are selected on the basis of known characteristics, which might be socio-demographic or might relate to factors such as experience, behaviour, roles etc. relevant to the research topic. Units are chosen to represent and symbolise prescribed groups or characteristics (**symbolic representation**) and to reflect the diversity of the study population as fully as possible.

Theoretical sampling is a particular type of purposive sampling in which units are selected specifically on the basis of their potential contribution to theory. It is mainly associated with grounded theory and involves iteration between sample selection, fieldwork and analysis. An initial sample is selected, fieldwork carried out and data analysed; a further sample is selected to refine emergent categories or theories, and so on until no new insights would be generated by expanding the sample further.

A sample frame is the information source from which the sample is selected. This may be an existing information source (such as administrative records, published lists or a survey sample) or one which is generated specifically for the study.

A sample matrix is a matrix showing the prescribed sample criteria, mapped out vertically and horizontally. Each criterion is broken down into categories, the number of which will vary. Some criteria may be **interlocked or nested** – that is, one criterion controlled within another. **Quotas** are then drawn up, specifying the precise number of people required within each of the categories set out in the sample matrix.

Non-probability sampling is the term given to a range of sampling strategies used in qualitative research. The intention is not to produce a sample which is statistically representative, and the probability of units being selected is not known. This is in contrast to **probability sampling** – an approach to sampling used in quantitative research, and particularly in surveys, to produce a sample which is statistically representative of the sampled population. The sample is selected randomly, and each unit has a known probability of selection. This approach is not generally appropriate for qualitative research.

Further reading

Bryman, A. (2001) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
Burgess, R.G. (1984) *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*, London: Allen & Unwin
Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago: Aldine de Gruyter
Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edition, London: Sage
Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

5

Designing Fieldwork Strategies and Materials

Sue Arthur and James Nazroo

In-depth interviews and focus groups – the subjects of the two chapters which follow this one – are sometimes grouped together as forms of unstructured data collection. Given their flexible and responsive nature, the use of this term is understandable. But it is also a little misleading. Although qualitative data collection does not involve pre-structured questions, carrying out good in-depth fieldwork requires a high degree of planning, both about the overall shape or structure of the interview or group discussion, and about the fieldwork materials that will be needed. These are the issues with which this chapter is concerned.

We begin by looking at different forms of in-depth interviews and group discussions and at how they can be structured effectively. We then look specifically at the design of topic guides. These are documents which identify the key issues and subtopics to be explored. They are also known as interview schedules or interview guides, but we prefer the term 'topic guide' both because it emphasises the focus on outlining topics rather than questions, and because it is equally applicable to focus groups as to interviews. The following section describes how and why other fieldwork materials might be built into data collection. Finally, we look at how researchers need to prepare for fieldwork and refine their data collection strategies.

Structuring data collection

Level of structure required

All qualitative data collection will have some intention as to structure – even if the intention is to follow entirely the direction taken by participants with the researcher not imposing any structure on the interview or group discussion. But the extent to which the structure and coverage of data collection can usefully be envisaged or planned in advance will vary, depending on the specific purposes of the study. In particular it will relate to how far the researcher can specify in advance the issues to be explored, how much interest there is in issues which they have not anticipated, and how far they are concerned with the way in which issues are raised, approached and conceptualised by people.

A very exploratory study designed to understand underlying values, concepts and norms (akin to what Rubin and Rubin (1995) refer to as 'cultural interviews') is likely to involve a number of very broad questions, encouraging the participant to take the lead and to shape their own narrative. The researcher will probe in depth, aiming to uncover the values and culture of the participant. Although the researcher will have a sense of the key research issues, the agenda will largely be set and the interview shaped by the interviewee. Rubin and Rubin's cultural interviews often involve interviewing the same person more than once, although this is not an essential feature of this very exploratory type of interview.

In other studies, there will be a stronger sense in advance of the issues that need to be explored. The interview or focus group will involve in-depth probing and questioning that is responsive to participants and (particularly in interviews) their individual experiences and context. But there will be a set of issues which need to be covered broadly consistently with all participants, and sometimes a stronger emphasis on factual and descriptive data than in the more exploratory forms of data collection. The researcher will play a more active role in moving the discussion through specific areas about which the people's experiences and thoughts are sought, although there will be scope for participants to move on to these areas spontaneously, and the researcher will still be open to unanticipated issues raised by participants. This type of data collection is closer to what Rubin and Rubin call 'topical interviews' which are 'more narrowly focused on a particular event or process, and are concerned with what happened and why' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 28).

Although these issues have tended to be discussed, by Rubin and Rubin and by others, in terms of interviews, similar differences in the degree of structure can be found in focus groups.

Deciding how far the structure and subject coverage should be specified in advance in any particular study requires careful thought about the nature of data sought (Burgess, 1982b; Holloway and Wheeler, 1996; Patton, 2002;

Thompson, 2000). Broadly speaking, data collection is likely to be a little more structured in an evaluative or investigative study looking for example at the operation of a service or policy. If the study needs to provide descriptive evidence of people's experiences of a service or programme, a fair amount of detailed information is likely to be needed to describe the features of the service or programme, and there are likely to be specific issues about which evaluative commentary is sought. Studies with a particular emphasis on comparison will usually also require more structure, since it will be necessary to cover broadly the same issues with each of the comparison groups. It may also need to be more structured where fieldwork is carried out by a team of researchers, to ensure some consistency in approaches and issues covered.

Data collection is likely to be less structured in a very exploratory study – perhaps in an area about which little is so far known, or if a key objective is to understand how participants' conceptions or values emerge through their speech and their narrative. In general, too, focus group data collection is less structured than in-depth interviewing, in part because it is harder to impose a structure on a group discussion but mainly because a key feature of focus groups is that data emerges through interaction within the group (see Chapter 7). The way in which topics are explored will derive very much from how the group responds to what has already been said. There will be less scope to specify, in advance, very specific areas for coverage.

