

3 What forms can qualitative interviews take?

Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the various forms of interviews including ethnographic, oral history, life course, life history, biographical, narrative interviews, as well as group interviews. Throughout our discussion, we link them to the broad philosophical positions underlying their use. Other modes of interviewing and ways of combining these types of interviews with other methods, qualitative and quantitative, are also considered.

General forms of qualitative interviews

The major forms of qualitative interviews are semi- and unstructured interviews. In a typical semi-structured interview the researcher has a list of questions or series of topics they want to cover in the interview, an interview guide (see Chapter 5 for examples), but there is flexibility in how and when the questions are put and how the interviewee can respond. The interviewer can probe answers, pursuing a line of discussion opened up by the interviewee, and a dialogue can ensue. In general the interviewer is interested in the context and content of the interview, how the interviewee understands the topic(s) under discussion and what they want to convey to the interviewer. Basically these interviews allow much more space for interviewees to answer on their own terms than structured interviews, but do provide some structure for comparison across interviewees in a study by covering the same topics, even in some instances using the same questions. For example, in a study of young women's sexuality one of us has employed a topic guide and a naturalistic interview, but needed to ask a few questions about the young women's basic knowledge of HIV/AIDS (Holland et al. 2004). These questions were asked in the same format of all (147) participants, at a point in the interview that the researcher involved considered appropriate.

In the unstructured interview the researcher clearly has aims for the research and a topic of study, but the importance of the method is to allow the interviewee to talk from their own perspective using their own frame of reference and ideas and meanings that are familiar to them. Flexibility is the key with the researcher able to respond to the interviewee, to trace the meaning that s/he attaches to the 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess 1984: 102), to develop unexpected themes and adjust the content of interviews and possibly the emphasis of the research as a result of issues that emerge in any interview. The researcher can have an *aide memoire* to remind them of areas into which to lead the conversation (see Chapter 5). Or they can use a single question to begin the interview, where the interviewee is prompted to embark on their story. The latter can be the case in some psychological or psychosocially oriented interviews and in some oral history or biographical approaches. Flexibility is key to the unstructured interview and phenomenological philosophical approaches underlie the method – constructivism, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Both semi- and unstructured interviews are qualitative methods in use across the social sciences. The form of the interview might be similar, or even the same; what will differ are the particular theoretical positions and concomitant approaches to analysis and interpretation adopted by the researcher from their philosophical and possibly also their disciplinary perspective.

Specific forms of qualitative interviews

The ethnographic interview

Ethnography is historically the basic qualitative method deriving from early twentieth-century anthropology, although now widely used in many other social science disciplines. Ethnography is itself constructed from multiple qualitative methods, including observation and participant observation, and can incorporate the collection of demographic and other statistical data about the researched as appropriate (see discussion of mixed methods later). Critically, however, ethnography involves social exploration, *protracted investigation*, spending time in the field, the site of study, and the interpretation of local and situated cultures based on paying attention to the singular and concrete (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Atkinson et al.

2001). In the anthropological model people go off and spend a long time in the field with their chosen group. Interviews are clearly important, initially perhaps with a key informant who can provide crucial information about the individuals, groups and social relations within the chosen research setting. Key informants have a formal or informal position that gives them specialist knowledge about the people and processes that are the subject of research (such as preacher, head of department, oldest club member). Interviews with key informants can help illuminate situations, behaviours and attitudes that researchers otherwise could not access or understand. But equally key informants can mislead the researcher or withhold knowledge in interviews. For example, arguably 'Doc', the leader of one of the gangs who was William Foot Whyte's key informant for his *Street Corner Society* ethnography (see Chapter 2), steered Whyte's understanding and interpretation of people and situations.

Interviews in the field can be formal (perhaps recorded, perhaps using an interview guide) or informal, on the hoof, as and when an appropriate situation, person or group becomes available. In this instance flexibility, practice in recall and making notes after the event become key researcher/interviewing skills. It is possible to use a small unobtrusive audio recorder in some informal settings, depending on the relationship with the participants and the types of setting. Shane Blackman undertook an ethnography investigating youth cultures, including following groups of young people into a range of settings using a tape recorder. One of his groups, New Wave Girls, made a tape for him:

We made this tape the other night. We thought you would like it because you're studying us and doing tapes. So we did one for you. Can we have it back sometime; we thought we'd help you, suppose. You coming for the walk?

Blackman reports that these girls were already heavily involved in documenting personal and group history, and throughout the fieldwork he collected letters, poems and pictures from them. He saw the tape as an attempt to influence the collection of data on themselves. And indeed it was successful, its analysis forming a chapter in his book (Blackman 1995).

