4

Qualitative Interviewing

In this chapter and the following two, we shift the focus onto particular methods for generating qualitative data. This chapter deals with what is probably the most commonly used method in qualitative research: interviewing. The term 'qualitative interviewing' is usually intended to refer to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. Sometimes, the term 'unstructured' interviewing is used, although I consider this to be a misnomer because no research interview can be completely lacking in some form of structure, as I shall discuss later. At the other end of the continuum, open-ended questions in an otherwise structured interview schedule are sometimes assumed to constitute qualitative interviewing. However, I consider this also to be a misnomer, because the logic, rationale and approach used in such interviews are derived from survey, not qualitative, methodology.

Qualitative or semi-structured interviewing has its own character, and despite some quite large variations in style and tradition, I suggest that all such interviewing has the following core features in common:

1 The interactional exchange of dialogue. Qualitative interviews may involve one-to-one interactions, larger group interviews or focus groups, and may take place face to face, or over the telephone or the Internet, for example.
2 A relatively informal style, for example, with the appearance in face-to-face interviewing of a conversation or discussion rather than a formal question and answer format. Burgess's term 'conversations with a purpose' captures this rather well (1984: 102).
3 A thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach, for example, where the researcher has a number of topics, themes or issues which they wish to cover, or a set of starting points for discussion, or specific 'stories' which they wish the interviewee to tell. The researcher is unlikely to have a complete and sequenced script of questions, and most qualitative interviews are designed to have a fluid and flexible structure, and to allow researcher and interviewee(s) to develop unexpected themes.
4 Most qualitative research operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual, and therefore the job of the interview is to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced. For some that extends into the assumption that data and knowledge are constructed through dialogic (and other) interaction during the interview. Most would agree that knowledge is at the very least reconstructed, rather than facts simply being

reported, in interview settings. According to this perspective, meanings and understandings are created in an interaction, which is effectively a co-production, involving researcher and interviewees. Qualitative interviewing therefore tends to be seen as involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the excavation of it (Mason, 2002). See also Kvale (1996: 3).

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING: LOGIC AND RATIONALE

Why might I want to use interviews?

Why might I want to speak to or interact with people to generate data in order to answer my research questions?

Why might I want to use *qualitative* interviewing?

Why this style and approach rather than a more structured form of interviewing or questionnaire?

What are the shortcomings of qualitative interviewing for generating data which will help me to answer my research questions?

Interviews are one of the most commonly recognized forms of qualitative research method. Perhaps for this reason, it is not uncommon for a researcher to *assume* that their study will involve qualitative interviews, without spending time working out why it should, what they expect to get out of these methods, and whether any other methods might be more appropriate or provide a useful complement? In my discussion of research design in Chapter 2, I suggested that you should ask yourself questions about why you might wish to use *any* method, rather than assuming too soon in the process that you have made the right choices. For qualitative interviewing, the questions you should ask yourself are summarized above. Your answers to these questions are likely to be quite complex and of course need to be closely related to your research questions (see Chapter 2). However, let us consider some possible reasons why you might wish to use qualitative interviewing as a method.

1 If you choose qualitative interviewing it may be because your *ontological* position suggests that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which your research questions are designed to explore. Perhaps most importantly, you will be interested in their perceptions. This might, for example, constitute a 'humanistic' approach (Plummer, 2001) or you may be interested in the constitution of language, or in discursive constructions of the social or the self (Wetherell et al., 2001).

2 If you have chosen to use qualitative interviewing you should have an *epistemological* position which allows that a legitimate or meaningful way to generate data

on these ontological properties is to talk interactively with people, to ask them questions, to listen to them, to gain access to their accounts and articulations, or to analyse their use of language and construction of discourse. You should, however, be fully aware of the epistemological implications of this approach, and you will have to be quite self-critical in judging how well interviews can provide all of this. For example, if you are interested in people's experiences or understandings of violence in their daily lives, these can only be *constructed or reconstructed* in interviews, and of course the interview method is heavily dependent on people's capacities to verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember. It is important not to treat understandings generated in an interview as though they are a direct reflection of understandings 'already existing' outside of the interview interaction, as though you were simply excavating facts.

3 As I have suggested, most qualitative researchers view knowledge as situational, and the interview is just as much a social situation as is any other interaction. This is one reason why you might choose to conduct *qualitative* interviews, rather than a social survey. If your view is that knowledge and evidence are contextual, situational and interactional, then you will wish to ensure that the interview itself is as contextual as possible in the sense that it draws upon or 'conjures up', as fully as possible, the social experiences or processes which you are interested in exploring. So, for example, instead of asking abstract questions, or taking a 'one-size-fits-all' structured approach, you may want to give maximum opportunity for the construction of contextual knowledge by focusing on relevant specifics in each interview. This might involve asking people to talk through specific experiences in their lives rather than, for example, asking them what they 'would do', or what they have 'generally done', under certain circumstances. It might involve trying to ascertain people's reasonings or judgements in certain areas by focusing on events and situations which have taken place in their lives, rather than simply asking them their views about x, y, or z. Or it could involve providing the means for them to 'free associate' so that you can get a sense of how issues and concerns are connected in their perceptions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The point really is that if what you are interested in, ontologically and epistemologically speaking, is for example a social process which operates situationally, then you will need to ask situational rather than abstract questions.