A number of writers (see for example Fielding, 1995; Fontana and Frey, 2000; Mason, 2002; May, 2001; Patton, 2002) distinguish between two main types of qualitative interviews. Unstructured, non-standardised or in-depth interviews involve a broad agenda which maps the issues to be explored across the sample, but the order, wording and way in which they are followed up will vary considerably between interviews. In semi-structured or semi-standardised interviews, the interviewer asks key questions in the same way each time and does some probing for further information, but this probing is more limited than in unstructured, in-depth interviews.

There are different models of semi-structured interviewing, and terms are not necessarily used consistently so that what some commentators describe as 'semi-structured' interviews may be described by others as unstructured or in-depth or, at the other end of the spectrum, open-ended survey interviews. Some approaches are quite flexible, for example allowing interviewers to alter the sequence of questions or the way in which they are phrased. Others lean more to a fixed structure plus probing and are essentially an attempt to combine standardised quantitative questioning with non-standardised qualitative questioning. This latter approach provides more depth than a classic survey interview (Brannen, 1992a; Qureshi, 1992) but has a number of disadvantages (Bryman, 1992). It allows only limited responsiveness to individual personal contexts, and requires interviewer and participant to move between rather different modes of question and answer. Because there is limited probing, the in-depth material is likely to

come disproportionately from more confident or articulate people. These features constrain their ability to generate the type of in-depth data that are the hallmark of qualitative research.

Ordering data collection

It is also important to give some early thought to the order in which issues and topics might usefully be approached in an interview or focus group. This involves mentally picturing the interview or group discussion and working out the most natural way to structure it. In the field, the researcher need not stick rigidly to this order – indeed, it is much better to be flexible and to explore issues earlier or later than envisaged if, given the dynamic of the interview or focus group, that is likely to be more effective. But giving some thought to how the various questions in the researcher's mind might be grouped and ordered is helpful, for several reasons.
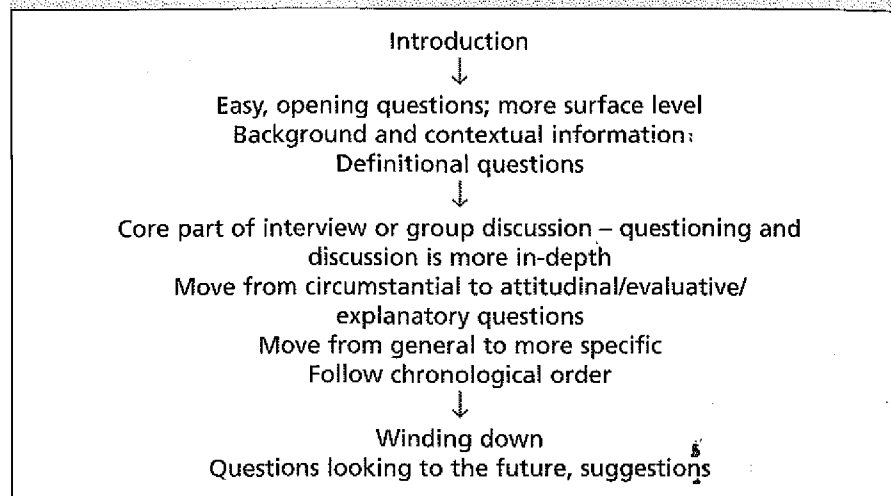
First, interviews and group discussions are processes with their own dynamic, which means that different issues are best addressed at different stages of the process (see below, and Chapters 6 and 7). The discussion will also feel smoother, more natural and less 'jerky' if issues are discussed in some kind of organised progression. A further issue is that understanding something of the personal context – what, precisely, will depend on the research topic – early in the interview will be important to make sense of what they later say, and to probe effectively. Finally, it will be easier for the research team to become familiar with the topic guide if it has a logical structure.

In practice, the order in which topics are addressed will vary between different interviews or different group discussions, but it is nonetheless worth spending time thinking about a rational order and using this in designing topic guides (see below). There are a number of useful general principles, which are summarised in Box 5.1 below and illustrated in Box 5.2.

- The opening topics should ease participants gently into the interview or focus group situation. They should be relatively straightforward to answer and unthreatening. Their purpose is to get the participant talking and to help them understand the discursive, conversational style of data collection.
- The opening topics are also an opportunity to collect information that will provide important context for later stages of the interview. This might include family or household circumstances, whether the participant is working or not, or any other key background details relevant to the later discussion. This same principle can apply to subsequent ordering of topics – in other words there may be some topics that it is helpful to know about at an earlier stage in order to place other responses in context and to guide follow-up questions.
- Another way to set up an unthreatening atmosphere is to move from general to more specific topics, especially if the subject in question is one which participants may feel is personal, sensitive or demanding.

- On the whole people find it easier to talk about an experience or something they have done (a behaviour), than motivations or reasons for something, or their attitudes or feelings. Generally, therefore, questions about experiences, circumstances and behaviours should precede motivational or attitudinal information.
- However, it can also be helpful to introduce a discussion of definitions or meanings at an early stage in the interview or group discussion, for example what people understand by the term 'satisfaction' in relation to services. Such conceptual questions can be quite challenging for participants, and care should be taken to ask them in a non-threatening manner, to avoid setting up what looks like a test at the start. But it may be useful to hear participants' initial reflections on and definitions of a concept, rather than asking these questions later when their definitions and conceptualisation has been influenced by the discussion that has taken place.
- Towards the end, it is important to wind the interview or group discussion down, partly to end on a positive note but also to ensure that participants have time to move away from any feelings, such as distress, frustration or anger that the discussion may have generated. The kind of topics that are useful towards the end of an interview or group discussion include thoughts about the future, or suggestions for how a programme or service could be improved, or advice or recommendations for other people in similar situations to their own.
- Towards the end, it can also be helpful to include questions which seek an overall summary of somebody's attitudes or experiences. In the interview or group discussion, this will enable participants to provide an overview, which may give a valuable indication of the weight they attach to different factors. It will help to highlight how views have been refined or modified as the discussion proceeded, particularly useful in focus groups. These types of questions may also allow a degree of 'mopping up', to be sure that the researcher leaves with a complete picture of participants' views on the key topics. However, care should be taken in analysis not to overemphasise these summaries of attitudes at the expense of the fuller, more complex data collected earlier on.

