enhance the response rate and length of interview.

3.5 Web Interviews

The Internet provides opportunities through chat rooms for interviewing, and is a growing method of conducting in-depth interviews. There are clearly major problems in establishing rapport, and non-verbal behaviour will be missed entirely. However, some research suggests that respondents may be willing to be more open about personal matters in this kind of format. Issues of authenticity of identity may also be an issue. Methods of using the web include e-mail interviews, bulletin boards and interactive web sites. Chat rooms can be used to simulate focus groups.

Exercise 1

Types and Methods of Interview

Which is the more appropriate interview approach (structured etc; face-to-face etc) in each of the following studies?

1. A study of experiences of extra-marital sexual relations among middle-aged men and women.

2. A study of how social workers, doctors and psychologists counsel people who are having marital problems

3. A study of the factors involved in caring for old people in a remote country in southern Asia that the researcher has not visited.

4. A study of old people's experiences of community nursing and care services (district nurse, 'meals on wheels', home helps etc)

4. Locating and Selecting Respondents: Who, How Many?

The different approaches to interviewing have different requirements for selection of respondents. In structured interviews, often there will be a need for a detailed **sampling frame** to determine how a representative sample is generated, and who can be interviewed (for example, patients with a condition, women under 40 etc.). In qualitative interviewing, on the other hand, neither the number nor the type of respondents can be entirely specified in advance, as there needs to be a willingness to change course as the data is collected. When we are working with something as complex as the experiences of life and their meanings for participants, research needs to permit a capacity to react to what is being found. The details of who is to be interviewed, how respondents are to be found and what will be asked in the interviews may all emerge during the study (Seidman 1998: 29).

That, however, does not mean that there is no need to plan ahead, and there are some theoretical as well as some practical issues concerning selection of respondents that need to be considered.

There are a number of ways of approaching the question of how and how many people to interview.

1. Interview as many as possible

There is a temptation to conduct as many interviews as one can within a setting, maybe even interviewing everyone involved (for example, all the staff of a care unit or all the surgeons in a hospital).

There is a logic to this, based on being comprehensive, but it may be very wasteful in time. It is feasible that after interviewing three people in a setting, all the subsequent data generated is repetition: the same points come out time and time again.

This approach feels rather quantitative in character: the aim is to ensure that everyone has been surveyed to get a total picture. It will be appropriate when using a structured interview schedule that may be analysed statistically

2. Choose a small, but representative sample

Like the previous approach, the intention here is to make sure that the analysis of data will reflect the broad view of participants in a setting. A sampling strategy would be to select participants to represent different categories, for example, doctors, nurses and technical staff.

The problem is of course that such a selection strategy is very crude. Unlike quantitative data collection, where randomised samples can be used and statistics applied to test 'significance' with a smaller sample and a non-statistical analysis it is not really possible to be 'representative' in sampling.

3. Choose respondents to maximise diversity

The intention here is to get as wide a range of perspectives as possible, even if these are extreme and do not represent the 'average' view. However, it enables the data to count much more than if analysis is based on a broadly representative sample

This kind of approach is known as **theoretical sampling** and is very different from a quantitative sampling strategy. The number of people interviewed is relatively unimportant, and more important is that each interviewee can **add something to the researcher's understanding of the setting**. The objective is to uncover the widest range of meanings held by the participants in the setting. When you do not uncover new meanings in an interview, this means you have interviewed enough participants! (Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 83). This is known as **theoretical saturation**. It does require that data analysis is partly concurrent with data collection, so that it is clear when no new meanings are emerging from the in-depth interviews.

This approach has been widely adopted in qualitative in-depth interviewing, and provides an economical way to sample. It is well suited to descriptive and exploratory research, and to some kinds of evaluation research. It is less suitable for multi-setting, large-scale studies using more than one interviewer.

Exercise 2

Sampling Interview Respondents

What approach to sampling would you adopt in the following research studies?

1. Interviews to determine patient satisfaction with a GP consultation

2. A comparison of satisfaction between two GP practices

3. Interviews to discover what factors affect whether patients are satisfied with a GP consultation

4.2 How to Recruit Respondents

There are various ways to recruit, ranging from the formal to the informal. If you require a random sample, you could select potential interviewees from the electoral register or telephone directory. Recruiting in qualitative research tends to use **networks**, either existing ones known to the researcher, or ones known to key informants in the setting. Especially where theoretical sampling approaches are to be used, there will also need to be an element of **snowballing**, whereby respondents are encouraged to supply names of further potential interviewees to the researcher.

Snowballing can be very effective as a technique to manage qualitative interviews, as the supply of respondents can be regulated, simply be asking for contacts at the end of interviews. This avoids having to cancel pre-arranged interviews when theoretical saturation occurs.

The following methods can be used for recruitment.

1. Approach a senior member of an organisation

This can be used to generate potential interviewees, and has the advantage that it may provide a good supply of respondents. However, it may lead to bias if the selection by a manager is based on her/his judgment of who is appropriate. The other concerns mentioned in chapter 1 also apply to the use of a formal approach such as this.

If you wish to interview senior management, it will be essential that you make a formal approach to the organisation, and there may be problems gaining access to these respondents, as there may be concern that confidentiality will be breached leading to commercial disadvantage to the organisation.

2. Use informal networks

If you know people in an organisation, this can be a way in. Here the snowballing methods may be valuable. It has the advantage that you can avoid any need for sponsorship from a senior member of an organisation. It has the disadvantage that it may not enable you to get to the entire range of perspectives. If you want to research an informal group, this approach will be the most appropriate.

