

ONE

Introduction

Defining the qualitative research interview

Turn on your television and flick through the channels; there is a good chance you will see someone being interviewed. It may be a politician facing a grilling from a tough political journalist, a celebrity answering flattering questions about her latest film, book or exercise DVD, a football manager explaining how his team let a two-goal lead slip. Perhaps it is a fictionalised representation of a canny detective extracting the truth from her prime suspect, or a psychiatrist diagnosing the nature of a patient's neurosis. And interviewing may well have impinged directly on your own life, be it in the form of a job interview, or someone with a clipboard questioning you on the street about your preferences for cosmetic products. It is no exaggeration to state that interviews have become a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary life, to such an extent that Gubrium and Holstein (2002) claim we are now members of an 'interview society'.

This book is about a particular form of the phenomenon: the qualitative research interview. Undoubtedly, interviewing is the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research, and this familiarity has advantages for us as researchers. As the first author has stated elsewhere (King, 2004a), when you tell a potential participant that you want to interview them, they will usually have a pretty good idea of the kind of encounter they are agreeing to. However, this familiarity also carries risks. The qualitative research interview differs in important ways from other forms to which people (including inexperienced researchers) will be more accustomed. Failure to recognise the special requirements of a qualitative research interview can result in the elicitation of data that have serious limitations for a study. For example, the interview may be shallow and superficial if the interviewer is too deferential to the interviewee, or the participant may clam up if she feels the interviewer is too aggressive. In this book we will spell out in considerable detail the distinctive characteristics of qualitative research interviews, also drawing attention to important variations within the method. To start you thinking about this, consider the comparison between qualitative research interviews and three other types of interview, shown in Table 1.1.

Of course, we have had to generalise in this table about qualitative research interviews (and indeed the other forms), but it does help to highlight key

Table 1.1 Characteristics of different types of interview

		TYPE OF INTERVIEW		
INTERVIEW CHARACTERISTICS	Investigative journalistic interview (e.g. with politician)	Celebrity interview	Job interview	Qualitative research interview
Style of questioning	Interrogative and confrontational	Deferential, with the interviewer aiming to coax the celebrity into sharing their experiences	May be challenging at times, but also seeks to enable interviewee to present their strengths effectively	Emphasises open-ended, non-leading questions, focuses on personal experience, seeks to build rapport with interviewee
Power dynamics	Potentially high stakes for interviewee in terms of personal and party reputation Especially in broadcast media, interviewer needs to demonstrate ability to get beyond the interviewee's defences	Interviewee likely to have high level of control; may even have given prior approval of questions Can be much at stake for interviewer in terms of keeping celebrity happy, so they may be cooperative in future	Power very much in hands of interviewers, bounded in its exercise by organisational policies and legislation (e.g. regarding equal opportunities)	As the person asking the questions, interviewer may be seen to be in the more powerful position. However, the balance is often complicated by factors such as age, gender and status of the two parties. Also, the interviewee has the explicit right to withdraw at any time with no further consequences for them
Visibility	Highly public and visible Any word out of place could be in tomorrow's headlines	Also highly public – indeed, maintaining the celebrity's visibility is their key reason for participation	Details of what happens are confidential to the interview panel, but outcome (success or failure to get the job) will be public knowledge	High level of confidentiality and anonymity expected in great majority of cases

features of the method. We would suggest that the following are defining characteristics of the generic qualitative interview:

- It is flexible and open-ended in style.
- It tends to focus on people's actual experiences more than general beliefs and opinions.
- The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is crucial to the method.

Of course, how these characteristics translate into interview practice will differ in different types of qualitative study, as will their relative importance. We will discuss such differences in more detail in the rest of this book.