Where the subject of the study is an event or a process, it will often be most useful to structure the interview or focus group chronologically. This seems to aid recall. It is also often the case that explaining behaviour or thoughts at one stage requires allusion to something that happened earlier and as a result it can be harder for participants – and researchers – if the discussion keeps moving backwards and forwards in time. Discussing processes broadly chronologically from beginning to end (albeit with some forward and backward referencing) will feel smoother and will often aid in-depth exploration.

BOX 5.1 STAGES OF DISCUSSION IN INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Introduction
↓
Easy, opening questions; more surface level
Background and contextual information;
Definitional questions
↓
Core part of interview or group discussion – questioning and
discussion is more in-depth
Move from circumstantial to attitudinal/evaluative/
explanatory questions
Move from general to more specific
Follow chronological order
↓
Winding down
Questions looking to the future, suggestions

BOX 5.2 EXAMPLES OF DATA COLLECTION ORDERING

Example 1: interview guide

A study of ethnicity and sexual lifestyles (Elam et al., 1999) which aimed to explore the personal and cultural factors that influence sexual lifestyles, particularly with a view to informing health promotion strategies, approached the key issues in the following order:

- Introduction
- Personal circumstances
- Learning about sex – ways of finding out, what was learnt, influences
- Sexual history and relationships – past and current experiences and behaviour
- Travel abroad and sexual activity – experiences and attitudes
- Safer sex – understanding, awareness and behaviour
- STDs and HIV infection – awareness about diseases and symptoms
- Suggestions for improvements to services and information

Example 2: group discussion guide

A study of an early stage of New Deal for Young People (a welfare to work scheme) (Legard and Ritchie, 1999) using group discussions had the following, broadly chronological, topic guide structure:

- Introduction
- Jobsearch prior to New Deal and perceptions of job readiness
- Initial impressions of New Deal
- Overview of activities under New Deal
- Initial interview
- Subsequent activities on New Deal
- Impact of New Deal on job readiness
- Job search activity
- Future prospects and short- and long-term plans
- Evaluation of New Deal

Designing topic guides

Considerations about the broad structure required will inform the design of the topic guide. A well-designed topic guide will provide flexible direction to fieldwork process and essential documentation of a central aspect of the research. A poorly designed topic guide at best will be confusing and at worst will restrict the exploratory and reflective nature of qualitative research. Regardless of the nature of the research, the use of topic guides in qualitative research is strongly recommended and careful investment in their design is needed.

The purpose and nature of a topic guide

Even in the most informal and unstructured interviews, the researcher is likely to have identified a broad agenda of topics or themes to explore. A topic guide provides documentation of subjects to investigate that serves as an interview agenda, guide, or *aide-mémoire* (Burgess, 1984).

As an *aide-mémoire*, the topic guide offers a tool to enhance the consistency of data collection, particularly where a number of researchers are involved. It helps to ensure that relevant issues are covered systematically and with some uniformity, while still allowing flexibility to pursue the detail that is salient to each individual participant. But this does not mean asking the questions in the same way or asking the same questions of each individual interviewed. A topic guide should be seen as a mechanism for steering the discussion in an interview or focus group but *not* as an exact prescription of coverage. If it is designed as a kind of semi-structured questionnaire it will limit the degree to which the researcher can interact with interviewees. It will also discourage reflection by both the researcher and the participant, and may prevent the pursuit of unanticipated but nonetheless highly relevant themes that emerge.

The topic guide will often be the only written documentation of the fieldwork process, apart from transcripts (which generally remain private to the research team, see Chapter 3). As such, the topic guide also serves a function as an important part of the public documentation of the research objectives and process. In the early stages of the research, it is a tool that can be used for consultation and discussion about the direction that the research will take. For the research team, the topic guide will serve largely as documentation of the objectives and concepts that have been developed together during discussions about the study. Displaying topic guides in study reports is an important element of documenting the research approach and making it transparent (see Chapters 10 and 11).

Establishing subject coverage

The process of topic guide design begins by establishing the subjects to be covered in data collection. This will often be clear to the researcher from the stated objectives of the research and the existing literature in the field. These

will have been determined at an early stage in the design of the study (see Chapter 3). So, the process usually begins by reviewing the research specification and relevant literature. However, before beginning data collection it is always useful to seek further ideas about the scope of the topic guide through discussion within the team and more widely.

Outside the team, this can involve potential users of the research, including funders or commissioners, other researchers, 'experts' in the field, or those who might be involved in the implementation of the research findings. Throughout the whole of this process though, it is important to maintain clarity about the central objectives of the study and not to allow specific questions or topics to shift the focus too far. Part of this process will therefore involve ruling certain topics as outside the scope of the enquiry.

For research that does not have clearly identified a priori research questions, Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Fielding (1995) describe the initial identification of the scope of a topic guide as the first of four key stages. They term this the 'puzzlements and jottings' stage at which the researcher initially identifies a topic and considers what is problematic or interesting about it:

> Logging data by means of intensive interviewing with interview guides reasonably begins with you, the prospective investigator, taking some place, class of persons, experience, abstract topic and so on as problematic or as a source of puzzlement. (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 78)

Having identified these 'puzzlements' the researcher then takes each as a topic of investigation and generates a list of problematic or interesting aspects, jotting down questions that will help to explore and clarify each puzzle. At this time, the researcher can discuss with others and consult the relevant literature in order to add to what is already known about the issue.

Whatever initial discussion takes place, it will be very valuable for the topic guide to be generated by all those who will be involved in fieldwork. The production of a topic guide leads to a crystallisation of the research objectives and raises issues about overall fieldwork strategies – how to approach difficult issues, the appropriate order and so on. It will generally be useful for all those involved in fieldwork to contribute to and to learn through the process of designing the topic guide.