3. Direct approaches

On occasions, you may need to approach people in public places. This is not a good method for in-depth interviewing given the length of time required for interviews and the need for quiet. Cold-call telephoning is similarly unlikely to be successful for this kind of research design. These approaches are more suited to closed question designs.

4. Advertising

Taking an advertisement in a local newspaper or a magazine read by your target group may be productive, but response rates are poor for the expense involved and the respondents will inevitably be highly **self-selected.** This could lead to bias, especially where a research topic is controversial.

5. World-wide web

Discussion forums exist on most topics and joining a group and asking for volunteers to be interviewed may yield some respondents. You will probably need to participate in the group for some time before you will be trusted, especially as you will be expecting people to meet you face-to-face for the interview.

5. Getting Agreement to Undertake Interviews

It is important that the interviewer seeks the informed consent of the respondent to participate in the study. In most cases, this should be obtained in writing. The interviewer has an important role in explaining why the study is necessary and converting waivers without coercion. Whilst it is possible to recruit respondents on the doorstep, it is preferable to invite them to participate in advance either in writing or by telephone. A written invitation on letter headed paper explaining the purpose of the study can enhance the credibility of the study and increase response rates. Nevertheless such an invitation should be careful to explain that participation is entirely voluntary.

The interviewer must reassure the respondent of their **confidentiality** or **anonymity**, and inform them that their identities will not be revealed in the aggregated findings.

It is important that the interviewer introduces her/himself, explains why the study is being done, why the respondent has been selected and what will happen to the interview data. Respondents should be encouraged to ask questions. All of this will help the interviewer to establish a rapport with the respondent.

Note that in some circumstance you will need to get permission to interview certain people. This will be the case where they belong to an official organisation such as the police or army, where you want to interview them because they represent a professional group or an organisation such as an NHS trust, or when you want to interview them on the premises of an organisation such as a hospital or GP surgery. Note too that all interviews with patients, NHS staff and interviews conducted on NHS premises require **prior ethical permission**.

It is also the case that some people although not **official gatekeepers** (e.g. management, ethics committees) still perform an informal gate-keeping role. They are important to get 'on side' as they can make it much harder to get to respondents without their assistance.

Exercise 3

Gaining Agreement for Interview

1. What is the disadvantage of interviewing people you know or work with?

2. Why might you need to approach an informal gatekeeper when conducting interview research?

3. Why should we be cautious if a person is eager to be interviewed?

6. Structuring the Interview

To conduct a good interview, interviewers need certain skills, including reflective questioning, summarising and controlling the interview process. Also, interviewers need to be unbiased, systematic and thorough, and offer no personal views. He or she also needs to be well informed on the purpose of the research interview and to be well prepared and familiar with the questionnaire or topic guide. In addition, he or she needs to be a good listener.

In addition to these generic skills, all interviews (even unstructured ones!) need some degree of **structure**. This will vary from what is basically a closed question questionnaire through to an interview guide in an unstructured interview.

6.1 Structured and Semi-structured Interviews

When carrying out a structured interview, it is important that the interviewer adheres closely to the interview instructions, namely:

- following the correct order and **filtering** throughout the questionnaire. Filtering enables the interviewer or the respondent to know which question to go to next. For example, a structured interview may include a filter such as:

  If yes to Q1, go to Q3

  If no to Q1, go to Q2.

- reading out pre-codes and **prompts** where instructed. A prompt is a prepared answer such read out to the respondent by the interviewer.
- **probing** when necessary. A probe is a follow-up question that is used after the respondent has given their first answer. It is used to elicit a more detailed

response. Sometimes probes are general and non-directed. In contrast some probes are very specific, for example, clarifying time of day.

- not reading out pre-codes for questions requiring spontaneous answers
- writing down or taping open-ended responses in full.

Using a structured interview is a way of trying to ensure consistency between interviews. However it is still important that interviewers are trained to administer the questionnaires and well briefed on the interview topic, ensuring familiarity with some of the terms and jargon that may be contained in answers. Interviewers carrying out structured or semi-structured interviews for a quantitative study should:

- stick closely to any written instructions about filtering questions, what to read out etc.
- refrain from giving personal opinions (for any type of design)
- be systematic and consistent in the way they interact with each respondent (again, for any type of design)

6.2 Structure in a Qualitative Interview

Qualitative interviews should **not** be based on a rigid list of questions that must be answered in the time available. If this is the case, it is not an in-depth interview (Jones 1985: 46). However, there is no such thing as a totally un-structured interview (or at least, if there is, then it is not really adequate for research). Even the informal interviews during participant observation are structured by the researcher's desire to clarify some aspect of a setting.

In preparing an interview, a researcher needs to have some broad questions in mind. But the process of in-depth interviewing is about being able to make choices 'on the hoof' as an interview progresses, to ensure that data is gathered in relation to the research topic, but without guiding the respondent into an area to such an extent that it precludes their being able to say what is most important for them.

The key here is to permit sufficient flexibility in structure, so that it is possible to respond quickly to what is important for the interviewee, asking questions in relation to **what we hear** from the respondent, not from what is written on our briefing sheet (ibid: 47).

The Three-Phase Qualitative Interview

According to Seidman (1998) we can discern three phases to a typical in-depth interview:

1. Focused Life History

In this phase, the interviewer's task is to put respondents' **experiences in context**, by asking them to provide as much information as possible about themselves, in relation to the topic of the study (ibid: 11).

Seidman offers an example of a study of the experiences of trainee teachers, in which this first phase of interviewing encouraged them to contextualised their experiences in relation to their life history, in particular their own schooldays and any coaching or tutoring they did before becoming trainees. He asked the question 'how did you become a trainee teacher?' rather than 'why?', to gain as much background as possible.