You might want to take this further by stimulating interaction of particular kinds through group or focus group interviews, where you guide group discussion through a particular set of topics so that you can observe how situational interactions take place, and how issues are conceptualized, worked out and negotiated in those contexts. In any case, if you are seeking to maximize the interview's ability to produce situated knowledge about processes and experiences 'outside' or indeed 'inside' it, you will need to be flexible and sensitive to the specific dynamics of each interaction, so that you and your interviewee(s) are, effectively, tailor-making each one on the spot. You will want to take cues from the ongoing dialogue with your interviewees about what to ask them next, rather than to go into the interaction entirely pre-scripted. This will enable you to follow up their specific responses along lines which are peculiarly relevant to them and their context, and which you could not have anticipated in advance, in a highly *organic* way. You may wish to follow the narrative or sequence provided by the interviewee.

4 Whichever of these apply, you are likely to be making certain kinds of epistemological assumptions about the *interaction* between yourself as researcher and those you are researching, which suggest to you that semi-structured interviewing is appropriate. These assumptions will be very different to those which form the basis for structured interviews or questionnaires, which are very often designed to minimize 'bias' through the standardization of the questions which are asked, as well as the way they are asked, and the interviewers who ask them. The underlying assumption here is that bias can be eradicated or controlled. Once bias is 'eradicated', a stimulus-response model is used, so that if you standardize the stimulus, then any variations seen in responses will be a true measure, rather than a product of your methods. But if interviews are always social interactions, however structured or unstructured the researcher tries to make them, then it is inappropriate to see social interaction as 'bias' which can potentially be eradicated. From this point of view you cannot separate the interview from the social interaction in which it was produced (because you cannot separate 'facts' from contexts), and you should not try to do so. It is better to try to understand the complexities of the interaction, and to try to develop a sense of *how* context and situation work in interview interactions, than to pretend that key dimensions can be controlled for.

   At the very least this means that you will probably reject the idea that standardization of questions and format ensures that interviewees will hear and interpret the questions in standardized ways, or that their articulations genuinely express standardized meanings. If this is your approach, you need nevertheless to ask yourself to what extent it is ever possible fully to understand the complexities of the interview interaction.

5 You may choose qualitative interviews if your view of the ways in which *social explanations and arguments* can be constructed lays emphasis on depth, nuance, complexity and roundedness in data, rather than the kind of broad surveys of surface patterns which, for example, questionnaires might provide. So, for example, you may wish to explain something about social process, social change, social organization, social meaning, and you will argue that this requires an understanding of depth and complexity in, say, people's situated or contextual accounts and experiences, rather than a more superficial analysis of surface comparability between accounts of large numbers of people. In other words, you may wish to achieve depth and roundedness of understanding in these areas, rather than a broad understanding of surface patterns. This is likely to mean that you take a distinctive approach to comparison, to analysing data and to the construction of arguments. You may aspire to the generation of cross-contextual generalities (see Chapter 9).

   So, for example, you are unlikely to rely heavily on quantifying, although you may want to count or enumerate certain elements of your data. Your approach to making analytical comparisons in your data set will certainly not depend upon having asked all interviewees the same set of questions. You will assume that in order to achieve data which are comparable in key ways, far from giving everyone standardized questions in a standardized form, you may well need to ask different questions of your different interviewees – precisely so that you can generate situated knowledge with all of your interviewees. Your point of comparison is therefore unlikely to be straightforwardly sited at the level of differences or similarities in people's answers to the same set of questions. What and where your

points of comparison are, must depend upon your research questions, and the analytical principles you propose to use or develop, but they are likely to be conceptual rather than straightforwardly empirical, and 'inductively' generated through your data (see Chapter 9 for a further discussion). You are likely to want to identify interpretive themes in your data upon which to construct your analysis and your argument. Nevertheless, you will need to engage with the question of how you ensure that you are generating data which will allow appropriate comparisons to be made.

6 If you choose qualitative interviewing, you are highly likely to conceptualize yourself as *active and reflexive* in the process of data generation, and seek to examine this rather than aspiring to be a neutral data collector. While most qualitative researchers do have this kind of aspiration, it is important not to under-estimate the reflexive challenge posed by analysing your own role within the research process.

7 Rather more pragmatically, you may choose qualitative interviewing because *the data you want may not feasibly be available in any other form,* so that asking people for their accounts, talking and listening to them, and so on, is the only way to generate the kind of data you want. For example, records of existing research, documents, letters, diaries, and so on, which you might use if you could, may not exist, or perhaps direct observation of phenomena in which you are interested is simply impossible. If this is your reason for using qualitative interviews, then you need to consider how good a substitute for your preferred method is a 'conversation with a purpose' of this kind. Does it really get at what you are interested in?

8 You may indeed wish to use qualitative interviewing as just *one of several methods* to explore your research questions. Qualitative interviews may add an additional dimension, or may help you to approach your questions from a different angle, or in greater depth, and so on (see Chapter 2). You may be attempting some form of methodological triangulation, where you are using interviewing in tandem with another method to see how well they corroborate each other, although as suggested in Chapter 2, you should not expect different methods to produce the same kind of data, or to address the same research questions. For example, you may interview selected participants from a meeting for which you have a set of minutes, so that you can make comparisons between the different types of experience and account of the same event and set of interactions.

9 You may choose qualitative interviewing because you have a particular view of *research ethics and politics* which means that you believe interviewees should be given more freedom in and control of the interview situation than is permitted with 'structured' approaches. You may want to suggest that qualitative interviewing is more likely to generate a fairer and fuller representation of the interviewees' perspectives. You may believe that you, as interviewer, should be more responsive in the interview interaction than a structured format allows, for example, answering questions the interviewee may ask, giving information, opinions, support. Or you may feel it is important to try to make sure your interviewees enjoy being interviewed, and your view may be that qualitative interviewing is the best way to achieve that. Nevertheless, you should ask yourself to

what extent qualitative interviewing achieves your ethical goals. For example, does it give interviewees more control, does it inevitably represent their perspectives more fully and fairly, is it really enjoyable? It may not necessarily be the 'best' moral choice, nor a sound intellectual one, to try to turn the interview into a 'therapeutic encounter'.

