

These three epistemological questions will be raised again in relation to each of the six qualitative method(ologie)s introduced in this book. They will provide a framework for discussion, evaluation and comparison of the six approaches in the final chapter.

Further reading

- Anfara, V.A. and Mertz, N.T. (2006) *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Burr, V. (2003) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.
- Chalmers, A.F. (1999) *What is this Thing Called Science?*, 3rd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Harding, S. (1991) *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hollway, W. (1989) *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science*. London: Sage.
- Kirk, J. and Miller, M. (1986) *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (1995) The social construction of validity, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1): 19–40.
- Willig, C. and Stainton Rogers, W. (eds) (2008) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

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Qualitative research design

General principles of qualitative research design • The research question • Choosing the 'right' method • Semi-structured interviewing • Participant observation • Diaries • Focus groups • Further reading

In Chapter 1, I identified a set of concerns shared by qualitative researchers (see pp. 8–9). These centred around the construction and negotiation of meaning, and the quality and texture of experience. These concerns have implications for research design. Qualitative data collection techniques need to be participant-led, or bottom-up, in the sense that they allow participant-generated meanings to be heard. They need to be open-ended and flexible enough to facilitate the emergence of new, and unanticipated, categories of meaning and experience. Pre-coding and the use of researcher-generated categories are not compatible with 'big Q' methodology (see p. 9). There are, therefore, a number of general principles associated with qualitative research design, and these are outlined in the next section. This is followed by a discussion of the formulation of research questions and the selection of appropriate data collection techniques. In the remainder of the chapter, four major data collection methods are introduced (semi-structured interviews, participant observation, diaries, focus groups). Ethical and reflexivity issues are also addressed in this chapter.

General principles of qualitative research design

These concern the type of data we should aim to collect, and the role of participants in the research process. The *type of data* we collect for a qualitative study need to be *naturalistic*. This is to say, the data must not be coded, summarized, categorized or otherwise 'reduced' at the point of collection. Strictly speaking, this is impossible because any process of collecting data requires some form of translation from one medium to another. For example, a verbatim transcript of what a participant says is not the same as the participant's performance of their speech in real time. Even a video-recording of that performance constitutes a transformation of the real-life act.

Nevertheless, qualitative data collection methods are designed to minimize data reduction. In qualitative research, the objective of data collection is to create a comprehensive record of participants' words and actions. This means making sure that as little as possible is lost 'in translation'. As a result, qualitative data tend to be voluminous and hard to manage. Qualitative researchers have to wait for the data analysis phase of the research before they can begin to 'reduce' the data, and even then they need to be very careful about what they 'leave out' (for a detailed discussion of this process, see Chapters 3–8).

Such considerations raise the issue of *validity*. To what extent can we ensure that our data collection (and analysis) really addresses the question we want to answer? That is, how can we be sure that we are, in fact, researching what we think we are researching? Validity can be defined as the extent to which our research describes, measures or explains what it aims to describe, measure or explain. As a result of their flexibility and open-endedness, qualitative research methods provide the space for validity issues to be addressed. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on pre-coded data collection techniques such as multiple-choice questionnaires or structured interviews, qualitative data collection allows participants to challenge the researcher's assumptions about the meaning and relevance of concepts and categories. For example, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, experimental social psychological research had demonstrated that women were more conformist than men. However, it later transpired that a validity error had been made: the studies had, in fact, measured familiarity rather than conformity (see Kirk and Miller 1986: 27–8). When Sistrunk and McDavid (1971) repeated the experiment, this time using a wide range of statements with which participants could agree or disagree, they found that women were more conformist when it came to statements about specialist tools, whereas men were more conformist in relation to statements about needlework. There was no difference between men and women in relation to gender-neutral statements. In the earlier studies, gender-related lack of familiarity with stimuli had been taken for female conformity.

Even though validity can be a problematic concept for qualitative researchers, qualitative methodologies engage with concerns about validity in a number of ways. First, qualitative data collection techniques aim to ensure that participants are free to challenge and, if necessary, correct the researcher's assumptions about the meanings investigated by the research. Some qualitative researchers also obtain feedback on their study's findings from participants (participant validation). If the study and its findings make sense to participants, the argument goes, it must at least have some validity. Second, much qualitative data collection (and in some cases also analysis) takes place in real-life settings, such as workplaces or youth clubs. As a result, there is no need to extrapolate from an artificial setting, such as the laboratory, to the real world, which means that such studies have higher ecological validity. Third, reflexivity (see p. 10) ensures that the research process as a whole is scrutinized throughout and that the researcher continuously reviews his or her own role in the research. This discourages impositions of meaning by the researcher and thus promotes validity.

An important aspect of quantitative data collection is *reliability*. A measurement is reliable if it yields the same answer on different occasions. Qualitative researchers are less concerned with reliability. This is because qualitative research explores a

particular, possibly unique, phenomenon or experience in great detail. It does not aim to measure a particular attribute in large numbers of people. However, there are qualitative researchers (e.g. Silverman 1993) who emphasize that qualitative research methods, if applied appropriately and rigorously, ought to generate reliable results. That is, the same data, when collected and analysed by different researchers using the same method, ought to generate the same findings, irrespective of who carried out the research. It has to be acknowledged that there is disagreement among qualitative researchers about the extent to which reliability ought to be a concern for qualitative research.