2. The Details of Experience

Here the emphasis is on the concrete details of the present experience of respondents in the research topic area, to **re-construct their experiences**. In Seidman's example of research on trainee teachers he asked them what they actually did, not about their opinions about the work.

Respondents may be asked about relationships with colleagues and students. One technique might be to ask them to **re-construct an entire day** in their work lives from getting up to going to bed.

3. Reflection on the Meaning

In the third phase, respondents are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experience. This is not about how satisfying the experience may be, but how the respondents make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences that are the subject of the research topic. The intention here is to find out how respondents make sense of the experiences that they have, and how it relates to other aspects of their lives and their selves.

This interview phase will draw on the first and second phases. Knowing something about the life history and also about the daily experiences, enables the interviewer to ask detailed in-depth, relevant questions concerning the meaning of events for each individual respondent.

It is clear from this that the critical third phase can only succeed if preceded by detailed earlier phases. Seidman (1998) actually suggests that there should be three separate interviews, each lasting up to 90 minutes. If time is more limited, then a single extended interview covering the three phases may be adequate. Seidman's case for separate interviews is alluring, as it ensures that a structure is sustained, making sure that phases one and two are adequately dealt with before moving to the final crucial phase.

I would add that this kind of approach can enable a rough analysis of phases one and two to be undertaken before the third interview, to ensure that the interviewer is fully briefed on critical issues and has been able to prepare adequately to ask the kind of in-depth questions required in phase three. If interviews are spaced from three to seven days apart, this also enables respondents to reflect on what they said, giving a potential for a more reflective third interview (Seidman 1998: 15).

The three-phase interview schedule is a good start towards this. It enables an interview to move from a relatively unstructured early phase, where the researcher is led by the respondent as the latter recounts their life history and their daily experiences, to a more **focused** latter phase, in which the researcher attempts to integrate the earlier materials to get at the critical meanings that the experiences have for the respondents.

6.3 Interview Guides in Qualitative Interviewing

In-depth interviews are not based on a formal **schedule**, as are more structured interview approaches. But it is important to have some kind of **interview guide** that can enable an interviewer to ensure that they cover important areas. Interviewing, especially as a novice, can be stressful, and a simple *aide-memoire* will assist an interviewer to recall any important areas that have not been covered during the interview.

The first step in preparing the guide will be to write down the research question. You need to make sure that your interview is always **focused** on the research question. You need to avoid getting side-tracked, although at the same time, you can be open to ideas that you did not expect to emerge during interviews.

Using the three stages outlined in the previous section is the basis for the guide. You can draft a series of **cues** that are intended to facilitate interviewees to talk about the subject, moving from background through to specific reflections.

Focused Life History

Use descriptive questions such as:

Tell me about what it was like back in (date or place) when you were …

I think that you had some background in .., didn't you? Can you tell me about that?

What got you interested in … ?

These kinds of questions should elicit the kinds of materials that will enable you to move on to

Details of the Experience

The second phase of the interview will need to get a full record of the experiences of the interviewee. The simplest way to do this is to use questions like:

Tell me about a typical day in your life/your office/your work

Can you start with what usually begins your day?

So what happens after that, on a typical day?

The responses can be probed to get maximum detail from the respondent. You may also ask:

So is there ever anything different that happens?

What might happen if x occurs at work?

These kinds of questions should provide you with data on the 'facts' of the setting. You need to note down the key issues that emerge, so these can be used in the third phase

Reflecting on the Experience

This is where you attempt to elicit the meanings of the experiences for respondents. By now, hopefully there will be some kind of rapport, but you still need to go gently, and this is where non-directive questions can be use effectively. We will look at the techniques you can use in this phase of the interview later.

Ask this kind of question:

You mentioned … as something that often happens, what do you feel about that?

What's it like when … happens?

It sounds like you have thought quite a bit about …

I wonder if you have any ideas about what might be happening in this situation?

I guess that having worked/lived/done … for such a long time, you've had plenty of time to make your own judgements about it?

Of course, sometimes people will jump from phase one to two or three before you had planned.

If that happens, allow the conversation to flow, rather than saying 'stop, I don't want to talk about that yet'! But remember where you were, and when it seems right, pull back the conversation by saying:

A moment ago you were telling me about …

We will consider what to do if the interview goes entirely off-track later.

Probing

Probe questions are more directive than those that you use to get each phase of the interview going. They are aimed to jog the memory of the respondent, and take the form of:

What did that place look like?

Can you remember what you said then?

How did it feel at that moment?

Who else was there?

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest other questions that can be used to dredge up memories:

Did your parents ever tell you stories about how you were when you were growing up?

What kinds of stories do you tell when you get together with your family/workmates from that time?

Exercise 4

The 3-phase interview

You want to interview a patient about having Parkinson's disease. Produce an interview guide for a three-phase interview. You need not write down individual questions, just topic areas to cover in the three phases.

7. Preparing for the Interview

Before an interview, it is necessary to do some preparatory work. Some of the preparation will concern purely practical issues. The more important aspects concern planning the structure of the interview. We will look at each in turn.

7.1 Practical Arrangements for the Interview

The main practical issues are:

A place to meet

You need to agree in advance where the interview will take place, and of course a time that is mutually suitable. There are clearly advantages in arranging interviews at a place that is known to you: you can ensure that the room is appropriate, quiet and private, that there is adequate light and heating/air-conditioning, that there is an electricity socket if you need this for recording equipment, that there are chairs and if possible a table. The disadvantage is that this will be seen as your 'territory' and may inhibit your interviewee from feeling comfortable and willing to speak openly.