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Good qualitative interviewing is hard, creative, active work (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). It is a much more complex and exhausting task to plan and carry out a qualitative interview than, for example, to develop and use a structured questionnaire for asking a set of predetermined questions. In that sense the informal and conversational style of this form of interviewing belies a much more rigorous set of activities. However, it can be exhilarating and highly enjoyable.

To begin with, qualitative interviews require a great deal of planning. For the moment I am leaving aside the question of deciding whom you want to interview and how you gain access to them, since this is dealt with in the discussion of sampling and selection in Chapter 7. What I mean by planning, therefore, is all the other work which goes into preparing for your interviews. Just because you are planning a loosely structured or semi-structured interview which is going to feel (to the interviewee) like a 'conversation with a purpose', this does not mean that you do not need to engage in some detailed and rigorous planning. In fact, in my view qualitative interviewers have to work particularly hard on the structure and flow of the interview. However, given that most qualitative researchers will find the idea of preparing this in advance in the form of a structured sequence of questions unsatisfactory (for the reasons outlined above), they must use alternative mechanisms and must develop a rather specific set of intellectual and social skills. I do not think the importance of these, and the challenge of acquiring them, can be over-estimated.

In the absence of a predesigned set and sequence of questions, the qualitative interviewer has to prepare themselves to be able to 'think on their feet' in the interview itself. They have to do this quickly, effectively, coherently and in ways which are consistent with their research questions. They need to be able to ensure that the interview interaction actually does generate relevant data, which means simultaneously orchestrating the intellectual and social dynamics of the situation. It is all too easy to orchestrate a pleasant social encounter whose content has little or no bearing on the intellectual puzzle which the research is designed to address. Alternatively, too much attention on asking 'the right' questions in 'the right' order can result in a peculiar social dynamic which may be equally unsatisfactory. A qualitative interviewer has to be ready to make on-the-spot decisions about the content and sequence of the interview as it progresses, and to keep everything running smoothly.

I think it is useful in preparing for and conducting qualitative interviews if you ask yourself a range of questions about the substance and style, scope and sequence of your interview questions.

Conducting Interviews which will Generate Meaningful Knowledge

Am I collecting data (excavation)?

Am I generating data (construction)?

What should be the content of my interviews, and the substance of my questions?

How do I prepare my questions, and ensure the interviews are focused, without writing and following a script?

I have already suggested that qualitative interviewing usually operates with the model that knowledge is constructed rather than straightforwardly excavated. However, it is wise to think through the implications of your take on this issue for the interview questions which you will ask. What do you expect of them? If the interview is intended to generate situated knowledge, how can you ensure that the appropriate context is brought into play? As I suggested above, this is likely to involve asking questions which focus more on lived experiences than hypothetical scenarios or abstract concepts, although you may wish to include some such questions also. Do you need anything else to help you to understand the relevant context? Do you want your interviewees to think something through or work it out during the interview? If so, how can you provide them with the necessary materials to be able to do this?

A great deal of intellectual preparation is required for qualitative interviews, and you will also need to plan for and handle the social dynamics. As I have pointed out, you are highly unlikely to find yourself producing a structured list of questions which you can simply reel off in the interview. Instead, you need to develop a mechanism to help you to devise the intellectual skills you will need to make on-the-spot decisions about the substance and style, scope and sequence of questions outlined above, for while the decisions have to be made and acted upon quickly, they should nevertheless be strategic and considered rather than *ad hoc* and idiosyncratic. I have emphasized the need to ground your decisions in your intellectual puzzle and your research questions. Although this does not mean that you should produce a rigid interview structure in advance, or that you must try to anticipate everything in which you are likely to be interested, it does mean that you need to be clear enough about recognizing what you might be interested in to be able to judge what to pursue in the interviews.

There may be qualitative researchers who will disagree with me here, because they wish to emphasize the possibilities for exploratory and unstructured data *collection*. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, my view is that, whether or not they acknowledge it, all researchers *do* have ontological and epistemological positions which get activated or expressed in their research decisions and judgements, and I now want to add that all researchers do make decisions and judgements in

the conduct of their qualitative interviews. Therefore, I do not think it is possible to gather data in a wholly unstructured way through a qualitative interview, because the decisions and judgements the researcher makes give some form of structure and purpose to the data generation process.

Given this, my concern is with the kinds of procedures for asking interview questions which qualitative researchers can use to help them make sensible, intellectually compelling and systematic interpretations and judgements. Whatever technical system you develop and use to do this, you will need to make sure that it is one which has the effect of firmly entrenching your research questions and your intellectual puzzle in your interview practice, because it will usually be on the basis of fast mental reasoning, rather than slow reference to notes and reminders, that you will make important decisions. Although you are likely to take written or visual notes and aids into your interviews to supplement your thinking, you will inevitably want to make many decisions and judgements quickly, without always referring to your notes.

Figure 4.1 gives an example of a procedure which you might use to prepare and plan intellectually for qualitative interviews. It is not intended to be rigid or prescriptive, but instead to give a sense of the kind of intellectual work that needs to be done in advance of interviews, and suggestions about how this might be achieved. It uses a worked example based on a real piece of research which I introduced in Chapter 2, entitled 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships'. Figure 4.2 provides a simplified overview of the same procedure.

Step 1
List or assemble the 'big' research questions which the study is designed to explore.