Finally, data collection needs to confront the issue of *representativeness*. Quantitative research relies upon representative samples. To be able to generalize their findings to the general population, quantitative researchers need to ensure that participants in their study are representative of this population. Qualitative research tends to work with relatively small numbers of participants. This is due to the time-consuming and labour-intensive nature of qualitative data collection and analysis (for more detail, see Chapters 3–8). As a result, qualitative studies do not work with representative samples. Is this a problem?

The answer to this question depends at least in part on the research question the study is designed to answer (see next section). If the study is a case study (of an individual, a group or an organization), representativeness is not an issue. Here, the aim of the study is to understand the internal dynamics of the case. However, if the study aims to explore a phenomenon that is relevant to more people than are actually involved in the study, representativeness can be an issue. This is because, in such circumstances, we are likely to want to be able to generalize from our study. For instance, if we study six women's experiences of childbirth, it is likely that we would want to move beyond our data and say something about its implications for women's experience of childbirth in general. Even though, strictly speaking, we cannot generalize from small-scale qualitative research of this type, it could be argued that, if 'a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalisation' (Haug 1987: 44). Thus, even though we do not know who or how many people share a particular experience, once we have identified it through qualitative research, we do know that it is available within a culture or society. If we assume that our participants' experiences are at least partially socially constituted, we can agree with Kippax and co-workers' (1988: 25) claim that 'each individual mode of appropriation of the social ... is potentially generalisable'.

Another way of attempting to solve the problem of generalizability is through accumulative techniques. These can be applied within and across studies. Within a study, accumulative techniques ensure that a particular observation made in one context is checked against related observations in other contexts, in case a more generalized, or overarching, category may be identified. Across studies, accumulative techniques allow us to review different studies' findings in relation to one another. Here, rather than relying on one isolated qualitative study, we aim to integrate the findings from a number of comparable studies to draw wider conclusions.

The *role of participants* in qualitative research can differ dramatically from that of the 'subjects' of quantitative studies. There are, however, also big differences between qualitative methodologies in this regard. At one end of the continuum, there are

qualitative methodologies, such as feminist approaches, participatory action research or memory work (see Chapter 8), where the distinction between 'researcher' and 'participant' is blurred. Here, the researcher becomes a participant in the research, and the participants contribute to the analysis of the data they generate. In some cases, there is no distinction between researchers and participants because the researchers actually study themselves (e.g. in memory work). At the other end of the continuum, there are qualitative methodologies, such as conversation analysis or discursive psychology (see Chapter 6), where the participants generate the type of data required by the researcher without any further involvement in the research. This is particularly the case where the data are recordings of everyday interactions that would have occurred anyway and in the absence of any data collection.

Reflexivity

As indicated in Chapter 1, qualitative research acknowledges that the researcher influences and shapes the research process, both as a person (*personal reflexivity*) and as a theorist/thinker (*epistemological reflexivity*) (see p. 10). Reflexivity is important in qualitative research because it encourages us to foreground, and reflect upon, the ways in which the person of the researcher is implicated in the research and its findings. It is not easy to focus attention on our own role within the research process, especially if we have been trained to think of 'the researcher' as (ideally) detached, neutral and unbiased – more of an instrument than a person. Reflexivity, however, means more than acknowledging personal 'biases'; reflexivity invites us to think about how our own reactions to the research context and the data actually make possible certain insights and understandings. In this sense, reflexivity in qualitative research has much in common with how psychoanalytic psychotherapists use 'countertransference' – the therapist's emotional response to the client's behaviour – in order to gain a better understanding of the client (see also Frosh and Saville Young 2008: 111–15).

Reflexive considerations can be discussed under a separate heading (e.g. 'reflexivity'); for example, at the end of a research report the researcher may reflect on how the research has changed her and her way of thinking about the subject matter of the research. Alternatively, they can be integrated into the report and raised in context, whenever they are relevant. For example, in the methods section there may be a discussion of the researcher's person (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, personal experience of the subject matter of the research, etc.) and the ways in which this may affect data collection and/or analysis. Reflexivity can be revisited many times within the same report. There are ways of highlighting and differentiating reflexivity considerations from the rest of the report, for example, by introducing a different font or colour, or by positioning reflexive comments as a series of footnotes throughout the report. However, there is no set format for addressing reflexivity. The important thing is to include reflections on the researcher's role in the research in a way that is clear, honest and informative.

Ethics

The same basic *ethical considerations* apply to the treatment of participants in both qualitative and quantitative research. These include (see Elmes et al. 1995):

- 1 *Informed consent.* The researcher should ensure that participants are fully informed about the research procedure and give their consent to participate in the research before data collection takes place.
- 2 *No deception.* Deception of participants should be avoided altogether. The *only* justification for deception is when there is no other way to answer the research question *and* the potential benefit of the research far exceeds any risk to the participants.
- 3 *Right to withdraw.* The researcher should ensure that participants feel free to withdraw from participation in the study without fear of being penalized.
- 4 *Debriefing.* The researcher should ensure that, after data collection, participants are informed about the full aims of the research. Ideally, they should also have access to any publications arising from the study they took part in.
- 5 *Confidentiality.* The researcher should maintain complete confidentiality regarding any information about participants acquired during the research process.