If you opt for a place that is on the respondent's 'turf', you will take a chance that some of the above are not available. I have interviewed in many unsatisfactory settings, from shared rooms where a telephone continually interrupted the interview, to a mud hut in Thailand where the distractions were barking dogs and man-eating flies!

If you do choose to go to the respondent's choice of location, you should ask about the arrangements and try to ensure at least that the room will enable an uninterrupted and private interview to take place. If you are invited to a respondent's home, this is a good sign, but you need to ensure you will feel comfortable and secure going to such a location. Settings where children (or pets!) are vying for your respondent's attention are to be avoided if possible.

NB If you are going to meet a respondent at an outside location, you should take these precautions:

- *tell someone where and when you are meeting, and make sure that if you are not back at a certain hour, that some kind of action will be taken to check your safety*
- *carry a mobile phone*

Sufficient Time for the Interview

You need to agree in advance how long the interview will take so you are able to have sufficient time to complete it satisfactorily.

If you are meeting on more than one occasion, try to make a regular arrangement, and typically do not leave gaps of more than about a week between interviews. It will help respondents if they are aware that more than one interview will be needed. Life history research will take many meetings, over a number of months to complete.

Recording Equipment

We will look at this in the next section.

Interpreting

If your respondents do not speak English, you need to arrange for a competent interpreter. Make sure you know exactly what language needs interpreting, and that the interpreter is fluent in the dialect to be spoken.

If you are unable to obtain a professional interpreter, you may be able to use a family member or friend of the respondent to translate. But this carries some risks: such an interpreter may have their own cultural agenda and may choose to translate accordingly. For instance, some questions may be perceived by an interpreter as culturally too sensitive to ask. They may paraphrase what is said in either or both directions, and you will get answers to questions you did not ask!

Interpreters need to understand the research process: there is a big difference between interpreting in a doctor's surgery and providing the level of accuracy of translation that is required when you are trying to access complex reflections on experience.

Interviewing People with Disabilities

If your respondent has a disability, you will need to prepare in advance to ensure that you can conduct the interview adequately (for example, that communication will be adequate) and that the respondent will be catered for physically.

Telephone Interviews

If you are interviewing by telephone, there are a number of specific practicalities.

- You need to make sure you can record both sides of the conversation using appropriate recording technology. Check that line quality is adequate and that your respondent can hear you.
- Ensure you agree a time for the interview when your respondent will not be interrupted.
- Make sure it is your (not your respondent's) phone bill that is being debited for the call!
- Attempting to conduct group interviews using conference calling is to be avoided: it is very hard to establish rapport among a group of people by telephone.

Exercise 5

Preparing for an interview

You want to interview teenage women about their sexual health. List the practical issues you need to address for this research project

8. Methods of Recording Interviews

In structured or semi-structured interviews, interviewers must record all answers carefully, distinguishing between questions which only allow one answer and multiple-response questions. Any verbatim answers need to be written down as accurately as possible.

In unstructured interviews, an interviewer would normally tape record the discussion rather than attempting to get it all down on paper. This frees the interviewer to really listen to what is being said and respond accordingly. You should arrange to use some kind of audio or video device to record your interviews unless there is a very good reason why this is not feasible (for example, because a respondent is not willing to be recorded). Consent to record the interview is necessary from the respondent. You need to explain the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview, and this can be done when you first agree an interview.

A small portable recorder that uses an ordinary cassette (not a mini-cassette) or recordable CD is the best option. Cheaper, more bulky recorders are available, and it is also possible to spend much more on a studio-quality recorder. It is probably best to use a mono rather than stereo recorder as this can enhance the sound quality. Do not buy a voice-activated model as any pauses during the interview will be lost, and low-volume speech may not be recorded at all. Digital recorders are now available which remove the need for cassettes, but do ensure you have sufficient memory capacity to record the interviews you plan between downloads.

It is inadvisable to use a Dictaphone, as the cassettes last for a short period and often quality of recording will be poor.

8.1 Microphones

The quality of your recordings depends on the microphone you use. Do not rely upon the internal microphone in a tape recorder: this may not pick up voices of both interviewer and respondent adequately.

The best microphones are **omni-directional**, meaning that they will pick up sounds equally well on all sides. Small flat microphones that rest on a tabletop can be purchased from electronics outlets. These require a battery to actuate them, and you must therefore **remember to turn on the microphone at the start of the interview, and off afterwards to conserve the battery!**

If using a flat microphone, place it about half way between you and your respondent, or in the middle of a table for a group interview. If you are able to avoid having the recorder on the table top, this will minimise any hum from the motor being recorded.

An alternative is to ask your respondent to wear a lapel microphone and to do the same yourself, ensuring excellent recording quality. You will need to check the sockets on the recorder can take two separate microphones.

Always test the equipment before starting the interview. Set the recorder working, and chat with your respondent for a minute. Then replay the tape to check it has recorded adequately.

Cassettes should be of a good quality, and ones intended for voice recording can be purchased. Sixty-minute cassettes will have a better quality than 90 or 120 minutes ones, but you need to remember to turn over the tape after 30 minutes.

If you need to change the tape, ask your respondent to pause for a moment.

One tip I have learnt is to leave a recorder running for as long as possible. Some respondents say important things after you have officially ended an interview. You will miss these if you ritually switch off your machine as you say ‘well thank you, that’s all’. Only when you are sure that a respondent has really finished, switch off.

8.2 Video Recording

Using video can pick up non-verbal behaviour but is unlikely to be worth the hassle of setting up. Video-recording an interview can inhibit openness among respondents. It can be very helpful in group interviews however, as it can be hard to discern from an audio tape who is speaking if a group is large.