An example topic guide

An example of a full topic guide is shown in Box 5.3. This topic guide was used for a study which explored the experience of homelessness among young lesbians and gay men (O'Connor and Molloy, 2001), through in-depth interviews.

The topic guide illustrates a number of points discussed above and below in this chapter. Although this particular guide was developed for use in in-depth interviews, the general features highlighted would also apply to guides for focus groups.

- It will be seen that there are six key sections, each divided into up to a further six subtopics. Each subtopic is broken down in some detail to show the specific issues that will generally need to be covered.
- The order should be noted. Some descriptive information about participants comes first, although the issues of sexuality and homelessness are not listed until later. Some participants might raise them earlier themselves, but they have control as to how early on these are discussed. Having mapped people's personal contexts, the topic guide moves on to look specifically at experiences of housing crisis – ordered broadly chronologically on the guide (cause, nature, sources of help, ending). The next section looks in more depth at sexuality – it is expected that people will feel more comfortable with the subject being discussed by this stage, and its interaction with their experiences of homelessness can be explored. The guide then moves to housing services and particularly their response to sexuality. It finishes with some more general reflections and, on a positive note, with suggestions for the future.
- Items are worded very briefly – almost none goes over one line of text. They are not worded as specific questions but as issues or topics, with an indication of the subtopics to be explored. The researcher is left entirely free to phrase questions as they think best.
- Finally, there are some signposts and instructions, but these are kept very brief – again the researcher is expected to exercise their own judgement about how to use and approach each section in the interview.

The structure and length of the guide

Some general principles around the order of topic coverage were discussed above, and these will inform the structure of the topic guide. The first stage is to establish which topics can be grouped together, and what the logical or natural ordering of the topics will be.

When thinking about the grouping and ordering of topics on the guide, it is important to watch for any repetition that might arise. This may seem an obvious point but a researcher's concern to ensure that key issues are covered can sometimes lead to putting them in several different sections. This makes a guide very hard – and tedious – to use. If there is a lot of probing to be done around one key topic then this should be contained within one section on the topic guide, and its importance emphasised there.

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, the extent to which follow-up issues are prescribed in the guide will vary depending on the purpose of the study, how far topic coverage can be anticipated in advance, and the desired balance between participants and researcher in shaping the structure of the discussion. Rubin and Rubin (1995) distinguish between a 'tree and branch' model (the 'branches' being issues pre-specified for follow up) and a 'rivers and channel' model (where the researcher follows 'channels', or themes, wherever they lead).

BOX 5.3   EXAMPLE OF TOPIC GUIDE

HOMELESSNESS AMONG LESBIAN AND GAY YOUTH

OBJECTIVES
- to explore life histories in detail
- to determine factors which are relevant to becoming homeless
- to gather reflections on their experience(s) of homelessness
- to examine contact of and use of statutory and voluntary agencies
- to understand the needs of homeless lesbian and gay youth.

INTRODUCTION
- introduce National Centre and study; confidentiality; timing

1 PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES

- Age
- Nature of current housing status
- Summary of current activity (work/education/other)
- Sources and level of income

2 LIFE HISTORY

> *Encourage detailed coverage of circumstances and key events/periods*
> *Each episode of housing crisis uncovered should be explored fully using*
> *Section 3*

- Childhood and family background

  - where born
  - family composition
  - family circumstances (emotional, economic, stability and mobility)
  - extended family (geographic and emotional proximity)
  - any experiences of care

- School life/education

  - where went to school (mobility, stability)
  - experiences of/memories of school
  - whether made friends, whether a happy time
  - any experiences of bullying
  - experiences of exclusion or absence temporary or permanent
  - relationship with teachers
  - when left school/further education
  - any qualifications

- Working history

  - whether worked, when started
  - types of jobs

(Continued)

BOX 5.3   *(Continued)*

  - how long stayed in jobs
  - feelings about jobs

- Leaving home/leaving care

  - when, what precipitated
  - experiences and feelings
  - how well prepared

- Friendships

  - important friendships and relationships as growing up
  - whether local network of friends, what based around, how (easily) made
  - whether still in contact, still important

- Further relationships

  - boyfriends/girlfriends/partners
  - living together
  - relationship breakdowns and separations

- Home moving/stability
  - experiences of moving
  - where from/to
  - what precipitated

3 HOUSING CRISIS

> *Use this section to explore each period of housing crisis unveiled above*

- Cause

  - how it came about
  - *explore fully events surrounding the beginning of housing crisis*

- Nature

  - what was happening
  - living arrangements
  - mobility
  - everyday activities

- Feelings

  - how felt about themselves
  - how felt others saw them

- Effect

  - main difficulties experienced
  - how life had changed

(Continued)

BOX 5.3 (Continued)

- Coping strategies

  - how managed during that time
  - personal resources
  - informal sources of help

    → who helped them
    → what role they played in life
    → whether remained in contact with anyone from home/family background
    → how made a difference

  - formal sources of help

    → which services used
    → why those services (why not others)
    → how made a difference

- Overcoming crisis

  ➢ *If in the past*

    - whether/how event or period ended
    - anything they tried to do/managed to do
    - what precipitated change
    - what prevented change
    - what made things worse

  ➢ *If current*

    - what could bring an end to housing crisis in the future

  ➢ *If now housed*

    - general feelings about current housing situation
    - if specific housing (i.e. with other L/G/B YP) – views about
    - if generic – views about suitability/need for specific housing

4 SEXUALITY

Use this section to explore the evolution of the young person's sexuality

- First emergence

  - own responses

- Sexual experiences since

- Relationships since

- Identity

  - whether have a particular way of describing sexuality now
  - when formulated
  - how comfortable and for how long
  - how clear
  - any changes over time
  - impact on their lives

(Continued)

BOX 5.3 (Continued)

- Coming out

  - out to whom/in what situations
  - situations in which reluctant to come out
  - own feelings about coming out (whether 'fully' out or not)
  - (in situations when have come out) other people's responses to sexuality
  - explore specifically impact of being out on accommodation held