To summarize, researchers should protect their participants from any harm or loss, and they should aim to preserve their psychological well-being and dignity at all times. However, many qualitative researchers go beyond these basic ethical guidelines. Brinkmann and Kvale (2008: 263) argue that qualitative research is saturated with ethical issues because '[T]he human interaction in qualitative inquiries affects researchers and participants, and the knowledge produced through qualitative research affects our understanding of the human condition'. From this point of view, ethical issues arise from the very beginning of the research (e.g. regarding the formulation of the research question), they stay with us throughout our interactions with our research participants, and they continue to be relevant throughout the process of dissemination of the research findings. For example, instead of merely protecting participants from any harm or loss, some qualitative researchers aim to deliver positive benefits for participants. Action research is designed to generate knowledge about a process or system through changing it for the better. Here, any action taken has to be 'in the best possible interests of the people involved' (see Hart and Bond 1995). Similarly, critical discourse analysis aims to challenge social inequality, injustice and relations of power. Van Dijk (1987: 4) identifies the following aims for critical science:

Beyond description or superficial application, critical science in each domain asks further questions, such as those of responsibility, interests and ideology. Instead of focussing on purely academic or theoretical problems, it starts from prevailing social problems, and thereby chooses the perspectives of those who suffer most and critically analyses those in power, those who are responsible and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2008) caution against the practice of ethics as rule-following. They suggest that ethical issues and concerns cannot be addressed and 'solved' once and for all during the planning stages of the research. Rather, ethical dilemmas will surface throughout the research process, requiring the researcher to remain ethically attuned throughout. This may mean, for instance, that the issue of consent is revisited throughout the study, something known as 'processual consent' (Rosenblatt 1995). Instead of simply learning the ethical rules for the treatment of participants in psychological research (see list 1–5 above), Brinkmann and Kvale (2008: 276–8) recommend that researchers learn 'ethical research behaviour' and develop 'the ability to sense, judge and act in an ethically committed fashion' (ibid.: 278).

This is particularly useful in qualitative research because the open-ended, exploratory nature of such research means that apparently straightforward requirements such as informed consent and confidentiality can become an ethical challenge (e.g. How can we obtain informed consent for a study whose direction and remit is likely to change during the research process? How can we guarantee confidentiality in a case study of one exceptional individual? What happens if criminal behaviour comes to light during a confidential interview?). Furthermore, qualitative in-depth interviews can lead to quasi-therapeutic relationships between researcher and participant, potentially giving rise to feelings and expectations on the part of the participant that the researcher may not be equipped to deal with. In addition, interviewees may feel betrayed when reading research reports offering interpretations of their accounts that do not tally with their own understanding of their experience (see also Willig 2004). Power relations between researchers and participants are perhaps more subtle and more covert in qualitative research; however, this does not mean that they should be ignored or denied by qualitative researchers. To the contrary, it could be argued that the close personal relationship between researcher and participants in qualitative research carries a particular risk for the abuse of trust, for example, when the researcher 'fakes friendship' in order to obtain information (see Duncombe and Jessop 2002).

The research question

Most qualitative research projects are guided by one or more research questions. Research questions are different from hypotheses. A hypothesis is a claim, derived from existing theory, which can be tested against empirical evidence. It can be either rejected or retained. A research question, by contrast, is open-ended. That is, it cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. A research question calls for an answer that provides detailed descriptions and, where possible, also explanations of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research questions identify the phenomenon (i.e. the process, object or entity) that the researcher wants to investigate. It points us in a direction without predicting what we may find. Good qualitative research questions tend to be process-oriented. They ask *how* something happens. For example, we may ask 'How do women with chronic illness manage a pregnancy?' or 'How do married couples negotiate child-care arrangements?' Qualitative research questions are always provisional because the researcher may find that the very concepts and terminology used in the

research question are, in fact, not appropriate or relevant to the participants' experiences. Asking the wrong question undermines the validity of the findings; qualitative research is open to the possibility that the research question may have to change during the research process. It could be argued that one of the outcomes of qualitative research should be an understanding of what would have been an appropriate research question to ask in the first place!

The research question does, however, play a slightly different role in different qualitative method(ologie)s. In some methodologies, such as Discursive Psychology or discourse analysis, the research question is directly shaped by the methodology itself. That is, the methodology, through its epistemological assumptions, dictates what we can and cannot ask. For example, a methodology informed by a social constructionist epistemology can (only) address research questions about the social and/or discursive construction of phenomena. Appropriate research questions within this context might be 'How is "failure" constructed in contemporary academic institutions?' or 'How do clinical psychologists construct "mental health" in their interactions with clients and colleagues?'

Other methodologies can address a wider range of research questions. For example, a realist version of the grounded theory method (see Chapter 3) assumes that the data themselves generate categories that emerge during the research process and which capture the reality of the phenomenon under investigation. As a result, research questions for Grounded Theory research can be about processes, experiences, structures or even cognitions. Examples of appropriate research questions within this context are: 'How do students make decisions about their future careers?'; 'How does a telephone helpline train its volunteers?'; 'What is it like to undergo a gender reassignment process?'

When formulating our research question, we also need to think about its ethical and political dimensions. We need to think about in whose interest it may be to ask the question in the first place, and how the answer to it may be used by individuals and organizations in society. We need to reflect on the value of the knowledge that our research question aims to produce and for whom we are producing this knowledge. If our research is funded, we should consider the motives of the funding body in supporting the research, and the extent to which we share these motives. *Reflexivity* also demands that we examine very carefully our own personal and professional reasons for asking our research question. The formulation of research questions is discussed in more detail in relation to each of the six qualitative method(ologie)s (see Chapters 3–8).