8.3 One-way Mirrors

If you have the facility of a room with a one-way mirror, you could use this in order for a second researcher to observe an interview, possibly attending to non-verbal behaviour. However, this technique is rarely used in in-depth interviewing, being more often used for training, clinical or psychological observation.

8.4 Note-taking

If you cannot use audio-tape, you will have to record an interview by hand. If you can learn shorthand, this will be of great assistance. If not, you will have to make the best of what will inevitably be a partial record of an interview. Remember to note your own questions as well as trying to record your respondent’s answers.

There is an argument for taking brief notes even during a recorded interview. These should be limited to notes that can remind you to ask questions later in the interview, notes for interviews with other respondents, and notes of any striking non-verbal behaviour. A respondent may be inhibited if you are scribbling away: far better to keep eye contact and try to remember these times after the interview. Your **post-interview notes** can be used to reflect on what was said by the respondent. These reflections are an adjunct to the interview data. They can also enable you to reflect on your interview style and refine this (Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 104)

After an interview, label the tape clearly so you know the name of the respondent, the date and location. We will consider transcription of tapes in the unit on data analysis. It is worth noting that transcription should take place as soon as possible after an interview. Any unclear passages on the tape can then be completed with the assistance of the interviewer's recall of the interview.

Finally, when ending the interview, remember to give the respondent a contact telephone number in writing for the interviewer or study organiser, as there may be something that the respondent wants to add or ask about.

9. Conducting an Individual Interview

We have looked already at the kinds of questions that might be used during an in-depth interview. In this section we turn to the techniques that can be used to make an interview run smoothly.

9.1 Establishing Rapport

Before commencing the interview, the interviewer should take the time to explain the reason for the interview, including the aim of the research project and what will happen to the interview data. He/she should check whether the interviewee has any questions. Questions should be asked in a relaxed informal manner so that the interview appears more like a discussion or conversation. The interviewer must be aware of the effect of body language in indicating interest, encouraging the interviewee to talk and maintaining a non-threatening atmosphere.

9.2 Emulate a Conversation

Try to make the in-depth interview seems as much as possible like the normal conversational situation in which people disclose information to others. You need to try to relate to the respondent on a personal level and if this is hard for you, it is going to affect the quality of the data. Don't be afraid to devote some time at the start of your interview to building a relaxed mood.

However, you should be very cautious about revealing information about yourself, and in particular your personal attitudes or beliefs, as these may affect what a respondent is subsequently willing to say. If you disclose about yourself, keep to neutral topics such as the journey to the interview, the attractiveness of the furnishings or even the weather!

9.3 Listen

If you do not listen to your respondent, you will miss the nuances of what is being said. Don't think about your next question while a respondent is talking. If you cannot remember what you want to ask next, you can always refer to the guide. Much more likely, if you have listened intently, the next question will flow naturally from what has just been said. It will also mean you will ask a 'real' question, not one to which you already know the answer (Seidman 1998: 63 ff.).

9.4 Be Non-Judgmental

If you want a respondent to open up about their life, they need to feel secure that they will not be judged for it. On occasions, interviewees may say things you find objectionable, foolish or upsetting. Your role is not to judge your respondent however, and you need to find ways to sustain a neutral demeanour. This is most easily done if you suspend your judgments during an interview (Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 94). If this is not possible, you need to respond neutrally. For example, if a respondent makes a racist comment that is relevant to your research topic, you may want to say 'tell me more about this', rather than frown, move on to another area or remonstrate with them for their racism.

9.5 Let People Talk

Open-ended questions are intended to get respondents to enter into a 'stream of consciousness', in which few cues from you are required to keep them talking. Practice with a mirror looking interested, nodding occasionally or even using an 'eyebrow flash' (McCracken 1988: 35) to indicate you want your respondent to keep talking. Don't frown or look away as they non-verbal cues will inhibit your respondent. Try to adopt an open posture, not leaning forward too aggressively in your chair, or leaning back as if uninterested. Pay attention to what is being said, as this will ensure the conversation will flow smoothly.

Of course, on occasions, respondents diverge magnificently from the research topic, and your skill is needed to bring them back on track without making them feel you are bored. Try: 'yes that's *very* interesting. Could I just ask you about something you said a moment ago', and then go back to your main line of questioning.

Silences may be very telling. Do not feel uncomfortable with a silence in a qualitative interview. If you do, you may try to rush in and fill it quickly with another question. You need to give the respondent the opportunity and the time to reflect and to add additional information. The length of the silence may be important and should be indicated in the final transcript. Develop your skill in leaving long pauses. In our society, we find these uncomfortable and so often jump in with speech so encouraging them to talk.

9.6 Be Attuned to Words and Gestures

If your respondent is leaking emotions via their body language, you will know you are on sensitive ground. Use this positively, to encourage reflection but without upsetting your respondent or getting into difficult areas that you may not be able to support your respondent through. You have an ethical responsibility not to harm your respondents through opening old wounds. Be willing to say ‘perhaps we should move on now’, if you realise you are on dangerous ground. If a respondent says they do not want to talk about something, reassure them that you won’t ask about that topic.

Non-verbal behaviour can often be revealing of lies or distortions, and you can use this to reduce the possibility that a respondent is misleading you consciously or unconsciously. Closed posture, looking away or shifting in the seat are all signs that what is being said may not be wholly accurate. If you suspect this is happening, you can gently probe to see whether you can clarify, perhaps saying ‘I wonder if there’s another way of thinking about that’ or ‘how do you feel about that deep-down?’

9.7 Specialised Questioning Strategies

A number of specific questioning techniques are suggested by McCracken (1988: 35-7).

The Grand Tour

Start an interview with low-profile, non-directive questions to get talk going without specifying the particular topic. This is the purpose of the life history and the daily details of experience parts of the interview.