Example of one of the 'big' research questions in the Inheritance project
1 *How do families handle issues of inheritance?*

Step 2
Break down or subdivide the big research questions into 'mini'-research questions. The links between the big questions and the subcategories of them – the mini questions – should be clearly expressed, for example, by using corresponding numbers or codes, or by laying the two sets of questions out in a chart, or by using cross-referenced index cards. It is possible to establish a perfectly workable manual system, or you can use a computer graphics package and/or database to help you.

Example of mini-research questions which are subcategories of the big research question given above
1 (a) *Are negotiations about inheritance treated as part of a wider set of negotiations about support in families? Or is inheritance treated as a totally separate matter?*
(b) *Do people in any way take into account the possibility of inheritance in formulating their own life plans?*
(c) *Is a clear distinction maintained between 'blood relatives' and 'in-laws' in the process of negotiating inheritance?*

Figure 4.1 *Example of planning and preparation for qualitative interviewing*

Figure 4.1 (cont.) *Example of planning and preparation for qualitative interviewing*

Step 3

For each mini-research question, start to develop ideas about how it might be possible to get at the relevant issues in an interview situation. This means converting your big and mini examples of 'what you really want to know' into possible interview topics, and thinking of some possible questions – in terms of their substance, and the style you might use to ask them. These will not form a rigid 'script' for you to use in the interview, but the process of developing possible topics and questions will get you thinking in ways appropriate to an interview interaction. Again, make sure that the links between this set of questions and the other two (that is the big and mini-research questions) are clearly expressed.

Examples of interview topics and questions related to mini-research questions

1 *(a) Family inheritance history, and history of other family support – what happened in practice in relation to specific events and instances? How did people decide what was the most appropriate course of action?*

(b) Knowledge of the inheritance plans, content of wills, etc., of other family members. Have people thought about inheritance at all? Have they made wills? Do people have life plans, for example, do people have a sense of what they will be doing, where living, and so on, in 5 or 10 or 20 years' time? How were these plans arrived at?

(c) Ascertain composition of family and kin group, and what kinds of relationships exist with specific others. Explore whom people count as 'blood kin', whom as 'in-laws' or 'step-relatives' – establish this so that family inheritance history, and specific events and instances, can be contextualized in the sense that we will know the 'kin status' (as conceptualized by the interviewee) of relevant parties. Explore the detail of distributions of assets, and negotiations about them, in relation to kin of different status. Who has legitimate interests? How do people decide whom to include and exclude? Possibly ask directly whether people think about their blood relatives and their in-laws in different ways in relation to inheritance, and other matters.

Step 4

Cross-reference all the levels, if you have not done so already, so that you know that each big research question has a set of corresponding mini-research questions, and each of these has a set of ideas about interview topics and questions. Make sure the cross-referencing works in reverse, so that your interview topics and questions really are going to help you to answer your big research questions.

Step 5

Start to develop some ideas about a loose structure, or format, for interviews. You will want this to be highly flexible and variable, but you should be able to produce some kind of guide to the key issues and types of questions you will want to discuss.

Example of loose interview structure/format developed for the 'inheritance' project

In this project we developed a loose interview format, based on key topics and types of questions we were likely to want to ask. With each interviewee we anticipated following up lines of enquiry specific to their circumstances, which we would not be able to anticipate in advance. We therefore wanted maximum flexibility, but also some kind of guide or prompt for the interviewer about the key issues and questions with which the study was concerned. We did not produce a script of questions, but rather a set of index cards to take into each interview. One card contained a flow chart of a possible interview structure, which could be readily modified on the spot. The other cards contained shorthand notes about specific topics and issues for the interviewer's use at relevant points in the interview. These notes were nonsequential, so that they could be drawn upon at any time, in relation to the specific context of the interview in progress. Here are examples of each type of card:

'Loose structure/format of interview' card

Possible main structure	**Specific topics and issues – to be asked in relation to any of the main structure sections (there are cards for each of these sets of questions)**
Introductory explanation	
↓	
Brief social/personal characteristics	
↓	
Composition of kin group and spouse's kin	Inheritance history, other responsibilities and relationships, inheritance family and kin group
↓	
Family inheritance history	
↓	Formal and external factors, including the law
Specific questions (if not covered elsewhere)	
↓	Principles and processes of inheritance and family responsibility
Questions about the law check	
↓	
Personal characteristics check	Social and personal characteristics (current and overtime)

Example of 'specific topics and issues' card
Inheritance history, other responsibilities and relationships, inheritance family and kin group

Experience of inheritance: personal/others – as testator, beneficiary, executor; patterns characteristic of own family; how many generations; experience of legal procedures and services; expected and unexpected; experience of will making; when, why; professional advice; intestacy laws; lifetime transfers.

Inheritance and other aspects of kin relationships/wider patterns of responsibility: family relationships affected by inheritance? conscious of possible inheritance in relationships with relatives?; conflicts – how resolved; life plans and inheritance e.g. housing, geography, timing; death and how it is dealt with; making formal statements about relationships?; part of ongoing reciprocity and exchange – explicit/implicit?; idea of final settlement?

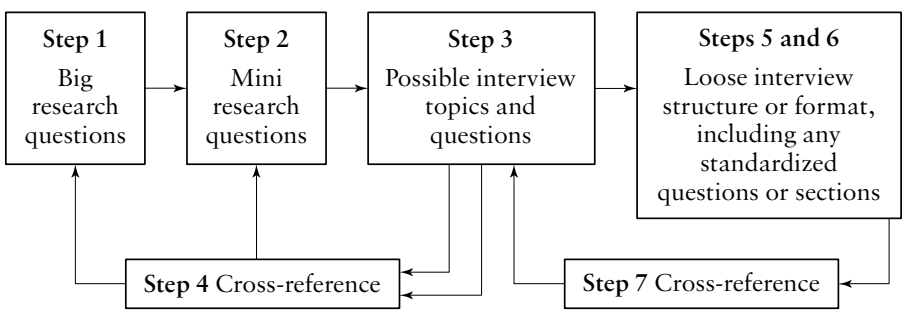
The inheritance family or kin group: who has legitimate interests?; in-laws/exclusions and principles of exclusion/inclusion; inheriting via someone else.