More recently 'ethnographic interview' has been used in a way akin to 'qualitative, unstructured interview' particularly in its spread to disciplines other than anthropology, and given the time and economic constraints

on protracted periods of research immersion. In a history of the development of ethnographic interviews, Barbara Sherman Heyl emphasizes 'the time factor – duration and frequency of contact – and the quality of the emerging relationship' (2001: 368). But she also identifies key features of the ethnographic interview as aiming to empower interviewees to shape the questions being asked, and possibly the focus of the research, according to their own worldviews and meanings, and reflexivity. In this regard she is drawing on interpretivist and feminist understanding of the interview. In the past the ethnographer had been regarded as an aloof, objective seeker after knowledge, whose writing up of the research provided an authoritative authorial voice. The textual turn in ethnography in the 1980s and the emphasis on reflexivity in research from feminists and others were key to the overthrow of this idea, and the qualitative researcher was recognized as historically positioned, locally situated and the very human observer/participant we can see in the changes sketched in the chapters of this book.

A yet more recent development has been that of autoethnography, based on postmodern philosophy, where the researcher her- or himself is the subject/object of the research and reflexivity is at its core. Autoethnographies 'are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes 2000: 21). Sarah Wall writes an informative and engaging autoethnography of her attempt to understand what it is – 'Despite their wide-ranging characteristics, autoethnographic writings all begin with the researcher's use of the subjective self' (2006: 8) – how to do it, and criticisms of the method. These include self-indulgence, narcissism, introspection and lack of rigour (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey 1999). Wall concludes that pursued with rigour the method can contribute to knowledge. (See too Jones 2005.)

Eliciting the interviewee's own story

One set of forms of interviews are specifically designed to elicit a story, their own story from the participants in the research, with particular inflections from the originating stance of the research. These are oral history, life course, life history, biographical and narrative interviews.

Oral history draws its methods from history and sociology and emphasizes the importance of time and memory, and people are interviewed about their past experiences. Oral historians also tend to try to

give expression to marginalized voices, particularly in relation to class, gender and ethnicity (Bornat 2012). Paul Thompson makes a distinction between oral history, which for him is focused on the past, and life history, which is focused on the present and can cover the whole life (Thompson, 2008: 19, 1975; Thompson et al. 1983). From this perspective in oral history approaches the focus of enquiry and the question(s) facilitating talk in the interview could relate to the interviewee's life experiences of a particular historical event or period, for example, World War II, the millennium, or to a particular biographical life event. This event could be their earliest memory, or the birth of their first child, for example. In life history the focus and facilitating question(s) could be more wide ranging, covering various aspects of their life (work, family, home). The question(s) could open up the possibility of the interviewee telling their whole life story in their own words. In some versions of this approach the aim is to elicit this story, which could be seen as an autobiography, with the researcher staying very much out of the picture after the initial question or prompt (see later). In each of these types of interview, points can be followed up with supplementary questions if necessary, or to clarify the meaning of what is being said if there is any doubt, and both versions can be combined with other sources of data such as documents – diaries, photographs, letters and so on (see Chapter 5).

Bringing the *life course* into consideration in these biographical approaches draws attention to normative expectations that can constrain or enable individuals at particular stages of life, the effects of biological ageing and cohort effects of being members of a particular generation. For example, in the United Kingdom the generation who experienced the deprivations of the 1930s and World War II were followed by the post-1945 baby boomers, who have come under attack in the current constrained economic climate for being the 'having it all' generation, leaving a more sparse life for the generations who now follow them (see Edwards et al. 2014). All of these elements, normative expectations, biological ageing and cohort effects will interact, affecting the individual life as both lived and told, and could be the focus of attention, or at least consideration, in designing a study using life history and biographical methods. They can also play a part in analysis, interpretation and understanding.

The *life history* method was pioneered by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, and exemplified by an autobiography written for them by a

Polish peasant Wladek Wisznienski – the first to be used as sociological data. In their view the individual case can give access to the social:

In analysing the experiences and attitudes of an individual we always reach data and elementary facts which are not exclusively limited to this individual's personality but can be treated as mere instances of more or less general classes of data or facts, and thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming. (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958: II 1832)

Overall in their monumental work they used letters and other 'life records' of Polish immigrants to access the story and history of Polish immigration to the United States, their concern being to draw subjective aspects of experience into an understanding of the social (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958). Although 'life history' and 'life story' are sometimes used interchangeably, Robert Miller (2000: 19) suggests that in the history of the method, an early distinction was made between life story as an account of their life given by one individual, and life history where other sources, including newspaper reports and public records, could validate the individual account. This confirmation or validation through external sources (triangulation) can be seen as related to the statistical modes of social enquiry which swept into a dominant position in sociology in the 1950s. In this period qualitative and biographical methods became relatively submerged.