Floating Prompts

Repeat the last few words of what is said by a respondent, using an interrogative tone:

> ***Respondent***: '… and eventually it seemed the right thing to do was change job …'
>
> ***Interviewer*** (neutrally): 'Right to change job?'

If you can carry it, off, a raised eyebrow can be sufficient stimulus to keep the respondent talking.

Planned Prompts

These are more directive and gives a respondent an opportunity to provide detail.

The **contrast** prompt asks something like 'you've talked about x and now about y, what exactly is the difference between these?'

The **category** prompt seeks clarification from a respondent to define key elements of the story. S/he may have mentioned a specific example: you ask 'what other examples of that kind of thing happen?' and from that, you are able to understand more about how the respondent categorises her reality.

The **exception** prompt asks for (or immediately picks up on) an example of exceptions to what normally happens, and to see how accounting for these helps a respondent to reflect on the reality

The **auto-driving** prompt is quite intrusive. The researcher provides a stimulus: a photograph or an object, and asks the respondent to comment upon it. This can be used where it would be hard to generate commentary on this particular topic.

10. Conducting a Focus Group Interview

Many of the techniques that are used in in-depth interviews with individuals may also be applied to group interviews. However there are some additional issues that emerge because of the rather different structure of the interaction.

10.1 Preparation

Group interviews need careful planning, and the right people need to be invited to participate. You should beware of using 'naturally-occurring groups' as these may not have adequate focus to be appropriate for research. They also need to be facilitated adequately, to ensure they discuss what they are meant to discuss (Morgan 1998: 34).

How large a group to interview is a moot point, but generally it is suggested that six to eight participants is the right size group (Hedges 1985: 75-6). If group interviews are being conducted for reasons of economy of time or cost, then this is an optimal number, but I have conducted very productive group interviews with three or even two participants. The value of the group interview is as much concerned with enabling a semi-natural conversation to be recorded between participants.

There are a few obvious practical issues to be addressed. You need a room large enough to accommodate all the participants, preferably around a table. Recording needs to be arranged so that all participants can be adequately heard.

Transcribing group interviews can be a problem, as it may be hard to identify all the voices in a large group. It is best to start with a round of 'names and jobs' so that a transcriber will have a better chance of identifying each contribution to the discussion.

You should explain that it will aid data collection if the discussions are orderly, and that participants allow each other opportunities to speak without interruptions.

10.2 Techniques in Group Interviews

The key skill as a group interview leader is as a moderator, rather than specifically as an interviewer. While some of the techniques for managing an interview noted in the earlier section on individual interviews are relevant, typically, the objective in a group interview is for the researcher to say as little as possible. The task is primarily to keep the discussion on topic.

Getting Started

You will need to relax your participants, and get them talking freely. You need to explain the purpose of the interview clearly and simply, and explain the recording method. You also need to ensure that participants understand the confidentiality of the research.

You will need to introduce people to each other, and perhaps incorporate some kind of round-robin of names and roles with a simple question such as ‘how long have you been involved in … ?’ Everyone will have a turn to answer this initial question, and this will at least give all a chance to speak up early in the interview.

You may want to do a further round-robin on a second question, but after that, it will become too repetitive if you expect a structured response. You do not want to conduct a series of individual interviews, after all! (Hedges 1985: 80-81).

Encouraging Talk

The first rounds should stimulate discussion and then it is a matter of allowing the conversation to progress organically.

Try to avoid direct questions, as these will close down the discussion and may make people feel they are being confronted in front of others.

If you want to explore a point, you can use the technique of repeating the last part of a comment as a question, as was seen earlier. Try to avoid the impression of controversy in anything that has been said, so that people do not feel nervous about disclosing.

Neutrality

You need to give an impression of enthusiasm and interest in what is being said, without overly partisan towards any view. You must never disclose your own views or feelings, as this could bias the discussions. If asked directly, you may need to explain that your moderator role means you prefer not to comment during the interview.

Group Dynamics

An important responsibility of the moderator is ensuring that the group functions effectively. The objective is to facilitate discussion without allowing one or more individuals to dominate it. It may be necessary for you to interject to ensure quiet members have an opportunity to contribute. You can ask ‘What do *you* feel about that?’ to someone who has not had a chance to contribute. If one person is dominating, you can say: ‘That’s interesting. I’d like to get other opinions on that from around the table’.

You also need to be aware of any tensions in the group, rivalries, or anything that could lead to disruption. If a legitimate view is being strongly challenged by a majority of participants, you may wish to say something like: ‘Participants in other groups have something similar, would you like to expand on your point?’

Stimuli

Sometimes you may wish to introduce some stimulus material into the group: for example a text or a picture. This can be used to observe how people react, and assess the impact on individuals or the group as a whole. **Scenarios** are sometimes used in this way, and this can provide useful structure to an interview. You should not under-estimate how long it will take to discuss a scenario however, and do not expect too much from a single focus group interview.

Overall Plan

You should have a general idea of how you expect the interview to proceed, and some kind of time-scale for all the elements you want to cover. It is your responsibility to ensure that the interview keeps to the expected time. Do not run on longer than you agreed with participants.

Exercise 6

Focus Group Preparation

Devise some stimuli for a focus group interview on a participant of your choice

11. Sources of Error and Bias in Interviewing

Because of the personal nature of interviewing, the scope for introducing error and bias is quite large and can affect all the following stages of the interviewing process:

- asking the questions
- recording the answers
- coding the answers
- interpreting the answers

Sources of interviewing error will affect a study randomly, i.e. in all directions, whereas sources of interviewing bias affect the study results systematically, i.e. in the same direction. Sources of error include:

- *deviation from the written instructions in a structured interview* , e.g. not following the correct order of questions, not following the correct filters on the question routing, not using show cards with pre-coded answers, reading out pre-coded answers which were not to be read out, and changing the wording of the questions.