I conclude this section by citing Lorion (1990: 321–2), whose 'street lamp' metaphor reminds us that our research question should always precede our choice of methodology:

I am frequently reminded of the old joke about the individual who explained that he was looking for his missing keys under the street lamp because 'the light is better there' . . . The 'street lamp' draws us to it by its apparent capacity to facilitate our search.

Lorion makes the point that we should not look for answers in certain places

simply because they are familiar or easily accessible; rather, we need to look in places where the answer is likely to be, no matter how inhospitable these places may be. This insight can be applied to research methods. Methods are a means to an end. They are 'the way to the goal' (Kvale 1996a: 278). This means that our research question (the 'goal') should inform our choice of methods, not the other way around. It may be tempting to choose a research question that can be answered by the method we know best. For example, we may have learned how to do t-tests and then decide to carry out research that addresses a question about differences in performance between two groups of people. But is this really what we want to know about the two groups? If it is, we can go ahead with our between-subjects design. If it is not, however, we ought to formulate our research question first and then choose the most appropriate research method to answer our question. It is within this context that research can take on the characteristics of an adventure (see pp. 1–2).

Choosing the 'right' method

Strictly speaking, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' methods. Rather, methods of data collection and analysis can be more or less appropriate to our research question. Having formulated a research question, the researcher needs to make a decision about how to collect the sort of data that can answer that question. That is to say, he or she needs to choose a method of data collection. The researcher also needs to think about how the answer to the research question may be extracted from the data. That is, he or she needs to select a method of data analysis. It is important to understand that the research question, data collection technique and method of data analysis are dependent on one another. They cannot be considered separately and they should not be chosen independently from one another. A good qualitative research design is one in which the method of data analysis is appropriate to the research question, and where the method of data collection generates data that are appropriate to the method of analysis. Researchers should never collect data without having decided how to analyse it. It could be argued that both qualitative and quantitative researchers share a common purpose, and that, ideally, they 'share a belief in the fallibility of knowledge, the need to link theory and empirical observation, the obligation to carry out research rigorously and conscientiously, and the necessity of critique and dissemination of research' (Yardley and Bishop 2008: 363).

From a pragmatic point of view, the aim of research is not to gain access to an abstract truth independent from human experience but rather to generate understanding that will be useful to us. It is designed to answer our questions, and as such, research designs and methods of data collection and analysis cannot be in themselves 'wrong' but they can be more or less appropriate (to the question put). Sometimes, the most appropriate way to answer a research question requires the use of two or more research methods (mixed methods design). We can combine qualitative and quantitative methods within the same study in order to answer related questions. For example, we can use a questionnaire to establish whether there are significant differences between two groups of people in terms of a particular behaviour or preference, and then use semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups to find out why there may be such differences by obtaining more information about what the behaviour or

preference means to the two groups of people. Similarly, we can use more than one qualitative method within one study if our research question requires it. For example, we may want to gain a better understanding of a particular community (e.g. singles' clubs, football clubs, reading groups, etc.) and the participants' experience of it. To achieve our research aim, we may choose to conduct some participant observation in order to identify the implicit and explicit rules of behaviour associated with it. This could be followed by semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants (perhaps representing different social categories (e.g. women and men, regulars and newcomers, etc.) that would provide us with information about how participants feel about their role within the community. Again, the important thing is to select methods that are able to generate data which will help us to answer our research question(s).

There is a wide range of qualitative data collection techniques that generate quite different kinds of data. Even though one technique (e.g. audio-recording of semi-structured interviews) may generate data that can be analysed in a number of different ways (including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and discourse analysis), there are other techniques that are simply not compatible with some methods of data analysis. For example, notes written by the interviewer during the course of a semi-structured interview cannot be subjected to conversation analysis. In the remainder of this chapter, four major data collection methods are introduced: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, diaries and focus groups. Their relationship with various forms of qualitative data analysis are highlighted.

Semi-structured interviewing

Semi-structured interviewing is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research in psychology. This is partly because interview data can be analysed in a variety of ways, which means that semi-structured interviewing is a method of data collection that is compatible with several methods of data analysis (e.g. discourse analysis, grounded theory, interpretative phenomenology). Another reason for the popularity of semi-structured interviews is that they are somewhat easier to arrange than other forms of qualitative data collection. This is not to say that the actual process of semi-structured interviewing is 'easy'; rather, I am suggesting that there may be fewer logistical difficulties in arranging a series of semi-structured interviews with a small number of volunteers than to design a longitudinal study that may involve the negotiation of access to organizations or groups for the purpose of participant observation or gaining participants' commitment to keeping diaries over a period of time. The popularity of semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection has given rise to a debate about the role of interviews in qualitative research (see *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2005). Potter and Hepburn (2005) have drawn attention to the fact that much qualitative analysis of interview-generated data does not pay attention to the many contextual features of the interview material (e.g. interactional features, its status as a conversation between two people, the stake that both participants inevitably have in the interview, etc.) and instead takes such data at 'face-value'. It is important to reflect on the meaning and experience of the interview for both interviewer and interviewee, and to take care not to assume that the interviewee's words are simple and direct reflections of their thoughts and feelings.

Semi-structured interviewing requires careful preparation and planning. The researcher needs to think about who to interview (and why), how to recruit participants, how to record and transcribe the interview, what style of interviewing to use, and what to ask participants. In this section, I discuss (1) the general characteristics of semi-structured interviewing, (2) the interview agenda and (3) recording and transcription of the interview.