A resurgence ensued in the 1970s, however, drawing on the influential work of C. Wright Mills who was concerned with the interplay between personal biography, history and society, and argued that 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (Mills 1959: 3). Prue Chamberlayne and colleagues have suggested that these methods have become more popular among social scientists in recent years, which they describe as a turn to biographical methods. In this period, an interview that pursues aspects of an individual's biography has become used more widely in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al. 2000). In most cases one aspect of the biography might be sought, for example, experience of childbirth, of family life, of health or perhaps educational or career trajectories. The focus might be quite tight, for example, experiences of a particular type of educational scheme or institution. Whatever the topic of the research the principles of the interview will be the same and depend on the underlying approach, but the practice might vary.

One particular type of *biographical interview* is employed in the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Chamberlayne et al. 2000; Wengraf 2001). Here a single question is aimed to induce a non-interrupted narrative from the interviewee, with the interviewer making as little intrusion as possible into the story. The researchers who developed this method take a phenomenological approach to understanding biographical data, focusing on the individual's perspective within a knowable historical and structural context, that is, some external (historical/social) facts of their life can be known (Bornat 2008). They have developed a specific analytic process for this type of interview, although other types of narrative analysis could also be used (Rosenthal 2004; Wengraf with Chamberlayne 2006).

From an interpretivist perspective, the *narrative interview* is based on the idea that people produce narratives about the self and identity through time that draw not only on their own experiences and understanding, but on culturally circulating stories that help them interpret and make sense of the world and themselves in it: 'They are interpretive devices through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others' (Lawler 2002: 246). Riessman (1993) provides a thorough introduction to narrative research and analysis with many examples, and also draws attention to performative aspects of the narratives produced by participants:

Personal narratives contain many performative features that enable the 'local achievement of identity' (Cussins 1998). Tellers intensify words and phrases, they enhance segments with narrative detail, reported speech, appeals to the audience, paralinguistic features ('uhms') and gestures, or body movement. (Riessman 2001: 701)

Others similarly regard the relationship between life and narratives as crucial for self-identity – Giddens highlights the importance of maintaining the continuity of self-identity in the everyday world, which he sees as the capacity to 'keep a particular narrative going' (1991: 4). We might produce a relatively stable and coherent self through the narrative we produce, but to do so we need to have an idea of our past, present and possible futures, although these ideas might be contingent and unstable. This will require us to work and rework the past in revisiting and recounting our memories in relation to the changing present and potential futures. Qualitative longitudinal researchers can have direct experience of this subsequent overwriting of the past when returning to interviewees after a period of

time has elapsed. In different types of interviews these narratives might be fragmented and partial, but they will always provide a link to the social positioning and experience of the storyteller in the social and historical context.

All of the approaches discussed here can be seen as eliciting a narrative from the interviewee, and the particular choice of interview type will relate to the aims and underlying framework of the research as delineated here, although in the literature there can be some blurring of terms. The participation of the researcher can also vary. S/he can stand apart, encouraging the interviewee to tell their story uninterrupted as in the BNIM method; s/he can share aspects of their own narrative with the interviewee, particularly if the specific research topic is about a shared experience, for example, being overseas postgraduate students in the United Kingdom (Gill and Goodson 2011). In this case the researcher shared her story with the participant and they had follow up conversations to collaborate on filling gaps in the narratives of each. The final step after drafting a narrative sketch involved participant and researcher locating individual stories in their wider historical context and social and cultural practices (162). So over time the approach in this study led to the third position where the researcher regards herself and the participant as co-producers of the narrative. All of the forms of interviews discussed here understand the interview as giving some level or kind of access to the social/historical as well as to the individual.

We have largely been talking about individual interviews so far, but the group interview is also an important route into participant's social worlds, particularly for illuminating group dynamics.

Focus group interviews

The term group interview can be used generically to describe any interview in which a group of people take part, but can be differentiated from the focus group interview. Many definitions of focus groups exist in the literature, but essentially they involve a small group of people engaging in collective discussion of a topic previously selected by the researcher. With their origins in market research, as a research technique in social science focus groups have elicited a range of criticisms, and gone in and out of fashion (Merton 1987; Morgan 1997; Morgan and Spanish 1984). Among advocates, appropriate group numbers can range widely and will depend

on the nature of the study and the specific situation of the group, but six to ten is often suggested in the literature. Many groups reported have performed better. Particular emphasis has been placed on the interaction that takes place between the participants, the group dynamics, and the insight and data that this can produce (Kitzinger 1994, 1995). Typically the researcher moderates, or runs the discussion, with a series of questions to guide its course. But a stimulus can provide a focus or starting point, for example, a photograph, film, vignette or game. If resources allow, a second researcher can be present making notes on the interactions, and identifying speakers as an aid to transcription and recognition of the participant in the recording. The use of video is associated with the topic and the underlying approach of the research, for example, video-recording children's interactions in the primary school.