- *interrogation error*, which occurs when questions are phrased differently from respondent to the next, for example, asking ‘What is your age?’ could produce a different response than asking ‘How old are you?’ Use of the word ‘old’ can result in some respondents giving a younger age.
- *interpretation error*, which occurs when the interviewer has to make a subjective judgement as to how to code an answer. This is most likely to happen when the potential answers are pre-coded and the interviewer has to attempt to squeeze the respondent’s answer into an existing box.
- *recording error*. It is generally recognised that the more an interviewer has to write down, the more likely he/she is to make a mistake in the recording of that data. There is a tendency to abbreviate answers, not necessarily correctly.

Exercise 7

Minimising error and bias in qualitative interviews

In a qualitative interview, how would you reduce interviewer error and bias?

11.1 The Pilot Study

In order to ensure that you will achieve your objectives in an interview, that you can ask the ‘right’ questions or that you have not forgotten or omitted some issue that is really important to the respondent, you will need to conduct a pilot study using your draft questionnaire.

The ideal situation is to try the interview on one or two respondents who are similar to those in your sampling frame, perhaps slightly more if you are doing a structured interview where you need to ensure equivalence of questioning. However, if the real participants are difficult to access or few in number, then you may have to test the questionnaire on slightly different participants. At the very minimum, you could try out the questionnaire on your colleagues or friends

It is essential that the interview be phrased in plain and clear language. If the participants of your study are to be members of the public, you should pilot the interview with a lay person in preference to a professional colleague, even if the lay person is a friend or relative. You may be so familiar with medical terminology and jargon that you forget other people may not understand it.

You can also use a pilot interview to test the equipment and make sure both parties are audible. Carry out pilot interviews a few days before you begin interviewing in earnest, so you can remember what worked well in the pilot.

Exercise 8

Avoiding Poor Questions

Read the attached transcript below of a research interview between a practice nurse and a patient. Identify (by line number) those parts of the interview where the interviewer asked:

1. leading questions (where the question encourages a particular answer)
2. ambiguous questions (where the meaning is unclear)
3. two questions in one sentence
4. State how this may have influenced the outcome of the study, and suggest ways in which the questions could have been better phrased.

The study below aims to explore how parents decide to use their primary care services when their children are ill. (I = Interviewer, R = Respondent)

1	I	: Thank-you for agreeing to spare me some time for this interview.
2		I'm doing a study of parents with small children - I'm interested in how they use
3		their local General Practitioner services.
4		I'd like to ask you some questions about the times when your child has been ill.
5		How old is she?
6	R	: Six. She was six in June.
7	I	Can you tell me about the last time she was ill?
8	R	What do you mean by ill? How ill?
9	I	Well, anything really, not necessarily ill enough to go to a doctor. I mean, eh, has
10		she had any colds or high temperatures or anything like that or more serious illness?
11	R	Yes.
12	I	She had em?
13	R	She had a bad cough and cold about two months ago.
14	I	And how did you handle that? Did you take her to the doctor?.
15	R	Well, I didn't take her to the doctor straight away. I gave lots of Calpol

and I

16 waited, and I tried to keep her cool, but then she seemed to get hotter and hotter

17 and eventually by night-time I decided that I had to call the doctor out.

18 I What time was this?

19 R About 3 am. She'd been awake all night and she'd been getting hotter and hotter

20 and I got more worried. You know how it is when you're worried.

21 I You were worried about meningitis?

22 R Yes, she was very poorly, so I called the doctor out.

23 I So you asked for a home visit. How quickly did he come?

24 R It was a woman. A different doctor. She came very quickly actually. I was

25 surprised she came so quickly. I thought that we would be waiting all night, you

26 know. But she was there within half an hour.

27 I What did she do?

28 R Well she took Anna's temperature and, you know, she said she was OK. Not to

29 worry and that if we were still worried we should go to the GP in the morning. I

30 wanted some antibiotics but I didn't get any.

31 I So the next day did you take her to the GP or did you treat her yourself?

32 R Eh, yes.

33 I Sorry, did you treat her yourself?

34 R Well, I gave her some Calpol, but then I took her down to the health centre and

35 we saw DR X and he examined her and I felt more reassured.

36 I Good. Was that reassurance important?

37 R Yes. I needed somebody to look at her properly and to listen to me.

38 I What about the time she was ill before that?

39 R (silence - respondent thinking) Well, I think she was ill around Christmas. She

40 had chickenpox.

41 I She must have felt pretty ill with that?

42 R No, actually. It hardly seemed to bother her. She was covered in spots, but she

43 carried on playing with her presents and she didn't like it when I told her she couldn't go to school.

44 I Did you take her to the doctor's?.

45 R Yes, of course. As soon as I saw the spots. I took her straight down. And we

46 saw Dr X. He knew what it was straight away.

47 I So at what point did you decide to go to the doctor's?

48 R I'm not sure. I just wanted to know what the spots were. I wasn't worried 'cos

49 there was a lot of it about at the time.

50 I How did you decide whether to go to the doctor's or call out a doctor for a home visit?

51 R Well, it depends on the time of day and how worried you are.

12. Handing and Analysing Interview Data

The way you analyse your interview data will depend on whether your interview is structured or unstructured.

12.1 Structured Interview Data

With structured interviewing, most answers will be either pre- or post-coded. They can then be subjected to statistical analysis. Interviews will need to be coded so that all responses can be allocated a number. This data can then be loaded into a data file, for use in a statistical package.