General characteristics of semi-structured interviewing

The semi-structured interview provides an opportunity for the researcher to hear the participant talk about a particular aspect of their life or experience. The questions asked by the researcher function as triggers that encourage the participant to talk. This style of interviewing is sometimes described as non-directive; however, it is important to acknowledge that it is the researcher whose *research question* drives the interview. Through his or her questions and comments, the interviewer steers the interview to obtain the kind of data that will answer the research question. The interviewer needs to find the right balance between maintaining control of the interview and where it is going, and allowing the interviewee the space to redefine the topic under investigation and thus to generate novel insights for the researcher. This can be difficult. A carefully constructed *interview agenda* can go some way towards ensuring that the interviewer does not lose sight of the original research question (see below).

To encourage the participant to speak freely and openly, and to maximize their own understanding of what is being communicated in the interview, researchers are advised to consider the possible effects of their own social identities (i.e. gender, social class, ethnicity, nationality, age, etc.) on the interviewee. They should also familiarize themselves with the participant's cultural milieu, and the status of 'the interview' within this milieu. For example, a middle-aged professional may be more comfortable with a formal interview than an unemployed youth because, in the latter's experience, such interviews may be associated with administrative distrust and judgemental assessments. The researcher needs to know what the interview means to the interviewee to fully understand the interviewee's contribution.

The researcher also needs to be aware of linguistic variability. The same term may not mean the same thing to all interviewees. In semi-structured interviewing, the emphasis is upon meaning rather than lexical comparability. This means that the researcher needs to try to understand what the interviewee *meant* by what he or she said, irrespective of *how* they chose to say it (discourse analysis constitutes an exception to this; see Chapters 6 and 7). It is also worth bearing in mind that language is indexical; that is, the meanings of words depend on the context within which they are spoken. For example, waiting for 'a long while' probably refers to something like 20 minutes within the context of waiting for a bus, whereas the same expression used when talking about buying a house may mean months or even years.

Semi-structured interviewing, perhaps more than other types of interviewing, depends on the rapport established between interviewer and interviewee. The semi-structured interview is, however, somewhat ambiguous. This is because it combines features of the formal interview (e.g. fixed time limit; fixed roles of 'interviewer' and 'interviewee'; the existence of an interview agenda) with features of an informal

conversation such as the open-endedness of the questions and the emphasis on narrative and experience. This means that although rapport can be established quickly between interviewer and interviewee, it can also be disrupted suddenly when the interviewer's role as researcher becomes salient. This can happen during the interview; for example, when the interviewer needs to turn over the audiotape, thus reminding the interviewee that they are 'being interviewed'. It can also happen after the interview; for example, when the interviewee reads the transcript of the interview and realizes how much they revealed about themselves in comparison with the interviewer who revealed very little in what appeared, at the time, to be a 'normal' conversation. The semi-structured interview requires sensitive and ethical negotiation of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviewers should not abuse the informal ambience of the interview to encourage the interviewee to reveal more than they may feel comfortable with after the event.

The interview agenda

The interview agenda for a semi-structured interview consists of a relatively small number of open-ended questions. It is a good idea to start with more public questions and move on to more personal matters when rapport has been established. Some researchers prefer to identify topic headings instead of questions, around which they then formulate questions during the course of the interview. This allows the researcher to incorporate the interviewee's own terms and concepts into the questions, and thus to make the questions more appropriate or relevant to the interviewee. However, the problem with using topic headings is that, as a result of their intense involvement in the interview process, researchers may formulate questions that are less open and more directive than necessary. Better formulations of questions may emerge from careful reflection and consideration of alternative versions before the interview, especially where the interviewer is a novice. However, it is a good idea to restate interviewees' comments and to incorporate them into further questions throughout the interview. This demonstrates to the interviewee that the interviewer is indeed listening, and it allows the interviewer an opportunity to check with the interviewee that they have understood correctly. It also serves to maintain coherence and continuity throughout the interview.

A good way to obtain detailed and comprehensive accounts from interviewees is to express ignorance. A naïve interviewer encourages the interviewee to 'state the obvious' and thus to give voice to otherwise implicit assumptions and expectations. This can be extremely enlightening. Another way to encourage interviewees to elaborate is to ask for illustrations of events or experiences. This is particularly helpful when abstract concepts or general opinions are being referred to. For instance, having heard the interviewee say that people do not take him or her seriously, the interviewer can ask the interviewee for a concrete example of when he or she felt this way and how he or she dealt with it.

Spradley (1979) has produced a useful guide to formulate four different types of question: descriptive, structural, contrast and evaluative:

- *Descriptive* questions prompt the interviewee to provide a general account of

'what happened' or 'what is the case'. Such questions ask for biographical information (e.g. 'What do you do for a living?'), anecdotes (e.g. 'What happened that day?'), life histories (e.g. 'How did you come to live in London?'), and so on.

- *Structural* questions are about how the interviewee organizes his or her knowledge. They prompt interviewees to identify the categories and frameworks of meaning that they use to make sense of the world. Here we may ask questions such as 'What does it mean to be an innocent victim of a crime?' or 'How did you decide to have an HIV antibody test?'
- *Contrast* questions allow the interviewee to make comparisons between events and experiences. For example, we may ask 'Would you rather report a crime and run the risk of revenge, or keep quiet and be safe from harassment?' or 'Did you prefer working in the public or the private sector?'
- *Evaluative* questions are about the interviewee's feelings towards someone or something. We can be vague in our formulation and ask 'How do/did you feel about this?', or we can be more specific and ask about a particular emotion (e.g. 'Did you feel afraid when you took the blood test?').

