6 What are the practicalities involved in conducting qualitative interviews?

Introduction

In this chapter we look at some of the practical issues involved in preparation for and during qualitative interviews. In other words, we address the practicalities of qualitative interviewing practice – the routine and taken-for-granted processes and activities that are part of the generation of interviews; what interviewers 'do'.

We cover preparation for interviews in terms of how many interviews need to be conducted, gaining informed consent for participation in interviews and equipment for recording interviews. And we deal with the mundane but crucial social interaction of conducting interviews: how to start an interview, how to listen and ask questions during an interview and how to finish an interview.

How many interviews?

Both students and more experienced researchers can be preoccupied with the question of how many interviews they should do when they are conducting a piece of qualitative empirical work. The topic frequently forms a thread on online discussion forums such as 'Methodspace' and 'Postgraduate Forum'.

The concept of saturation is often mooted as the ideal guide for the number of interviews to be conducted, especially where researchers are taking an interpretive, grounded approach. That is, qualitative interviewers should continue sampling and identifying cases until their interviewees are not telling them anything that they have not heard before. Thus rather than the number in a sample being representative of types of people as in quantitative research, in qualitative research it is the range of meanings that should determine numbers of interviewees in a study. Using data saturation is challenging for many qualitative interviewers, however, because

sampling, data collection and data analysis have to be combined, and it is not possible to specify how many interviews are necessary in advance. This can be a problem where project proposals may require researchers to state a number.

A collection and review of advice from noted qualitative interview methodologists on the question of 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' finds the recurring answer 'it depends' (Baker and Edwards 2012). The guidance offered by contributors as to what the number of interviews depends upon includes the following:

- *Epistemological and methodological questions* about the nature and purpose of the research: whether the focus of the objectives and of analysis is on commonality or difference or uniqueness or complexity or comparison or instances. A single case is sufficient if it is unique and not comparable, or to establish if something is possible, for example, but greater numbers are required to compare particular groups. A key issue is the ability to build a convincing narrative based on rich detail and complexity.
- *Practical issues* such as the level of degree, the time and finances available and institutional committee requirements. How much time is available to find and keep in contact with participants and complete the project, for example? And will research ethics committees or upgrade boards have a view on appropriate numbers?
- Linked to the last point, and cutting across epistemology and practicality, the judgement of the *epistemic community* in which a student or researcher wishes to be or is located is an issue. What size of sample or number of cases will satisfy mentors, peers and readers, and forestall critics? For example, one interview is considered valid evidence in oral history.

Some contributors to the collection do provide rough numbers to guide those who are desperate: 1 (Passerini; Sandino); between 12 and 60, with a mean of 30 (Adler and Adler); 20 for masters and 50 for doctoral theses (Ragin). Other examples of recommendations regarding how many interviews to conduct are Greg Guest and colleagues' (2006) argument that data theme saturation is achieved after 12 interviews, and Janice Morse's (1994) recommendation of a sample of 6 for phenomenological studies and 30–50 for grounded studies. This overall diversity in estimates of how many qualitative interviews are enough reveals the importance of the

epistemological and methodological, practical and epistemic community issues that comprise the 'it depends' of the answer.

Information leaflets and consent forms

Most institutions require staff and students to gain ethical approval for their research before they begin their studies, and most social researchers regard fully informing potential participants about the research project in which they are being asked to participate, and gaining their informed – and often written – consent, as ethical good practice. For example, the research ethics committee of one of our institutions advises that information leaflets cover what the research is about, why the person has been chosen, what taking part in the study will involve, any benefits or risks involved, promises of confidentiality and anonymity, rights to withdraw, who to approach for further information or to complain to about the research process and so on. Similarly it is recommended that the consent form consists of a series of tick box statements about having read the information sheet, agreeing for their data to be used and stored for research purposes and their participation being voluntary, which the potential participant should then sign.

All social research is subject to debates about who can and should consent in the case of children or adults with learning disabilities; questions about whether consent can ever be *fully* informed where researchers themselves are not always sure what the outcomes and uses of the data may be before they start; discussion about whether consent is the one-off process implied by ethics committee processes; and concerns that the bureaucratization of consent procedures may shift research participation towards those who are comfortable with bureaucracy and signing forms (Edwards and Mauthner 2012; Miller and Boulton 2007; Wiles et al. 2005). Nonetheless, gaining informed consent in qualitative research also raises method-specific ethical issues in relation to interviewing.