Figure 4.1 (cont.) *Example of planning and preparation for qualitative interviewing*

Step 6
Work out whether you want to include any standardized questions or sections in your interviews. There may be certain questions which you want to ensure that you ask everybody. In the example above the introductory explanation was fairly standardized, as were some of the questions about personal and social characteristics (for example, age, marital status). You might also want to think of some standardized comments and assurances which you will make about confidentiality of data to your interviewees.

Step 7
Cross-check that your format, and any standardized questions or sections, do cover adequately and appropriately your possible topics and questions.

Figure 4.2 *Overview of the planning and preparation procedure for qualitative interviews*



Scope and Sequence in Interview Questions

How much depth or breadth do I want to achieve on these issues?

What should be the *scope* of my questions?

Shall I follow up, or move on?

What should I ask next? What should be the *sequence*?

Just as working out what to ask, and in what sequence to ask it, depends upon on the spot assessments of the relevance of each part of the interview interaction to your intellectual puzzle and research questions, so does deciding how deeply you want to engage with any one particular issue, or how broadly you want to cover a range of issues. You may find yourself having to make decisions about the

implications of sacrificing some breadth of coverage for depth on a particular issue in a particular case. You may find you are having difficulty achieving either breadth or depth, because your interviewees are garrulous in ways which are not entirely relevant, so you may have to make an on-the-spot decision about how to get the best – in terms of breadth or depth – out of that particular interaction.

Probably the easiest part is deciding where to begin the interview, and you may well wish to begin all your interviews with a similar opening or 'warm-up' question or topic. But as each interview progresses you need constantly to make decisions about what to ask next in the context of that particular interview. This means working out whether you want to ask a question which relates to what you and your interviewee(s) have just been talking about, or whether you want to change the subject and move the interview onto new terrain. Whichever of these you decide to do, the social task is to orchestrate an interaction which moves easily and painlessly between topics and questions. The intellectual task is to try to assess, on the spot, the relevance of each part of the interaction to your research questions, or to what you really want to know. Although you are likely to have some form of *aide-mémoire* to remind you about the topics and issues you are interested in, you nevertheless need to be able to make connections between relevant issues quickly, and to spot and follow up issues which may be relevant, but which you had not anticipated.

Style and Demeanour

How should I ask my questions?

What kind of demeanour should I adopt?

How should I act?

Working out how to ask questions means both how to phrase them, or what words to use, and also what kind of manner, demeanour and approach you are going to adopt. You will not have a standard script of questions, and will instead need to think on the spot how best to ask about whatever it is that you 'really want to know', and how to generate meaningful contextual and situated discussion. This means that you will need to be able to formulate appropriate questions there and then, rather than asking your interviewee to wait while you fumble in your notes for a preformulated question which you discover, as you ask it, is not suitable in this particular case. This process involves more than thinking of the right words. Your decisions will be likely to depend upon the research questions which guide your study, the specific social and situational dynamics of each interview, and what repertoire of demeanours and sets of social skills you personally are able to draw upon.

Of course the question of how we should 'be' is not always one that is easily resolved by making a decision and executing it. Apart from the fact that

researchers are rarely able to exercise such high degrees of instrumentality, performance and self-control, we must also remember that interviews are interactions, and how you can 'be' depends to a great extent on the situation and the other participants. So, while it is important to reflect upon these issues, you should not over-estimate your ability to act a part, nor its benefits. In Chapter 5 we discuss these issues more fully in relation to a researcher's 'ethnographic self' (Coffey, 1999).

These questions all imply the need to make quick, but considered and strategic, decisions while you are interviewing. In each case, these decisions and their consequences will need to achieve a number of things. They will need to do the following:

- Make sense to, or be meaningful to, the interviewees
- Be related to your interviewee's' circumstances, experiences and so on, based on what you already know about them
- Be sensitive to the interviewees, to their needs and rights, in accordance with your ethical position and moral practice
- Help the flow of the interview interaction – the 'conversation with a purpose' – rather than impede it
- Ensure an appropriate focus on issues and topics relevant to your research questions.

Developing Your Skills

Clearly, interviewing is a formidable – although highly enjoyable – task for which a high degree of intellectual and social skill is required. At any one time you may be: listening to what the interviewee is 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 your interviewees' demeanour and interpret these, for example, you may notice they are becoming reticent for reasons which you do not understand, or if there is more than one interviewee there may be some tension developing between them; 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 limits. At the same time you will be observing what is going on around the interview; you may be making notes or, if you are audio or video tape-recording the interview, keeping half an eye on your equipment to ensure that it is working; and you may be dealing with 'distractions' like a wasp which you think is about to sting you or your interviewee, a pet dog which is scratching itself loudly directly in front of your tape recorder microphone, a telephone which keeps ringing, a child crying, the fact that your feet are aching, you are tired and too hot, and so on.