Finally, it is important to ensure that the questions asked are actually meaningful to the participants. Cross-cultural researchers have drawn attention to the fact that not all questions make sense in all cultures. For example, Deutscher (1978) reminds us of Lerner's observation that hypothetical questions ('What would you do if ...?') may be considered unworthy of attention by some (e.g. the French) but be unproblematic for others (e.g. North Americans).

Recording and transcription of the interview

To be able to carry out a full analysis of the data, it is necessary to audio- or video-record and transcribe the interview. Most qualitative methods of analysis require that the material is transcribed verbatim, or near verbatim. Taking notes during the interview is no substitute for a full recording. Note-taking also distracts both the interviewee and interviewer. It interferes with eye contact and non-verbal communication and does not encourage the development of rapport between interviewee and interviewer. However, taping the interview may also affect what is being said. Participants may not be entirely comfortable and relaxed in the presence of a tape-, or worse, a video-recorder. It is important that the researcher explains why the recording is being made and how it is going to be used. It is also a good idea to offer the interviewee a copy of the transcript of the interview, if at all possible. The researcher may ask the interviewee to comment on the transcript. Such feedback constitutes additional data.

If the interview is being tape-recorded, the researcher needs to make sure that the recorder is placed in a position where it will record clearly. This could be on a table between the interviewer and the interviewee. Such positioning also allows the researcher to keep an eye on the recorder to make sure that it is taping the interview. It also allows the researcher to change the tape if necessary. It is vital that the researcher checks that the tape-recorder is working before the interview. It is a good idea to use a new set of batteries for each interview. It is extremely frustrating to find that an

hour-long interview has not been recorded or has been recorded so badly as to be inaudible. Badly recorded interviews also take much longer to transcribe.

There are different ways in which an interview can be transcribed. If we are interested in the subtleties of communicative interaction between interviewer and interviewee, we need to transcribe the words as well as the way in which they are spoken. This means including pauses, interruptions, intonation, volume of speech, and so on. These various features of speech are represented by the signs of the *transcription notation*. A commonly used form of notation for such detailed transcription was developed by Gail Jefferson. Guidance to using this type of notation can be found in Potter and Wetherell (1987) and in Atkinson and Heritage (1984). Detailed transcription is required for conversation analysis and some types of discursive analysis. If we are interested only in the content of the interview, we do not need to transcribe non-linguistic features of speech. In this case, it is sufficient to transcribe what is being said (the words). This would be appropriate for grounded theory analysis. However, even here we need to make a decision about what we wish to include. For example, we may wish to include incomplete sentences, false starts, laughter and repetition of words. Alternatively, we may wish to 'tidy up' the transcript. It all depends on what we aim to do with the transcript. That is, our decision about what type of transcription to use depends on our research question and the method of analysis we have chosen. It is important to bear in mind, however, that *all* types of transcription constitute a form of translation of the spoken word into something else. An interview transcript can never be the mirror image of the interview.

Participant observation

'Observation' is part of a wide range of research activities. It could be argued that without engaging in some type of observation, a researcher would not be able to carry out any kind of research. In this section, however, we are concerned with 'observation' as a method of data collection. Flick (1998: 137) identifies five features that define types of observation. They include the extent to which the observation is covert, the extent to which it is systematic (or standardized), whether or not it takes place in a natural setting, whether or not the observer takes part in the activity that is being observed, and how much of it involves self-observation (or reflexivity). The type of observational method we are concerned with here is *participant observation*. This tends to take place in natural settings (e.g. a school or hospital; a bar or a club), where the observer can be either incognito (covert) or known as a researcher (overt). It tends to involve at least some self-observation (see *reflexivity*, p. 10), and the observations made tend not to be standardized (i.e. not systematic), at least in the early stages of the research. Participant observation requires the researcher to engage in a variety of activities including participation, documentation, (informal) interviewing and reflection. The researcher needs to maintain a balance between participation and observation. In other words, the researcher needs to be involved enough to understand what is going on, yet remain detached enough to be able to reflect on the phenomenon under investigation. This can be extremely difficult, particularly when the research is concerned with emotionally charged subject matter. For example, it may be easier to maintain reflective distance when we are observing visitors to an art gallery (see

Appendix 2) than when we are engaged in participant observation in an intensive care unit. In their book about soccer fans, Marsh et al. (1978: 119) remind us of the importance of emotional involvement in participant observation:

A point should be made here concerning participant observation. Many people seem to equate this kind of methodology with going along to events and simply looking at what goes on – they seem to leave out the participation bit. But an involvement, albeit a rather restrained one, in the action is a basic requirement. One needs not only to observe what is happening but also to *feel* what it is like to be in a particular social situation. This experiential aspect does not come about by being a totally disinterested onlooker. It comes about through an attempt to share in the excitement and emotions which, for soccer fans, constitute the ‘electric’ atmosphere which is seen as being the most important aspect of Saturday afternoons. (emphasis in original)

The participant observer needs to keep detailed notes of any observations made. In some settings, it is a good idea to phase observation and writing. This is particularly the case where participation in the activities under investigation requires the researcher’s full attention. Note-taking will then have to wait. However, it is important that the researcher records his or her observations as soon as possible after they have been made. This is partly to counteract forgetting but also because we may see things differently after a period of reflection. First impressions cannot be recaptured. Observational notes should feature as much detail as possible, including verbatim, or near verbatim, quotes of what people said, concrete descriptions of the setting, people and events involved. In the early stages of the research, in particular, the researcher should take care not to exclude observations that appear trivial at the time. This is because apparent trivia may well turn out to contain crucial information, the value of which may only emerge in later stages of the research. Some researchers find it helpful to think about observational notes in terms of their focus.