In the case of interviews, potential interviewees usually are briefed about the purpose and process of the interview and how long it is estimated that it will last when invited to participate. Once they have agreed to participate, they are asked again for their consent at the start of the interview. Some, however, have concerns that being too specific about the topic and questions to be addressed in the interview may shape interviewees' answers in particular ways that may not be helpful to the research endeavour (Kvale

1996; see later for further discussion on this point). Certainly if you are interested in, for example, class prejudice among the elite it may not be a good idea to explain your research to them in those terms. Further, even if interviewees do have the research explained to them as fully as possible, consent can not be completely informed prior to an interview given that interviews may involve greater disclosure and revelation than both interviewee and interviewer anticipated or intended (Miller and Boulton 2007).

A more fundamental challenge is to be found in arguments that the qualitative interviewing process goes beyond explaining the substantive topic of the research and the type of questions to be asked in information leaflets because the interviewer him/herself is implicated in the process (unless an approach is adopted where the idea is to minimize the role of the interviewer as far as possible – see Chapter 2). Steiner Kvale points out the following in qualitative interviews:

> The person of the researcher is critical for the quality of the scientific knowledge and for the soundness of ethical decisions in any research project. By interviewing, the importance of the researcher as a person is magnified because the interviewer him-or herself is the main instrument for obtaining knowledge. (1996: 117)

Indeed, given Kvale's psychoanalytic philosophical approach (see Chapter 2), he is concerned with qualitative interviewers thinking through whether or not their interviews will touch on therapeutic issues (and if so what precautions can be taken), and issues of over-identification with interviewees.

Tina Miller and Mary Boulton take such ideas further, though, to argue that standardized regulation of consent procedures are increasingly ill-fitting for qualitative interviews conducted in a complex and fluid social world. Rather, they say, individual qualitative interviews need to be dealt with on their own terms, where the researchers should

> document the *process* of consent – the invitation, the response from the participant, the questions asked and answers given, the negotiation of dates and times of interviews, and so on. This is potentially a much more appropriate and useful way of working towards (and documenting) participation in research which is both informed and voluntary than asking participants to sign a consent form at the start of study. (2007: 2209, original emphasis)

In the case of qualitative longitudinal research, the fact that consent is a process is more apparent since it must be negotiated afresh for each research encounter.

Recording equipment

In qualitative interviews, words are the main currency of the interviewing and subject to analytic interpretation; audio recording of interview talk has become standard. Audio recording interviewees may be impossible or inappropriate in some situations however, and sometimes interviewees may feel self-conscious about having their words recorded, or indeed the audio recorder may not work (or the interviewer cannot work it!). Interviews can still go ahead in these circumstances, with the interviewer making notes on what the interviewee says: recording talk in written note form.

Audio recording qualitative interviews can be useful both during the interview itself and afterwards. During the interview, recording the interview means that qualitative interviewers can focus on listening, probing and following up (see later) and maintaining eye contact with their interviewee. It can be quite distracting to have to keep making notes during the interview. But this is not to say that recording devices alleviate distractions from the talk of the interview. Interviewers can find themselves constantly checking whether or not their recording device is still working, if the microphones remain positioned closely enough to the interviewee/s to pick up their words clearly and monitoring the level of background noise (you may be able to focus on hearing the interviewee and mentally block out the music being played in the next room but the recorder will not).

As Ray Lee (2004) describes in his discussion of the history of the interview in relation to technological development and the implications for producing knowledge, as technologies develop, so do the means of recording qualitative interviews – from pen and paper notes and remembered quotes written up after the interview, to bulky reel-to-reel tape recorders, to portable cassette recorders, to mini digital audio recorders, and also video recorders. Sound quality has also improved. Since technology and the equipment available changes so rapidly, we do not cover specific devices here, but a useful list of factors to consider is provided in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1 Factors to consider in selecting digital audio recording equipment (Stockdale 2002).

- **Cost** (including batteries and media if applicable). Cheap recorders may mean increased transcription costs. Are batteries rechargeable?
- **Audio quality**. External microphones (mic-in jacks) are better than internal.
- **Ease of use**.
- **Portability** and **intrusiveness** in an interview situation.
- **Ruggedness** and **reliability** of recorder and media.
- Audio **recording format** and computer transfer.
- Length of **recording time** that media and batteries allow.
- **Information display** and control. Is the recording level displayed and can the recording level be manually adjusted? Is the remaining battery power and record time displayed?
- **Copy protection**. Is this implemented and what limitations does it impose?