- Housing

  - whether sexuality has impacted on housing at any point in the past

    → security of housing status
    → access to accommodation
    → safety of housing
    → other aspects

5 ACCESSING SUPPORT AND HELP

- Overview of service provision

  - knowledge of different places/services available to help with housing crisis

    → homelessness agencies
    → housing associations
    → local authority housing services
    → lesbian and gay services
    → other services

  - who runs them
  - what do they do
  - attitudes towards/perceptions of different services available
  - how did/can they help
  - what prevents them from helping
  - how felt was treated by services used
  - encourage YP to compare and contrast different services

- Sexuality

  - whether ever asked by agencies about their sexuality
    if asked, explore in what way and responses given
    feelings generally about being asked by agencies
  - if L/G/B, how comfortable being out in services used
    factors that make this easy/difficult

    ➢ *If has a key worker*

  - explore whether the sexuality of key worker is important

6 POTENTIAL HELP AND SUPPORT

- What would have made a difference at times when have experienced housing crisis

(Continued)

BOX 5.3 *(Continued)*

- What specifically would they like to see delivered
- Explore what could/should be done

  - to help people in same situation
  - to help people avoid being in that situation
  - what needs to change
  - what difference would it make

What needs to be learnt from their experiences

In its briefest form, a topic guide simply lists key topics to be covered as a broad agenda for the interview or group discussion. At its most detailed, the topic guide may contain a succession of carefully worded questions. More detailed topic guides can contain information such as:

- suggested wording for opening and closing the interview or introducing particular topics
- specific subjects to be covered within broad topic areas
- suggestions for prompts and directions for probing
- suggested wording for questions addressing sensitive topics.

Topic guides can vary from a single page to several pages in length. The amount of detail will reflect the extent of pre-structuring that is possible or desirable (see above), and thus the type of data sought. But some of this difference in length is also determined by individual styles of creating topic guides and the amount of detail which people feel comfortable with when using a guide. Some researchers are much happier working from a short guide (two to three pages) and feel constrained or overwhelmed by a guide with a large amount of detail on it. Others feel more comfortable with detailed guides, and gain some security from knowing that what they need to cover is written down on the guide in case they lose their way during an interview.

On the whole, it is best to keep the topic guide as short as possible. Shorter guides generally encourage more in-depth data collection, provided the researcher is steeped in the objectives of the study and adept at qualitative data collection. Less detail fosters an approach of responding to each interview or focus group situation, and not reading from the guide in a formal style. If a topic guide is designed with a lot of detail and in a relatively structured style, it may give the impression that the questions on the guide are the only ones that need to be asked (or that they have to be asked in a prescribed way), which will rarely be the case.

At the same time, research commissioners or advisers may want to have a more detailed idea of what is, or is not, going to be covered in the interview. A full topic guide can also act as a good source of briefing for research teams. A useful strategy to meet different people's requirements of topic guides is to have a full detailed guide, which gives a clear steer on relevant topics and areas of interest, and alongside this, a summary topic guide to be used in fieldwork.

It is therefore hard to be prescriptive about the most appropriate length for a guide, although, as a general rule, a guide that is longer than four pages can feel very unwieldy in fieldwork. Another 'rule of thumb' for judging appropriate length is the number of different sections a guide contains – somewhere between six and nine discrete subject sections is probably enough for an interview, for which the optimum duration lies somewhere between one and two hours (see Chapter 6). With this kind of time limit, a topic guide with ten or more sections, or alternatively one which has a great amount of detail in each section, will result in an interview which is only able to provide very surface level information. Depth of information will be lost in favour of breadth of coverage. For focus groups a maximum of five or six key areas is desirable – fewer than an interview to allow time for all group members to be drawn into each topic.

Since on the day participants may have less time than was originally requested, or a great deal to say on some topics, it is important that the team is clear about the issues which are most important, and those that could be sacrificed if time is short.

Language and terminology

In general, topic guides work best when items are not worded as actual questions, but instead use single words or phrases to indicate the issues which should be explored, and leave the formulation of the question up to the researchers themselves. This encourages active interviewing, becoming responsive to the situation and most crucially to the terms, concepts and language used by the participants themselves (see Chapter 6). In practical terms it is very difficult to read carefully a long and detailed question on a topic guide while carrying out interviews or focus groups.

The best way to approach this is to draft topic guides with a simple statement of the issues to explore – much more useful in the heat of the moment than a long question. For researchers who prefer a little more guidance, phrasing the question with 'they' rather than 'you' is helpful – for example, 'what do they think are the most important features'; 'how did they become aware of the service'. This encourages more spontaneity in question wording, rather than verbatim reading of questions listed on the guide. The guide can also indicate a useful way of approaching a subject that has, perhaps, arisen through discussion in the team: for example, 'ask for description of a typical day at work', rather than 'details of job activity'.

Since the researcher needs to be responsive to the language used by participants, the items should be phrased in language which is as neutral as possible. Sometimes it is easiest to use official or formal language on the

guide itself (for example 'sexually transmitted diseases', 'job search activity') provided that it is clear that the actual words used will reflect the language of participants and the terms with which they appear comfortable. The most important thing is to make sure that both the researcher and the participant are using language and specific terms in the same way, and that there is no misunderstanding.

Specification of follow-up questions and probes

In addition to the main subjects of interest, topic guides will usually include some indication of issues for follow-up questions and probing (see Chapter 6 for a full discussion of types of questions and probes). These follow-up questions are an essential feature of qualitative data collection, and vital to ensure full exploration of the issues under investigation. They are used to generate comprehensive accounts of the dimensions or factors involved in an issue, for detailed exploration of a particular attitude, motivation, behaviour and so on, to check views on some feature across the whole sample or to generate examples or illustrations.

One of the ways in which topic guides can vary considerably is the degree to which these are included on the guide or left to the researcher's discretion, and a number of authors discuss the use of probes in topic guides (see for example Rubin and Rubin, 1995, and Fielding, 1995). Again, the optimal amount of detail will depend on the level of consistency sought in coverage, on individual preference and on the level of skill, experience and knowledge of the researchers who will be using the guide. In particular, it may depend on how confident they are at holding in their head the different dimensions of a topic and the key issues to be explored.