Most of what is recorded will be concerned with the actual observations made. Such notes will include descriptions of settings, events and people, as well as quotations and/or summaries of what people said. These may be referred to as *substantive notes*. Another set of notes will be concerned with the process of observation itself. Such notes will reflect on the researcher’s role in the research, his or her relationship with the other participants, and problems encountered in the field, such as any difficulties associated with the negotiation of roles. These are *methodological notes*. Finally, the researcher will wish to record emerging themes, connections, patterns, and so on. These constitute the beginnings of data analysis and theory-building; they may be referred to as *analytical notes*.

Some approaches to participant observation *combine* data collection and analysis. This is how participant observation is used in ethogenic research. In this case, the analytical notes will be extensive and progressively complex. Others *phase* data collection and analysis whereby a period of data collection is followed by a period of analysis of the observational notes. Preliminary data analysis then gives rise to another, this time more focused, phase of data collection, and so on. This is how grounded theory researchers use participant observation. A third approach to participant observation

involves a period of data collection followed by analysis of the data. This is suitable when the researcher has little time or is unable to return to the field for whatever reason.

The first two approaches (*combining* and *phasing* of data collection and analysis) require focused observation. Focused observation involves the identification of a particular aspect of the phenomenon as the focus for intensive observation. Focused observation constitutes a move beyond a purely descriptive approach to observation. It is based upon emergent theoretical formulations and it is designed to ‘test’ the researcher’s hunches against reality. For example, if we think that we may have identified a recurrent pattern in our observational data (e.g. that nurses take cigarette breaks after particularly stressful or distressing encounters with patients), we may wish to focus our observations around relevant situations or events (e.g. stressful or distressing encounters with patients) to further explore the pattern. It is important, however, to maintain an open mind and to observe widely enough to allow disconfirming observations to occur. Emerging theory should not constrain the researcher’s ability to consider alternative explanations. A shift from a descriptive to an explanatory level needs to be managed carefully.

Diaries

Diaries are not widely used as a method of data collection in psychological research. This is because the diary method constitutes a challenge for both researcher and participant. Participants make a commitment to maintain a record (of their experiences, of their activities, of their feelings) over an extended period. Keeping the diary will inevitably have an effect upon their daily routines and most probably also on their experiences. The diary becomes the participant’s companion, and yet it has to be handed over to the researcher at the end of the data collection phase. The researcher in turn has to face the challenge of recruiting participants who are willing to keep a diary. Some sections of the population will be more likely to agree to take part in such a study than others. Literacy, however, should not have to be a pre-condition for taking part in a diary study. Tape-recorders can take the place of journals. The researcher has to formulate a set of instructions that will guide participants in their diary-keeping without constraining them unnecessarily. Participants are likely to differ in their expectations of what is involved in keeping a diary for research purposes. Some of them will have kept diaries for themselves; others will find the idea of writing about themselves strange and possibly uncomfortable. The researcher needs to identify the appropriate medium of communication for their participants. Recruitment and initiation of participants, therefore, require a lot of thought.

As with interviews, diaries can be more or less structured. Here, we are concerned with unstructured diaries. That is, participants are asked to keep a record of their experiences, activities and feelings in relation to a particular issue or topic (e.g. their pregnancy, their spouse, their work, their chronic illness), *in their own words*. They are not provided with a set of questions or rating scales to complete each time they make an entry in their diary. However, even with unstructured diaries, the researcher needs to provide participants with some guidance as to:

- how frequently they are expected to make entries (e.g. every hour, day, week, month, etc.);
- which medium of reporting is to be used (e.g. audio-taping, written, photographic, video, etc.);
- what to write about (i.e. the focus of the study);
- the time period covered (e.g. one day, week, month, year, etc.).

Depending on the research question, there may be more or less flexibility in relation to any one, or all, of these. In addition, the researcher may need to indicate to participants in how much detail they are expected to write about their experiences. However, it is important not to be too prescriptive, as this may undermine participants' motivation to take part in the study. It is a good idea for the researcher to collect diary entries regularly (e.g. daily or weekly) to maintain contact with participants, answer any questions they may have and to motivate them to continue keeping the diary.

When used successfully, the diary method of data collection can provide access to information that is otherwise very hard to obtain. The diaries generate data that are temporally ordered; that is, they reveal how events unfold prospectively, in real time. They avoid problems associated with retrospective reporting, which can easily be coloured by the participant's present circumstances, retrospective interpretation of events or simply forgetting of details. Diaries can also facilitate access to very personal or intimate information that may not emerge in a face-to-face interview. However, the diary method does suffer from poor recruitment and high drop-out rates, due to the high demands it places upon participants. Its success depends very much on the participants' motivation and commitment to the study. There are also ethical concerns. Keeping the diary may sensitize participants to certain experiences. For example, keeping a pain diary may increase some participants' pain. Keeping a diary may also prompt the respondent to reflect upon aspects of their lives that they feel unhappy about. The commitment to keep the diary may increase pressure on participants, particularly during stressful episodes. Researchers need to monitor any harmful effects of keeping the diary on participants and offer support where needed.