Most people use either SPSS or EPI-Info to carry out their statistical analysis. SPSS is very user friendly but it can be very expensive to purchase. EPI-Info on the other hand is freely available (for further details of these two software packages you are advised to refer to The NIHR RDS EM / YH Resource Packs *An introduction to Using EPI Info* and *An Introduction to Using SPSS*.)

For further details on quantitative data analysis you are recommended to read The NIHR RDS EM / YH Resource Pack *An Introduction to Using Statistics in Research.*

12.2 Qualitative Interview Data

If you have carried out a semi-structured or an in-depth interview (or have open-ended questions in a structured interview), then you can analyse the data using qualitative methods. It would be quite wrong to try and quantify the results of an in-depth interview. For instance if you carried out ten in-depth interviews you should not say that six out of the ten people interviewed took a particular viewpoint. Instead you should be looking at how and why the respondents differ in their views.

The first stage of qualitative analysis is to examine your transcripts of all your interviews. It is important that you get all the tapes of your interviews transcribed. It is much more difficult, if not impossible to try and do your analysis from the tapes alone. Using transcripts means that you pick up on the detail, including all of those points that you might have forgotten. But don't forget to allow sufficient time to get the tapes transcribed. This can be a very painstaking process and you should never underestimate the amount of time that it can take.

Once you have all of your transcripts together, you will need to carry out some form of thematic analysis. This is really a systematic way of identifying all the main concepts which arise in the interviews, and then trying to categorise and develop these into common themes.

Most people now use a qualitative data analysis software package such as *NVivo* or *AtlasTI* to conduct qualitative analysis.

For further details of how to analyse qualitative data, you should read The NIHR RDS EM / YH Resource Pack *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.

13. Summary

Interviewing covers structured, semi-structured and unstructured or qualitative approaches. You should be able to describe the main advantages and disadvantages of each of these, and also of face-to-face, telephone and focus group interviews. I have looked in detail at the preparation for interviewing, the structure of these different kinds of interview, and the skills and techniques needed for a successful interview.

Interviewing is an important method of data collection in research in health and medicine, and plays a role in many research studies, especially where data on experiences or beliefs is needed. The theory can be learnt from a text such as this, but what is also needed is practice!

14. Answers to Exercises

Exercise 1

1. Individual web-based in-depth interviews could be used as this is a sensitive issue and this may be a hard-to-reach group.
2. Individual semi-structured telephone interviews, as these busy professionals may be hard to access for face-to-face interviewing
3. Semi-structured focus group interviews with a range of caring agencies
4. Individual face-to-face interviews

Exercise 2

1. Representative sampling using a structured interview schedule
2. Small samples to cover main sub-groups e.g. elderly, young parents
3. Theoretical sampling to gain broad selection of patients.

Exercise 3

1. In general, there may be conflicts of interest, especially if you are in a position of power in relation to colleagues. Workers may not be willing to speak openly to someone they know, because it may breach informal rules about privacy in the workplace. Friends may be poor interviewees, as they may make assumptions about shared beliefs.

2. Approaching informal gatekeepers may facilitate access to a group. However, if they are self-appointed, working through them may actually inhibit access to colleagues who resent their self-importance.

3. An over-enthusiastic potential interviewee may wish to use the opportunity of an interview to criticise the organisation or a colleague. While this may be important, to shed light on an aspect of the micro politics of a setting, this may not be relevant to your study, and may be a waste of both your times, as the data will not be useful. However, such a person could be a useful informant and maybe a contact to obtain other respondents.

Exercise 4

Have a look at section 6 of this pack for suggestions about the kinds of questions in each stage of the interview.

Exercise 5

Some of the issues you will need to consider are:

a) a neutral place to conduct the interviews. Their family homes may not be conducive to open-ness, but a health clinic could seem too impersonal and 'cold'.

b) if you are going to a destination outside your control, make sure a colleague knows your movements and carry a mobile phone.

c) if you are going to use a recorder, make sure you know how to operate it. You will need to ask permission to record and plan what to do if permission is refused.

d) check if you will need an interpreter for any of the participants who may not speak good English.

Exercise 7

There is no single right answer, however some possible suggestions are:

§ train all of the interviewers in the appropriate skills.

§ ensure that all of the interviewers are thoroughly briefed on the research topic.

§ pilot the interview.

§ accompany interviewers and monitor their questioning and recording.

§ use structured questions where possible and avoid verbatim answers.

§ avoid having to select a pre-coded response for a verbatim answer - let the respondent select the code where possible.

§ avoid giving strong personal opinions; in particular do not show disapproval or disagreement with the respondent, regardless of what you may really think.

Exercise 8

1. Leading questions (by line number): 21, 23, 38, 41
2. Ambiguous questions: 9, 38
3. Two questions in one: 9, 14, 31, 50

There is a danger that the interviewer could have confused or biased the interview. The interviewer assumes a number of things, for instance, that the doctor was male, or that the chickenpox had made the child feel 'pretty ill'. Luckily the respondent actually corrects her on these points but it may not always be so easy to pick up. If it's a minor matter, the respondent may not bother to clarify the question.

Questions should be phrased without assumptions, for example, at line 21, the question 'You were worried about meningitis?' could be rephrased as 'What in particular were you worried about?' Likewise line 36 could be replaced with 'How important was that reassurance?'

There are a number of questions where the interviewer asks two questions instead of one. The interviewer then has to probe the respondent's answer, otherwise she would not have been able to interpret the answer. Obviously it would be preferable to break these multiple questions up and ask them one at a time.

15. References

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16. Further Reading

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