Most probes cannot be specified in advance since their wording and use depend on what the participant has just said. The researcher will always need to be developing follow-up questions on the spot. But it is always useful to have a note of the types of issues that could be explored within each subtopic, with as much discretion as possible left to the interviewer as to which in particular they explore, and the questions they formulate to do so. Box 5.4 shows some examples of how this can be approached.

Making the guide easy to use

This section gives a number of practical tips for how to create a guide that is easy to use in an interview or focus group.

- *Objectives*. It can be helpful for the guide to begin with a brief statement of the objectives of the research study – not just a statement of the topics listed in the guide, but a reminder of the underlying purpose of the study.

BOX 5.4 EXAMPLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

Example 1

In a study about sexual health (Elam et al., 1999), the guide contained a section on awareness of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV:

Awareness of infections/diseases which may be picked up through sex

- types of diseases/how spread: risky practices and circumstances
- types of people who catch them: more or less at risk; attitudes towards people with STD/HIV
- how diseases can be avoided
- perception of own risk of catching/passing on
- perception of risk among friends, partners
- experiences: own partners; people own age
- awareness of HIV
- attitudes towards HIV and other diseases

Example 2

In a study about physical activity among disabled people (Arthur and Finch, 1999), people were asked about their beliefs and knowledge about physical activity:

How important is it to do physical activity; why. Explore e.g.

- fitness
- health (how is health different from fitness)
- mental health, general well-being
- social reasons
- reducing risk of injury
- weight control, physical appearance

- *Introduction*. It is often helpful to have a section at the beginning of the topic guide to remind those using the guide about what needs to be said at the start of the interview. This may include summary points about the research objectives, details of the research team or organisation, the commissioner or funder of the research, why the research is being conducted, the policy on confidentiality, on recording data collection, and how the material will be used.
- *Summary of topics*. An overview of the topic guide on a separate front sheet, giving the main section headings, can provide a quick and easy-to-read reminder when it comes to using the guide.
- *Layout*. The layout of a topic guide can make all the difference to how easy it is to use. In particular, making sure that there is a lot of space on the page not only makes the topic guide easier to read at a glance but also allows the user to annotate the guide where they want to (see below).

It is helpful to 'cascade' items as shown in the full topic guide example earlier (Box 5.3), with a heading showing the main topic and a number of subtopics, each broken down further. Other helpful elements of layout are:

- using different levels of bullet points
- highlighting individual words
- distinguishing different sections through colour, boxes or shading, especially where they apply to different subgroups
- italics or text boxes for instructions or for prompts to demarcate them from main topics or subsidiary questions
- font style which is easy to read at a glance (clear, sans serif and not too small).

- *Instructions.* Although ways of using the topic guide should be extensively discussed in briefing sessions (assuming the researcher is not the only person who will be carrying out fieldwork), it can be helpful to include some pointers on the topic guide. The following can usefully be noted on the guide:

  - some suggested wording for questions which are particularly difficult to introduce
  - instructions for how to carry out a task or when to show a visual aid
  - a brief description of the rationale behind asking a particular question
  - an indication of the relative priority of different sections or topics – maybe noting 'key section', 'briefly', or using asterisks
  - instructions for where certain sections are relevant to subgroups only
  - instructions to explore particular dimensions throughout a section or subsection, such as sources of information, influence of others, or how a past experience compares with a current experience.

- *Ending.* It can be helpful to put a reminder at the end of the topic guide to give reassurances about confidentiality and how the data will be used, giving payments or other 'thank yous' for taking part and dealing with any other business, for example sorting out how they will be re-contacted if there is a follow-up element in the research.

- *More than one topic guide.* If a study involves subgroups whose circumstances or experience means that they need to be asked a separate set of questions, it may be easier to create more than one topic guide rather than incorporate all the different areas or wordings on one guide. For example in a study investigating views of continuing service users and of those who had stopped using a service, it might be easier to have a separate guide for each group if a lot of the question areas need to be handled differently. However, in such a case, it would be vital that both guides cover the common areas in the same way, and that both are taken to each interview in case the person has changed status between selection and the interview.

Incorporating other research instruments and materials

At an early stage in considering the topic guide structure, it is useful to think about whether the types of information sought mean that additional research instruments or materials are required. There are a number of options to consider.

Collecting structured data

Sometimes a topic guide will be used in conjunction with a more structured question sheet or proforma. This can be important where relatively complex and detailed background information is needed in order to have a clear understanding of participants' situations. An important example is when detailed financial information (such as sources and levels of income and expenditure) needs to be collected. Because collecting more structured data means breaking the flow and rapport of an unstructured interview, it is usually helpful to do it near to the beginning of the interview. It is also important to be sure that the information is strictly necessary and to think through how it will be combined with the rest of the data.

For example, in a recent study which involved exploring how couples who separate approach division of their financial assets (Arthur et al., 2002) it was necessary to collect detailed information about the couple's financial situation at the end of their relationship. The interviews then involved looking at each asset, debt or source of income and exploring how it was treated, and why. Because how each was treated depended on the existence of other assets, it was necessary to have a full picture of the financial situation early on, but the information involved was much too detailed for the researchers to hold in their heads. A one-sided sheet was therefore designed with space to enter the value and ownership of each type of asset, and this was used as an *aide-mémoire* in the rest of the interview.

Where past events, and particularly their sequence, are important, using specially designed calendars or diaries can enhance data collection. The structure of the calendar or diary acts as a memory jogger and supports greater precision in the dating of events or episodes described. Logging them as they are discussed means that overlaps or gaps between episodes, and the precise sequencing of events, are highlighted for both participant and researchers and their implications or causes can be the subject of further questioning in the interview.

Using case illustrations and examples

Rooting discussion in specific examples can add depth and richness to data collection. It helps to move beyond initial general responses and to achieve a greater level of depth and specificity. Often it will be sufficient for participants

to give examples and illustrations as they talk, but sometimes a more structured approach is useful.