How might qualitative interviewers prepare for such a challenging set of tasks? First, it is vital that researchers work on developing the skills they need to

handle the social, intellectual and indeed practical elements of these kinds of interactions, and on preparing for their interviews, rather than assuming that these are attributes which they either do or do not have already. It is possible, for example, to practise the following:

1 Listening – *really* listening – to what people are saying. Most people need a great deal of practice in this. You need to be able to do this whether or not you are tape-recording your interviews.
2 Remembering what people have said to you, and indeed what you have already asked them. It is only too easy, in the context of the multiple activities you are engaging in, to forget what you have been told, or what you yourself have already said. If you are conducting more than one interview per day, you may become unclear about what occurred in one and what in another.
3 Achieving a good balance between talking and listening. The appropriate balance is likely to vary in different situations, and there is no general rule about what you should do. However, it is important to be aware of what you are doing, and of the implications of it. So, for example, are you interrupting your interviewees frequently? For what reasons? What are you trying to achieve by interrupting? Do you achieve it? Is interrupting in this way helpful, or unhelpful?
4 Observing, picking up verbal and non-verbal cues about the social situation, its visual and spatial dynamics, and the mood of your interviewee(s). This means making sure you are tuned in to body language and to demeanour so that you can recognize when people become bored, tired, angry, upset, embarrassed. Sometimes, you may recognize a change in your interviewees' demeanour, but be unable to interpret it. This should include understanding, anticipating and interpreting the social dynamics of interviewing, for example, showing appropriate respect and courtesy to your participants
5 Becoming accomplished in the practicalities of interviewing, for example, in note-taking, in using your tape recorder, in recording visual and other non-verbal elements (see section below on generating data for a discussion of some of these aspects).

All of these skills involve handling the social interaction of the interview appropriately. You can practise them in everyday social situations, or with your peers, colleagues, or advisers, or better still in a pilot study which you can reflect upon later. You can audio or video tape-record some pilot interviews, and scrutinize the recording later on for these aspects as well as taking the opportunity to train yourself in the use of the equipment. Or you can ask a colleague to sit in on some pilot interviews and give you their views about how you are handling the situation. Or you might want to ask your pilot interviewees what they think? In general, you need to find some mechanism for ensuring that you are identifying which skills you need to work on, and that you are developing and improving these.

TURNING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS INTO DATA

So far we have focused on the planning and doing of qualitative interviews, but have said little about processes through which what we call data are produced. I

am referring here to the mechanisms through which you transform your interview interaction into what you consider to be data. This throws the spotlight back onto epistemological issues and, in particular, onto what your perspective suggests count as data and as evidence. You will need to consider the following types of questions:

Deciding What Counts as Data

What procedures give my interview interactions the status of data?

Do different procedures yield data of differing status or quality?

Which elements count as data? What shape or form do they need to take?

Should I focus only on the utterances?

Do other non-verbal aspects of the interaction and its context count?

Does my own written or tape-recorded account, and do my written or tape-recorded field notes, which are based on my interpretations of what went on, count as data?

Do my own memories and unwritten interpretations of the interview interaction count as data?

Does the interview or interaction become data only when it becomes text as, for example, in a transcription of a tape-recorded interview?

Does a visual or audio record of the interview count as data in itself?

Can diagrams, pictures, drawings, charts and photographs produced during the interview, or before or after it, count as data?

What counts as data should not be regarded as self-evident. As I suggested in Chapter 3, different qualitative approaches may take widely differing views on this question. It is therefore very important indeed to ask yourself these questions, and to work through their implications for your research practice from the beginning, since many of the consequent decisions need to be made early on. In answering these questions you need to ask yourself what it is that turns your interviews into data, rather than just chats or conversations. Do the procedures, or the data, have to be verifiable in some way in order to have the status of good or reliable data? What principles of verification might be appropriate? What form or shape do the data need to be in to make this possible?

A major challenge for interpretivist approaches centres on the question of how you can be sure that you are not simply inventing data, or misrepresenting your research participants' perspectives. Qualitative researchers over many years have been locked in debates about this question (see Chapters 1 and 9), and

different qualitative approaches offer different solutions. For an ethnomethodologist, this is precisely the problem with reading 'beyond' data, and researchers from this perspective should concentrate on utterances and recorded (although usually naturally occurring) interactions.

Ethnographers, on the other hand, have long sought to draw reflexively on their own experiences and perceptions, and to see these as part of their data. The main challenge with this approach is to ensure that you are doing it in meaningful and sensitive ways, rather than imposing your own interpretation inappropriately or without justification. It is very important in this context to record as fully and explicitly as you can, the route by which you came to the interpretations you are making. This will involve questioning your own assumptions. You need to remember that, however 'objective' you try to be in your records, you are continually making judgements about what to write down or record, what you have observed, heard and experienced, what you think it means. Your records need to provide the fullest possible justification for your own decisions. In dealing with these issues you will inevitably face questions about memory and verifiability. How can you be sure that your memories are accurate or that your perceptions are valid? You need to try to be as systematic as you can about these matters.

In answering these questions it is also important not to over-estimate the representational or reflective qualities of interview transcripts, audio and visual recordings. A transcription is always partial partly because it is an inadequate record of non-verbal aspects of the interaction (even if you try to insert these in the form of fieldnotes into the transcription afterwards), and also because judgements are made (usually by the person doing the transcription) about which verbal utterances to turn into text, and how to do it. For some verbal utterances, there are simply no written translations! Therefore, do not assume that transcription provides an 'objective record' of your interviews, or that you do not need to make a record of your own observations, interpretations and experiences of the interview.

The same applies to audio and video recordings, which have to be regarded as partial reconstructions of interviews rather than full records of them (see Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of these issues). Ask yourself which aspects of the interaction you do not gain access to via a video tape. For example, you will not have a record of what went on behind the camera. You may have a record from only one visual perspective. And, as with tape recording and transcribing, this does not give you much access to the interviewer's observations, interpretations, experiences and judgements. Make sure that the knowledge that you have a tape recorder switched on does not tempt you to stop listening or watching or doing all the other work outlined above. Not only do you need to continue with these activities in order to conduct the interview well, but you may discover subsequently that your equipment had failed. If you were not paying full attention to the interaction, there will be little you can retrieve from it.