Kirstin Luker explains that recording interviewees' words means that the metaphors or expressions and their emotional timbre and tone of voice during the interview – the way people say what they say – remains accessible long after the interview itself: 'Months and even years into a study, when I've finally figured out what the elements of my categories are, I go back to my very first interviews, and there they are, although my ear was not sophisticated enough to recognize them at the time' (2008: 174). And when it comes to writing up research, recording what an interviewee has said means that researchers can provide verbatim quotes.

This access to the talk of the interview through recording is not necessarily an unmitigated good. Some argue that the improvement of quality in interview recording devices can give a sense of being present at the interview later; a form of realist innocence (Ashmore and Reed 2002). Les Back muses on the recording of interviews as both enabling and limiting:

> Enabling in the sense that it allowed for the voices of people to be faithfully transcribed with accuracy. Paradoxically, the fact that the recorder captured the voice and the precise detail of what informants said meant that social researchers have become less attentive as observers. The tacit belief that the researcher needed merely to attend to what was said has limited the forms of empirical documentation. (2010: 23, 24)

Thus Back warns that qualitative interviewers need to think carefully about the analytic status they bestow on recorded accounts, and not fall into mistaking the socially shaped interview performance for a capture of the real and authentic (see also Atkinson and Silverman 1997, on the structure of the 'interview society' discussed in Chapters 1 and 2).

Starting an interview

You have your interviewee, consent has been gained, the recording device is working and the qualitative interview can start. But how is it best to begin? Luker recommends what she refers to as 'the hook' to start the conversation about the topic of research. The 'hook' is how she explains the study she is conducting to the people she is about to interview – yet again:

> Yes, I know that you probably used your hook when you talked to your interviewees on the phone to get them to agree to be interviewed; you may well have told them the hook when you first wrote them a letter asking if you could interview them; and there may even be a version of your hook in a consent form . . . But you can never tell people too often what your study is about, why you are interested in it, why *they* should be interested in it, and most important, why the person you are interviewing is *the* key person needed to help you understand this puzzling case that you are studying with such intensity. (2008: 171).

Once the stage for the interview has been set through the hook, qualitative interviewers often like to ask if the interviewee has any questions about the interview before they begin. They then open the interview 'proper' by asking general, broad questions of the 'grand tour' type mentioned in Chapter 5, for example: 'Please tell me how you started skydiving.' As the interview progresses, the questions gradually focus on more specific and targeted enquiries.

Listening, probing and following up

A qualitative interview is often thought about in terms of the interviewer asking questions and the interviewee responding to them. In this respect, Luker has the idea of 'turn signals' between different aspects of the

research topic that comprise the interview, which alert the interviewee that you are shifting from the issue that you have just asked them about and they are currently discussing, to another area of the research topic. An example that she gives is: 'Up to now, we've been talking about your childhood. Now I'd like to ask you about [fill in the blank]' (2008: 170–171). But interviewees are not just passive respondents, and interviewers have to fit themselves around what the interviewee is telling them and respond in turn with appropriate questions that fit into the 'natural' flow of the discussion.

Indeed, overall the process of qualitative interviews requires a lot of concentration and effort on the part of the interviewer. As Jennifer Mason (2002: 45) explains:

> At any one time you may be: listening to what the interviewee(s) is or are currently saying and trying to interpret what they mean; trying to work out whether what they are saying has any bearing on 'what you really want to know'; trying to think in new and creative ways about 'what you really want to know'; trying to pick up on any changes in our interviewees' demeanour and interpret these . . . ; reflecting on something they said 20 minutes ago; formulating an appropriate response to what they are currently saying; formulating the next question which might involve shifting the interview onto new terrain; keeping an eye on your watch and making decisions about depth and breadth given your time limit.

Listening and attending to what interviewees are saying is a crucial skill for a qualitative interviewer as part of the social interaction of interviews. It involves being attuned, alert and attentive to what the interviewee is telling you, or even not telling you. Listening well is a qualitative interviewing skill that often goes unremarked in favour of a focus on how to ask questions, yet it is the foundation of being able to respond to what the interviewee is saying, and able to probe and follow up their answers to your questions effectively and sensitively.