The construction of focus groups is guided by the topic of research and research questions. They could be, for example, people at the same, or different, levels in the organization under study; people of the same age, class, gender; people of varying ages, classes and genders depending on the issue under study; naturally occurring groups – for example, occupational, or members of specific groups as in a rowing club. So members of the group might know each other, as in the latter, or know some or none of the group as in Janet Smithson's (2000) groups who were single-sex groups of people at similar life stages, that is, university students, in vocational training, young unemployed, in semi-skilled or professional jobs. Smithson draws attention to the public performance aspects of the groups and the moderator's constraints and guidance, particularly for consideration in analysis and interpretation. She also suggests that analysis should see accounts that are produced in different contexts as products of those contexts. These contexts include the micro-geographies of socio-spatial relations and meanings of space and place, discussed in Chapter 4.

Focus groups can be used alone, or in conjunction with other methods, and often individual and focus group interviews are used. Focus groups can be used at the start of a project, for generating ideas about the participants under research, since their interaction can give insight into participants' worldview, the language they use and their values and beliefs about a particular issue or topic, useful in design of the study. They can be used at the end, to get feedback on results or for assessment in an evaluation design. The rapidity with which data can be generated in focus (and other) groups is valued, but the logistical and practical issues of organizing

focus groups should not be overlooked, even when the participants might all be in one organization or location. See too Kate Stewart and Matthew Williams (2005) for a consideration of undertaking focus groups online.

Focus group interviews might be seen as more appropriate for non-sensitive, low-involvement topics, but many argue for their value in just such contexts, and they have been widely used, for example, in studying sexuality. Hannah Frith (2000) highlights some advantages provided by focus groups in this field. They can provide conditions in which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences, particularly shared experiences. Agreement between group members can help to build an elaborated picture of their views; disagreement may lead to participants defending their views and provide further explanation. Others illustrate their value in studies on violence against women and corruption in Tanzania (Jakobson 2012), and young women who have been victims of sexual abuse in Sweden (Overlien et al. 2005). Lori Peek and Alice Fothergill (2009) argue that focus groups can serve a social support or empowerment function, and illustrate the strength of the method used with marginalized, stigmatized or vulnerable participants. Pitching their discussion at a more general level, George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis (2005) review the history of focus groups, in particular in relation to pedagogy, politics and social enquiry, arguing that critical focus groups in these areas (and their articulation) in empowering participants can create the conditions for the emergence of a critical consciousness directed towards social change.

Focus group interviews can then be a useful method in a range of contexts. As ever, the decision to use the method is dependent on its appropriateness for the particular piece of research, its theoretical and philosophical approach and the research questions.

Couple interviews

We have suggested that the focus group is particularly valuable in giving access to social interaction, and a further type of interview offers access to a very particular type of interaction – between couples. The general form of this joint interview is when one researcher interviews two participants who usually know each other. This can happen when the interviewee asks for another person to be present, or perhaps someone in the setting intrudes upon the interview and stays (a parent when a child is being interviewed, a husband when a wife is the main interviewee). It can also be

appropriate in studies of illness and disability, in this case involving a carer and the care recipient. The more specific version is in a planned design and involves two people who are in a couple relationship, for example, husband and wife, heterosexual or same-sex partners (Bjornhold and Regland 2012; Doucet 1996; Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012; Weeks et al. 2001), as we describe for Doucet's household portrait technique in Chapter 5. The design often involves both couple interviews and individual interviews with the partners separately and can take place in the context of a family study, where children are also interviewed, with or without parent(s) (Backett 1990; Harden et al. 2010; Valentine 1999).