The production of visual materials, or encouraging your interviewees to produce something of this kind, can be a very creative way of accessing aspects of your interviewees' lives or experiences which are non-verbalized, or difficult for them to verbalize. Do not assume, however, that everyone finds it easy to express themselves through the production of these kinds of materials.

Nevertheless, these can be particularly useful if what you really want to know about in ontological terms is not readily or appropriately expressed verbally. You can use visual materials as prompts in an interview, or you can produce charts or diagrams jointly with your interviewees, or you can ask them to produce their own 'cognitive maps' as drawings, diagrams (see Miles and Huberman, 1994, for lots of examples) or pictures. The latter technique is fairly widely used in interviews with children. Again, in thinking about how these constitute data, you must be aware of their limitations, and what they do not, as much as what they do, address.

Reading Interviews Literally, Interpretively and Reflexively

Do I wish to derive data from interviews in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?

When thinking about all of these difficult questions, you may find it helpful to draw a distinction between literal, interpretive and reflexive 'readings' of interviews. If, for example, you wished to derive data in a *literal* manner, then you would probably be interested in aspects of the interaction such as the literal dialogue, including its form and sequence, or the literal substance. If you wished to derive data in an *interpretive* manner, then you would be wanting to 'read' the interviews for what you think they mean, or possibly for what you think you can infer about something outside of the interview interaction itself. And if you wished to derive data in a *reflexive* manner, then you would want to 'read' something about your role, and your interface with the interaction. Your answers to these questions will of course be related to your stance on whether knowledge is constructed or excavated through interviews. The different decisions about what count as data, which you can potentially make, will imply different answers to these questions, and place differential emphasis on literal, interpretive or reflexive data. In practice, you may wish to derive data in all three ways, but it will nevertheless help you in doing so to think carefully about what kind of balance between them you are hoping to achieve.

In general, you should try to be as clear as you can about your answers to all of these questions as early as you can in your research process, since they will help you to choose your methods for generating (or recording) data from your interviews. You will need to think carefully about which methods are best for you – in both practical and intellectual terms. It is important to remember that tape-recording or video-recording, and transcribing in full, usually represent a very large commitment of time and resources. You should therefore be clear that you have good reasons for doing this, for example, that you are interested in the ways in which people articulate their ideas, not just in the substance of what they say. These reasons should be closely linked to your research questions. You will also need to have some idea of how you are going to go about analysing your data, so

that you make sure that what you generate takes an appropriate form for this type of analysis (see Chapters 8 and 9 for a further discussion of data analysis).

I think this demonstrates that it is possible to generate a fairly wide range of types of data, and more creatively than is sometimes thought, through qualitative interviews. It also suggests that conducting interviews can help a researcher to develop experience in a fairly wide range of methods.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

I emphasized the importance of ethical issues in research design in Chapter 2, and more generally the need to be clear about operating a moral research practice at every stage in the research process. I also suggested that this is by no means straightforward. The use of qualitative interviews as a data generation method raises a number of general ethical issues, and there will also be specific ethical concerns connected to any one particular project. Some of these can be anticipated in advance, but just as you will find yourself making intellectual and practical decisions on the spot, so too you will from time to time need to make hasty moral judgements. You must prepare yourself to do this, by thinking through the kinds of ethical issues which might arise, and your possible responses to them. While you cannot anticipate all of them, this will nevertheless help you to ensure that you are thinking and acting in an ethically principled way even in the face of the unexpected. Here are some examples of difficult questions about ethics and qualitative interviews which you can ask yourself as a form of preparation.

Conducting Qualitative Interviews in an Ethical Way

How far is my own interview practice and style ethical?

On what basis am I judging what is ethical and what is not?

What justifications can I offer for the ethics of my interview practice and style?

On what basis, and to whom, are these acceptable?

Answering these questions might involve thinking about the following:

1 What you ask. Are you asking questions about personal or private matters, or matters which your interviewees do not wish to discuss? Are you asking about traumas, tragedies, mistakes, illegal activities? Are you asking questions which may distress, worry, or annoy your interviewees? In examples such as these, you will need to think about your ethical justifications.
2 How you ask it. For example, are you using trick questions to catch your interviewees out, to confuse them? Are you doggedly pursuing a particular issue? Are

you asking questions in a blunt way, to see how your interviewees react? Is your style of questioning making your interviewees uncomfortable?

3 What you 'let' your interviewees tell you. Are your interviewees revealing more than you think they should? Even if you do not ask them directly, they may feel relaxed and open up to you about issues which you suspect they consider to be private. What are the ethical implications of the process of gaining your interviewees' trust, and the process of making your interview feel enjoyable, like a conversation, or like a therapeutic encounter?

4 Whether and how you can guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of your interviewees, if this is what you have said you will do. You must think carefully about how you will fulfil such promises, and this can be quite difficult given the full, rich and personal nature of the data generated from qualitative interviews. Such data can usually be recognized by the interviewee whether or not you attach the interviewee's name to them, and also they may be recognizable to other people.

5 The power relations of the interview interaction. It is usually assumed that the interviewer exercises power over the interviewee in and after the interview, for example, in setting the agenda and in controlling the data. In this context you clearly have certain responsibilities to those interviewees. But power relations can be more complex and multidirectional than this, and sometimes they may simply be reversed – you may, for example, be interviewing very powerful people, and you may feel that they are controlling the agenda. You may feel your personal safety is at issue. In these cases, you must nevertheless think through the ethical implications, rather than assuming that ethics do not count because you as researcher are not wielding all the power.