In studies of professional practice, looking at detailed case examples can help to ensure that the information collected is not very general or idealised, but a description of actual behaviour. Examples can illustrate how general principles were applied in a specific situation, and the circumstances under which a professional might deviate from what they have described as their general approach.

Participants would usually be asked to draw in examples of cases from their own experience. Some guidance as to the type of case sought is useful, to avoid potential bias resulting from someone selecting an atypical example and to ensure that a varied set of cases is discussed across the sample as a whole. For example, participants might be asked to describe the most recent case, or both a difficult and a more straightforward recent one. To ensure complete confidentiality of client details, the participant would be asked to describe the case without naming the client.

It may occasionally be possible for the researcher to select a case in advance. Details of individual cases might sometimes be available in the data set which is used as the sample frame for the study. For example, court records or medical records would allow prior selection of specific cases. Prior selection will help to ensure that a varied set of cases is discussed and to avoid bias in case selection. But it may be problematic if the participant being asked to discuss the case does not see it as a helpful example, and they will need prior warning of the example selected to aid recall.

In either event, it will be important to allow time for the specific example to be discussed in the broader context of the participant's work (describing features of typicality and atypicality, for example), to discuss other cases, and to describe views or practices more generally.

Enabling and projective techniques

The terms 'enabling' and 'projective techniques' refer to a number of techniques described in this section. They generally require preparation of printed material, and careful thought needs to be given to how they should be incorporated in data collection. The techniques are used to aid expression and refinement of views: perhaps to pinpoint the components' dimensions of attitudes, tease out differences in view, explore boundaries, or prioritise between different options to expose what underpins beliefs or opinions. They can help to focus the discussion following a general debate, enabling people to consolidate their views, or promote further thought.

Enabling and projective techniques tend to be used more in group discussions than in interviews, although they can be used effectively in either forum. They can sometimes seem stilted in interviews, as if the interviewee is being tested or observed, whereas a group can provide a more natural

environment in which uncertain participants can take their lead from others who respond more positively to the task.

VIGNETTES

An earlier section described how data collection can be shaped around real cases or examples. Another way of rooting discussion in specific cases or examples involves using prepared hypothetical examples or 'vignettes' (Finch, 1987). These are very valuable both in research with professionals and in general population studies. They are short descriptions of a particular circumstance, person or event, which might be described verbally by the researcher or a written version shown. They introduce an element of consistency which can be useful, allowing comparison between the reactions of different participants to the same hypothetical example. They give a common basis for discussion in focus groups which may be more useful than a case known to one participant only. They can also be a way of getting people to talk hypothetically about what they would do in a particular situation, or to explain how general principles or views they have expressed might be modified in different circumstances. They bring a degree of specificity to the discussion which can be very valuable, for example helping to highlight the boundaries or contingencies of people's beliefs and actions, and can work equally well in interviews as in focus groups.

In a study carried out as part of the evaluation of New Deal for Lone Parents (Lewis et al., 2000), a first stage of in-depth interviews with lone parents was carried out, followed by group discussions with staff delivering the service. A typology of lone parents was drawn up from the in-depth interviews, and vignettes were devised to describe a 'typical' member of each of the key groups. The vignettes were then discussed in the group discussions with staff, and approaches to working with each type of lone parent described. This brought a degree of commonality to the discussion so that all participants were discussing the same cases. It highlighted differences in how staff would work differently with each group, which helped to explain why different groups of lone parents appeared to gain to varying degrees from participating in the service.

A recent study for the Wicks Committee on Public Standards (Graham et al., 2002) explored public attitudes towards the ethical standards that should be expected of public office holders. After general discussion of views, which included asking for and discussing examples of high and low standards of behaviour, a series of vignettes was shown. Each outlined a particular situation, and participants were asked what if any penalty should be imposed. The topic guide showed further issues to probe, particularly changing some of the circumstances to establish the boundaries of people's views and the values underpinning them (see Box 5.5).

BOX 5.5 EXAMPLE OF VIGNETTE

Vignette

A minister announces the appointment of someone to an important government job. The minister insists they were offered the job because they had the most relevant skills and experience. But the person who got the job has donated money to the minister's party, amounting to hundreds of thousands of pounds in recent years. He is also a close personal friend of the minister.

Issues identified for probing in topic guide

- if the case had involved a different type of office holder, such as a local council leader, a university head or an NHS trust director
- if the person had been a family member, rather than a friend and donor
- if the friendship and/or the donation had been made public before the appointment
- if a smaller amount had been involved

CARD-SORTING

Another useful technique is card-sorting. Participants are shown a number of written or visual examples of an issue, and asked to sort them into piles or to order them – perhaps to indicate their priorities, to show which examples do or do not 'belong', or to draw out relationships between different examples. In a study exploring how the term 'training' is understood, group participants were shown cards describing different types of training or learning and asked to indicate which did and did not fall within their own understanding of the term (Campanelli et al., 1994). Such techniques are regularly used in survey research. Their purpose in qualitative research is to facilitate discussion of the reasons for choices and priorities, and their implications, not simply to aid the selection itself.

GIVING INFORMATION OR SHOWING WRITTEN MATERIAL

Although as Chapter 6 describes the researcher will generally want to adopt a neutral and objective role, there may in some studies be a need to introduce information into the interview or group discussion. This might arise for example where reflections on different proposals are required, to stimulate discussion further, or if the topic is one about which knowledge is likely to be particularly limited among participants. (In the latter case, it will usually be desirable for the topic guide to explore knowledge and awareness before introducing information.) For example, in a study of public attitudes to lone parents (Snape and Kelly, 1999) descriptive statistics about lone parents were given to the group after they had aired their own perceptions. This generated more discussion as participants reflected on how it related – or, more particularly, did not relate – to their preconceptions.

Depending on the study objectives, it may be helpful to show other materials. For example, it may be a purpose of the study to consider how far different types of material might address people's information needs, or whether a form is easy to use.