Margunn Bjornholt and Gunhild Farstad enter what they describe as a methodological controversy about 'whether couples should ideally be interviewed together or apart' (2012: 1) stressing the strengths of joint couple interviews. In their work on gender, work and care they found that the advantages included: solving the ethical problems of anonymity and consent among interviewees where people know each other; providing a 'common reflective space' (15) with corroborations, extensions and disagreements contributing to rich data; providing observation opportunities of behaviour and interaction; and practical advantages in organizing the interviews. They suggest that 'joint interviews with interviewees who share some kind of personal relationship should be recognized as a separate form of the qualitative research interview' (15). Brian Heaphy and Anna Einarsdottir who interviewed couples in civil partnerships both together and apart point out that the 'narratives are the product of the situated interactional context in which they emerge, and involve the negotiation of agency and constraint: put another way, they involve complex flows of power' (2012: 15). The context (and audience) includes the researcher, the partner, broader audiences for the research and the socio-cultural context. In their work the joint interviews produced couple and marriage stories and the individual interviews produced biographically embedded narratives of relating selves. The latter complicated and contextualized the couple stories, and enabled the researchers to make links between the relational scripts that were produced in interviews and flows of power in relational and socio-cultural contexts. Heaphy and Einarsdottir suggest that in the light of changing relational possibilities, including civil partnerships and gay marriage, but also more generally an interactionist methodology based on joint and individual interviews, orientation towards narrative analysis is an

appropriate research strategy for exploring the complexities of relational realities.

Mixing qualitative interviewing with other methods

The most usual mixing referred to in the context of social research is the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods, and we can see from our earlier discussions that this could raise issues about incompatibility of the underpinning philosophy and epistemology of these approaches. These issues have indeed provided the basis for continuing debate, rejection and/or support for mixing methods over many years, with heightened interest in recent decades with the growth and rapid expansion of the mixed methods field (Brannen 1992; Johnson et al. 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2010). Julia Brannen (2005) has suggested, like Alan Bryman (1988), that pragmatic or technical rather than philosophical assumptions drive much research in practice, and even when researchers plan to choose methods in line with the framing of a particular research question and its philosophical assumptions, in practice this might not occur. Jennifer Mason (2006: 9) argues for the importance of a qualitatively informed logic of explanation for theoretically driven mixed-methods research. She suggests that qualitative thinking is a useful starting point for thinking outside the box, and ultimately her preferred approach involves multi-dimensional research strategies that transcend or subvert the qualitative–quantitative divide.

But it is also possible to mix methods within qualitative and quantitative approaches (Williams and Vogt 2011). As we have seen, qualitative studies very often combine several qualitative methods, and ethnography is a typical case in this regard. This mixing can involve qualitative interviews with other types of qualitative methods, life history or different versions of narrative interviews combined with documentary analysis, for example. Different types of interviews can be used in the same study, individual interviews combined with focus groups, face-to-face with telephone or email interviews, and all combined with different types of documentary and archival data.

In mixing across paradigms, there is considerable discussion about which takes priority, qualitative or quantitative, and models have been developed with one or the other prioritized (Brannen 2005). Others argue

for qualitative and quantitative data to be given equal weight in a study. Jo Moran-Ellis and colleagues (2006, 2007; Cronin et al. 2008) provide an example of mixing methods across paradigms, using quantitative data, and multiple qualitative methods (different types of interviews) in five small studies exploring the understandings, experiences and management of everyday vulnerability in the lives of a wide range of people living in 'Hilltown'. The studies were methodologically linked but discrete in terms of data. Vulnerability could occur at the area level (statistics on risk of crime, flooding, etc.), the spatial environment, the community, the household and the individual. The researchers' objective was to integrate the methods, arguing that this approach gives equal weight to the contribution of different methods in understanding the phenomenon under study, each data set contributing to answering the research question in their own paradigmatic terms. They also mixed within paradigm, in using different types of qualitative interviews in four of the studies. These produced visual data through photo-elicitation and video interviews focused on neighbourhood; narrative data from in-depth interviews with homeless participants; household interviews, including individual interviews with all household members, which could be aggregated to the household level; and individual in-depth interviews with participants who lived alone. They developed a model to accomplish integration at the level of analysis, 'following the thread', e.g. of 'physical safety', through each dataset).

Sheila Henderson and colleagues (2007) used focus group and individual depth interviews in the first phase of a qualitative longitudinal study of young people's values and transitions (McGrellis et al. 2000). They also employed a survey of youth values (1,800 young people), using some questions as in the European Values Survey (Ashford and Timms 1992), to compare their views with adults, provide background information about youth values and material on young people's concerns to draw on in designing the subsequent focus groups (62), which in turn contributed to the content of depth interviews (57) with selected young people. The different elements were integrated at the level of research design and, as with Moran and colleagues, equal weight given to each element. They were initially analysed separately, each contributing to specific research questions pursued in the research, and then integrated in analyses related to other research questions (Henderson et al. 2007).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have detailed forms of specific qualitative interviews that elicit narratives, biographies, life stories and histories from participants, linking them to their philosophical grounding. We have discussed the qualitative interview in the context of mixing methods. In the following chapter we build on this discussion of types of interviews to consider the different contexts in which any of them might occur, with particular reference to space and place.