Probing and following up in interviews are means by which qualitative interviewers attempt to get an interviewee to open up, provide more information, elaborate and expand on what they have said. It is difficult to plan probes in advance because they are responses to what an interviewee is saying at the time in the interview, but it is useful to have a sense of the range of probes that a qualitative interviewer can use. H. Russell Bernard

(2000) delineates seven ways of probing during qualitative interviews, most of which require prudent and well-judged use at different points within a single interview:

- *Silence*. This probe involves being quiet once an interviewee appears to have finished answering a question, perhaps nodding your head, and waiting for an interviewee to continue and add more to the topic they were discussing. It provides interviewees with time to reflect. Allowing silence to endure in an interview can be very difficult for interviewers, but effective if used sparingly.
- *Echo*. This is where an interviewer repeats the last point that the interviewee has said, and is useful especially when they have been describing a process or event. Bernard asserts that this probe shows the interviewee that you have understood what they have said so far and encourages them to continue and expand.
- *Uh-huh*. Saying 'yes', 'I see', 'right' and so on as an interviewee talks affirms what the interviewee has said. It can act rather like silent nodding of your head.
- *Tell-me-more*. After an interviewee has answered a question, this probe encourages interviewees to expand and go further through follow on questions along the lines of 'Why do you feel like that about it?' 'Can you tell me more about that?' 'What did you mean when you said . . .?' 'What did you do then?' etc.
- *Long question*. These sorts of probes can help at the beginning of interviews in the grand tour mould. Bernard gives the example of when he asked sponge divers he was interviewing, 'Tell me about diving into really deep water. What do you do to get ready, and how do you ascend and descend? What's it like down there?' (2000: 198). He also says that threatening or sensitive questions (he gives the example of condom use) can benefit from a long rambling run up to them.
- *Leading*. These are directive probes – though as Bernard points out, any question leads in an interview. The idea of asking leading questions is often treated in introductory methods textbooks for students as if it were an anathema, with concerns about 'bias'. The assumption is that if you ask a leading question then the answer you get will be produced by the way the question is put: such as 'do you think that this is a really bad way of behaving?' Qualitative interviewers with experience, however, know that this is rarely the case. Interviewees

are perfectly capable of telling you that you do not understand what they mean; that actually they don't 'think it's a really bad way of behaving' at all.

- *Baiting.* Bernard says this sort of probe is a 'phased assertion' in which the interviewer acts as if they already know something. He contends that either people then feel comfortable opening up or are likely to correct you if they think that you have got the wrong idea.

Bernard also provides advice on dealing with interviewees who either say too much or too little during an interview. 'Verbal' interviewees are very likely to go off at a tangent as they tell you much more than you need to know for your research topic. He recommends 'graceful' interruption and moving the interview back on track. 'Non-verbal' interviewees provide monosyllabic or 'don't know' responses to questions. As Bernard says: '[S]ometimes you can get beyond this, sometimes you can't.' If you can't, then it is best to 'cut your losses' (2000: 200). Indeed, often qualitative interviewers can feel themselves to be failures if they have to give up on an interview but this is not the case. There is little to be gained by continuing on for the sake of it and ending an interview may sometimes be the wisest course of action.

Finishing an interview

By the time an interview ends, qualitative interviewers will probably have spent an hour or more asking their interviewee/s questions and the interviewees will have been telling them about their lives. This can create a sort of intimate link that is broken suddenly when the interview ends. Luker (2008) discusses the 'cool down' to 'finish up and let go of the interview' that enable both interviewer and interviewee to detach themselves from each other gradually, through final questions that focus on the future or ask the interviewee to review their experience or identify the most important thing that they feel they have discussed or mentioned It is also important finally to thank the interviewee. Luker warns, however, that it might be an idea to keep your audio recorder handy at this point because sometimes interviewees can start opening up again with fascinating information just after the recorder has been turned off. Such a practice, however, has ethical dimensions (Wiles 2012) – does the participant need to consent explicitly

to the further recording of their words after they may assume that the research interview has finished.

The discussion of practicalities in this chapter may seem rather mechanistic at points (e.g. probes such as repeat the point the interviewee makes). Interviews can be situations of visceral dynamics, however, involving power and emotions – as we discuss in the next chapter.