Focus groups

Focus groups have only recently emerged as a standard data collection technique for qualitative researchers in psychology. However, focus groups are rapidly gaining in popularity, particularly in qualitative health psychology (e.g. Wilkinson 1998). Focus groups provide an alternative to semi-structured interviewing. The focus group is really a group interview that uses the interaction among participants as a source of data. Here, the researcher takes on the role of moderator whose task it is to introduce the group members to one another, to introduce the focus of the group (e.g. a question or a stimulus such as an advert or a photo) and to gently 'steer' the discussion. Such 'steering' may involve periodically recalling the original focus of the group, prompting group members to respond to issues raised by others, or identifying agreements and disagreements among group members. The moderator also sets certain limits to the discussion, such as its beginning and its end.

The strength of the focus group as a method of data collection lies in its ability to mobilize participants to respond to and comment on one another's contributions. In this way, statements are challenged, extended, developed, undermined or qualified in ways that generate rich data for the researcher. Such data allow the researcher to address questions about the ways in which attitudes may be formed and changed, and about how participants jointly construct meanings. It provides evidence of the ways in which participants may justify their positions, and how they may be persuaded by others to change their views. In addition, the focus group provides a setting that is less artificial than the one-to-one interview, which means that the data generated by it are likely to have high(er) ecological validity.

Ideally, focus group participants should interact with one another in the same way that they would interact with peers outside of the research context. This is more likely to be the case if participants are already acquainted with one another before they take part in the focus group. Focus groups should consist of no more than six participants. This is to ensure that all participants remain actively involved in the group discussion throughout the data collection phase. Also, it is extremely difficult to transcribe a group discussion of more than six participants accurately.

Depending on the research question, focus groups can be: (1) homogenous (where participants share key features) or heterogeneous (where participants are different), (2) pre-existing (e.g. a group of friends or work colleagues) or new, and (3) concerned (where participants have a stake in the subject matter) or naïve (where participants do not have any particular commitment in relation to the subject matter). For example, we may be interested in the experience of pregnancy in women whose partners have died shortly after conception. Our research question may be 'How do women whose partners have died shortly after conception manage their pregnancies?' To address this research question, we need to recruit a homogeneous focus group (i.e. women whose partners have died shortly after conception). The group could be either pre-existing (e.g. a support group for women in this situation) or new (brought together through the researcher). The group would probably be concerned rather than naïve, since the subject matter of the focus group discussion concerns their personal circumstances.

Even though focus groups may appear to be more productive than the one-to-one interview, they are not appropriate to all research questions. If the subject matter is sensitive and the participants are expected to talk about intimate aspects of their experience, semi-structured interviews may be more appropriate. Disclosure is not necessarily enhanced through the presence of other participants, although mutual questioning within a group may have this effect. The researcher needs to think carefully about the extent to which the focus group setting would, or would not, facilitate disclosure in relation to the research question. It is also important to be clear about one's aims in analysing focus group-generated data. If our aim is to obtain valid and reliable information about the participants' views and/or experiences in relation to a particular concern (i.e. a *realist* research aim), then we need to employ analytic techniques that will allow us to detect, and remove from our analysis, distorting influences such as the contributions of domineering group members or overly acquiescent comments. On the other hand, if the aim of the research is to trace the ways in which meanings are collectively constructed within a group and how consensus may be

achieved through discussion (i.e. a *social constructionist* research aim), then all contributions are equally useful to our analysis. In both cases, however, the researcher needs to pay careful attention to the group dynamics within the group. A focus group with six participants is never the equivalent of six individual interviews because, as Kidd and Parshall (2000: 294) point out '(...) individuals in groups do not speak or answer questions in the same way as they do in other settings'.

Semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, diaries and focus groups are not the only qualitative methods of data collection available. New ways of collecting data for qualitative analysis are being developed by researchers as they attempt to answer new research questions. For example, in recent years qualitative researchers have begun to use the Internet as a source of data (see Evans et al. 2008; Mann and Stewart 2000). The Internet can provide access to a range of data sources, including unsolicited data (e.g. web pages, blogs, newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms) (see Robinson 2001), as well as Internet-mediated interviews and discussions. It is important to consider ethical issues when planning to use unsolicited data in particular; after all, those who expressed their thoughts and feelings within the context of an Internet-based support group or discussion group may not wish their words to be used for research purposes. The Association of Internet Researchers provides a set of guidelines for ethical decision-making in Internet research (see Ess and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002). The British Psychological Society has also produced guidelines for ethical practice in psychological research online (www.bps.org.uk/webethic).

The four methods introduced in this chapter can generate a wide range of qualitative data. In addition, methods of data collection can also be used in combination (e.g. participant observation and semi-structured interviewing) to view the same phenomenon from different angles. This constitutes a form of *triangulation*.

Finally, there are qualitative approaches for which methods of data collection and methods of data analysis are inseparable. Here, the gathering of data and the process of analysing the data do not take place at different, and consecutive, points in time. Instead, the researcher collects and analyses data in a cyclical fashion so that initial attempts at data analysis inform strategies for further data collection, and so on. Such studies' findings emerge, in cumulative and piecemeal fashion, from the research process as a whole. Grounded theory (see Chapter 3), phenomenology (Chapter 4) and memory work (Chapter 8) are examples of such qualitative approaches.

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