Aims and structure of this book

In this book we aim to provide you with comprehensive coverage of what you need to know to conduct a research study using qualitative interviews. Our emphasis is strongly practical; we will take you through the processes of designing and carrying out qualitative interview research in detail, using numerous examples based on our own and others' projects. At the same time, we believe that even the most applied research needs to have a strong theoretical and philosophical grounding, and we will cover these aspects of qualitative interviewing too. Each chapter ends with an annotated list of recommended reading. In terms of discipline, our focus is broad, drawing on literature from across the social sciences in such diverse topic areas as health, education, criminal justice, business and management, and others. As to level, we see this book as being particularly useful for postgraduate and advanced undergraduate students who may be carrying out substantial research projects utilising qualitative interviews. We also believe it should be helpful for more experienced researchers who are relatively new to qualitative interviewing, or who need updating in specific areas – for instance, the possibilities offered by online interviewing (see Chapter 6).

We have structured the book to take you sequentially through all steps involved in carrying out a qualitative interview study. The chapters are, though, relatively self-contained so you can dip into areas that especially interest you. Chapter 2 introduces the philosophical issues which should inform your choice of approach, to ensure you have a firm foundation to the methodological decisions you make in the course of developing a project. The next two chapters move on to the practicalities of designing and carrying out a qualitative interview study. Our goal here is to be as specific and concrete as possible in the advice we give, rather than staying at the level of general principles. We have done this by using real-world examples and also by considering in some depth aspects of the research process that are often addressed sketchily (if at all) in methodological textbooks. These include such things as the pros and cons of different ways

4 Interviews in Qualitative Research

of contacting potential participants, the choice and effective use of recording equipment, and issues around your self-presentation in varying interview settings.

The next two chapters address variations from the conventional format of the individual face-to-face interview. In Chapter 5 we look at the challenges involved in group interviews, concentrating mainly on focus groups, but also highlighting other less well-known forms. In Chapter 6 we consider the use of 'remote' interview techniques in qualitative research – telephone and online interviewing. The former are quite widely used and yet have received very little attention in the methodological literature. The latter is a burgeoning field that no examination of qualitative methods can afford to ignore. It includes both synchronous ('real time', such as Instant Messaging) and asynchronous (e.g. e-mail) forms and can be either one-to-one or group in design.

Next we move on to address two key areas that any qualitative project needs to consider: ethics (Chapter 7) and reflexivity (Chapter 8). Regarding ethics, we cover the philosophical bases of ethical thinking in relation to social scientific research, explain the role and function of ethical review boards, and offer guidance on how best to tackle specific ethical issues in the design and execution of qualitative interviews. Similarly, in the chapter on reflexivity, we combine an examination of the theory and philosophy underlying the concept with pragmatic suggestions for how to incorporate a reflexive approach into your own work. Considerations of ethics and reflexivity do not only apply to research design and data collection, they must also be borne in mind in relation to what you do with your data. While this book does not seek to be a comprehensive text on qualitative data analysis, in Chapter 9 we have provided a thorough introduction to the principles and practice of thematic analysis, particularly for those relatively new to the field. We also briefly cover some of the main variants to this style of analysis and provide pointers to further information on different analytic approaches.

Chapters 10 and 11 differ from earlier ones as each focuses on a particular philosophical and methodological tradition in some depth, and considers the place of interviewing within them: Chapter 10 covers *phenomenology* and Chapter 11 *narrative*. If you are new to these traditions, we would suggest you read the earlier chapters first. This should allow you to get a good grasp of some of the generic principles and practices in qualitative interviewing before getting to grips with how these apply and might be adapted when taking a specific theoretical approach. At the heart of each of these chapters is an examination of what it means to use a phenomenological or narrative interview method, but we also introduce the philosophical and theoretical backgrounds to each, and give an overview of some of the main ways of analysing interview data from these perspectives.

Over many years of conducting qualitative interviews in varied styles and settings, it has been our experience that it is a challenging but ultimately very

rewarding way of doing research. Through close and sustained engagement with participants, not only can you gain insight into the topics you are studying, you can also learn about yourself. We hope this book helps you make the most of this endeavour.

Recommended reading

Gubrium, J.F. and Holstein, J.A. (2002) From the individual interview to the interview society, in J.F. Gubrium and J.A. Holstein (eds), *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A critical examination of the rise of the interview in contemporary society. Gubrium and Holstein argue that the interview not only enables us to inquire about our social world, but it is actually a significant constituent of the kind of society we live in.