Gaining Informed Consent

Have I gained the 'informed consent' of my interviewees for their participation?

Whose consent should I seek?

How can I be sure that the consent is genuinely informed?

Many of the ethical guidelines published by professional academic associations emphasize the importance of gaining the informed consent of all participants in research. On the face of it, this seems fairly straightforward where qualitative interviews are being used, since the participants are clearly identifiable, and can be asked whether or not they give their consent before the interview begins. However, I want to suggest that getting informed consent is actually quite a complex and difficult business even in this context.

First, you will need to consider whose consent to ask. You should certainly gain the consent of the people you propose to interview. However, you should be careful about how readily you accept that consent has been gained. In particular, you should acknowledge the persuasive influences which operate on people when you ask them to consent to take part in your research, for example, powerful

committee members, teachers, parents, carers, employers, colleagues, yourself, all may influence a potential interviewee into saying yes. How much choice do interviewees really have about participating? Is it ever appropriate for a third party to give consent on someone else's behalf, for example a parent on behalf of a child, a relative or carer on behalf of someone with a mental illness, a husband on behalf of his wife, an employer on behalf of their employees? Is it ever desirable to gain the consent of someone other than the interviewee, for example, a parent *as well as* the child you wish to interview? You need to recognize that it is not uncommon for an interviewee to reveal what seems like private information concerning third parties whose consent you have not gained. These issues are not straightforward, and you will need to think them through in some detail in the light of the precise issues raised by your project.

You will also want to consider how you can be sure that the consent you have gained is actually *informed* consent. This is very difficult, and relates crucially to what it is that you think you are asking people to give their consent to, and what rights you think they are giving to you in giving that consent. For example, are you asking them to consent to the following?:

1 Participating in the interview? Does this mean they are consenting to answer whatever questions you might ask? Are you giving them opportunities to withdraw their consent at any stage? You may wish to renegotiate consent at several points during the interaction, as the interviewee becomes more fully informed about what consenting to the interview actually means.
2 Giving you the right to use the data generated through the interview in ways which you see fit? Do you think they understand and share your perspective on what counts as data, for example, where you are drawing on not only their words, but also their intonation, body language, pauses, general demeanour, what they say 'off the record' when the tape recorder is switched off, other aspects of the interaction? How about where data include information about others?
3 Giving you the right to interpret and analyse the data, making comparisons with data generated through other interactions? Most interviewees will be unfamiliar with the principles and techniques of analysis which you use, and with the ontological and epistemological principles upon which your research is based.
4 Giving you the right to publish or reproduce the data, and the analysis?
5 Passing those rights on to others, for example, by archiving your data for other researchers to use?

In my view, there are limits to how adequately you can inform all interviewees about all these aspects. You need to think carefully about what to tell your interviewees when you are informing them. How much can and should you tell them, at what level of detail, complexity and sophistication, and at what points during the interaction? Many interviewees may not be very interested in the detail, and may not be familiar with the disciplinary and academic skills and conventions which are needed to understand issues about what counts as data, what principles of analysis will be used, and so on. You may not be sure yourself, at this stage, about exactly how you will constitute and use your data, and about how you will use them to explain your intellectual puzzle. If you take the decision to offer your

data to an archive, you will be even less sure about what use other researchers may make of them.

However, these limits mean that researchers need to take the issue of informed consent more rather than less seriously, in ensuring that they adopt a stringent moral practice. There are no easy answers or prescriptions about what that practice should be. But in my view, it is not sufficient simply to assert that you have gained informed consent because people have agreed to be interviewed, or because in our increasingly litigious world they have signed a consent form, and you can therefore do what you want with the data and the analysis, if there are in fact some ambiguities in relation to the difficult questions outlined above. As Murphy and Dingwall have argued:

> The rights of research subjects in ethnographic work will not be respected simply because consent forms have been signed: indeed, as in much biomedical research, these forms may offer more protection to the researcher than to the subject in the event of litigation . . . Signed consent forms may actually jeopardize the confidentiality of participants by making them identifiable. There are genuine difficulties about the means of respecting rights to autonomy and self-determination. The answers depend more on the moral sense of the researcher and their ability to make reasoned decisions in the field than upon regulative codes of practice or review procedures. (2001: 342)

It may be impossible to receive a consent which is fully informed, and the responsible researcher should be prepared to recognize this, and think through its implications, in their research practice. Recognizing that fully informed consent may be impossible always to achieve puts researchers in a powerful and highly responsible position, and means that they have a greater, not a lesser, duty to engage in a reflexive and sensitive moral research practice.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined some of the difficult questions which are raised by the use of qualitative interviewing. Perhaps the most important message is that this kind of interviewing is not an easy option, contrary to the view that such interviews are little more than everyday conversations which 'anyone could do'. Although interviewing can be rewarding and fascinating, I have also wanted to make it clear that qualitative interviewing is difficult intellectually, practically, socially and ethically, and that all researchers should be aware of the kind of challenge they are taking on in choosing to use this method. Furthermore, this kind of interviewing is greedy of resources: it is heavily consuming of skills, time and effort, both in the planning and conducting of the interviews themselves, and in the analysis of the products (which is discussed in Chapters 8 and 9).

All this means that the decision to use qualitative interviewing should not be made lightly. It is, in fact, one of the most – possibly *the* most – widely used methods in qualitative research, and for some very good reasons. It is considered by many to be an appropriate and practicable way to get at some of what qualitative