MAPPING EMERGENT ISSUES

Another useful technique, again more appropriate for focus groups, is to map emergent issues as they arise in the session on a flipchart or board. This displays to the group what it has generated, encourages them to take ownership of it and to move it forward. The group might be asked to add to the list, but more importantly it will serve as a framework for further discussion. For example, in a study exploring how benefit entitlement adjudication was organised in local offices (Woodfield et al., 1999), descriptions of different organisational systems were mapped diagramatically on a flipchart by one of the co-moderators. This made the differences between systems visible to all participants and meant that the group could elaborate on them and discuss their merits and disadvantages.

Another example comes from a study which was part of a programme of research carried out for the Benefits Agency, looking at the validity of satisfaction measures used in surveys. Qualitative research was used to identify the components that make up satisfaction with aspects of the service, and to understand how broader factors can influence assessments of satisfaction (Elam and Ritchie, 1997). In a series of focus groups, the researchers first logged on a board all the issues raised by the group as satisfactory or unsatisfactory aspects of recent dealings with the Benefits Agency. This formed the basis of the second half of the discussion in which participants discussed how these issues relate to satisfaction: the different ways in which they would contribute to satisfaction, how their importance would vary in different circumstances, and how they would influence their rating of satisfaction.

PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

'Projective techniques' are a range of strategies designed to facilitate freer discussion and communication, and to access thinking or beliefs that are less conscious or that may be difficult to speak about. The term derives from the psychoanalytic concept of projection in which, as a defence mechanism, we locate or attribute some part of ourselves, such as our own unacceptable feelings, on to something external to ourselves such as someone else. Projective techniques are often used in market research to explore imagery around brands or products or to develop advertising. They can be quite elaborate exercises.

Gordon and Langmaid (1988) identify five different types of projective techniques: association, such as word association or asking participants to describe the 'personality' of brands or organisations; completion, where participants complete sentences, stories or conversations; construction, such

as bubble drawings or taking the perspective of a third party; expressive methods, involving drawing and role enactment; and choice-ordering, which involves selecting or ranking items.

Projective techniques also have an application to social research, although they are not appropriate to all subjects. They can provide a means of cutting through self-consciousness and can draw out views that are otherwise less 'acceptable' or 'rational', less conscious, or are based on strong underlying emotions. Because projective techniques involve other forms of communication beyond direct questioning, they are helpful in focus groups with people who have difficulty in articulating their views, such as adolescents. In discussions with younger age groups they are also a good icebreaker or general stimulant to discussion. They are also helpful for enlivening discussion on a subject that people may find less then riveting. For example, a study of political interest (or lack of it) among 14–24-year-olds involved showing participants a picture of the Houses of Parliament and asking them to imagine what it would be like inside, asking them to draw a picture of a politician, and to complete the sentence 'Politics is boring because ...' (White et al., 2000).

Although stimulus materials or projective techniques can help the researcher to delve for further information, it is important to be clear whether they are really necessary. Straightforward discussion may be sufficient. Using the techniques does have some disadvantages. The process of introducing and administering materials takes time and is disruptive to the flow of discussion so that for a while the group task becomes more specific or structured and proceedings need to be directed by the researcher. They are also open to misinterpretation: it is important that the participants themselves interpret what they have come up with, not the researcher. There can be resistance within the group to their introduction, and care is needed to avoid trivialising the subject through their use. Finally, it is worth remembering that some people in the group may have difficulties with literacy, or sight problems.

Any materials or exercises used should be kept as simple and short as possible and combined with more free-flowing discussion. They are generally introduced after some warm-up debate or in the latter half of the session. Co-moderation is helpful to handle their administration, particularly if the exercise involves mapping what participants have said and re-playing it to them.

Fieldnotes

Finally, the role of fieldnotes should also be considered. Fieldnotes are long established as a method of data collection in ethnographic research, and particularly in observation form the primary data (Bryman, 2001; Burgess, 1982c, 1984; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). However, in studies using in-depth interviews and focus groups where data are captured through audio-recording,

fieldnotes provide an opportunity to record what researchers see and hear outside the immediate context of the interview, their thoughts about the dynamic of the encounter, ideas for inclusion in later fieldwork and issues that may be relevant at the analytical stage. They may simply involve rough jottings, but generally some stimulation of the issues for consideration and some consistency between researchers in the coverage of fieldnotes will be required. It may also be useful, in writing up the research methods, to describe how fieldnotes were used to develop fieldwork and analysis.

All these additional methods of generating data need to be considered at the topic guide design stage and built into it, rather than seen as an add-on feature at a later stage. Clarity about their purpose and prior discussion of how they can be integrated are important if they are to be used effectively and consistently.

Preparing for fieldwork and refining fieldwork strategies

Research team briefing

Because qualitative data collection leaves so many critical decisions and choices to the researcher carrying out the fieldwork, it is essential that a research interviewer is steeped in the research objectives and has a clear understanding of what each section and subsection of the topic guide is seeking to achieve. Assuming the researcher is not working alone, a full briefing for the whole team is one of the most critical elements for successful data collection. This is especially important if any members of the research team have not had the opportunity to be involved in earlier discussions about the objectives and overall design of the research study. The level of briefing required will also partly depend on the interviewing skills and experience of members of the team.

The briefing meeting is often a very good opportunity to discuss how the topic guide will work in practice, to identify any potentially difficult areas, and to think about different ways in which questions might be phrased or issues approached. A briefing meeting should be interactive and lively, encouraging questions, discussion, and pooling ideas or worries. Following this meeting, the topic guide may need to be revised. The research team for example may suggest modifications to the order or grouping of subjects, identify gaps in coverage, have views on the length and amount of subject coverage, or want to suggest ways of dealing with sensitive question areas.

Written information will also be an important aspect of the briefing of team members. This might include, for example, background information about the aims and coverage of the research, a summary of the aims of each section of the topic guide or notes about technical terms used. Where there is a complex policy or a programme to be discussed in the interview, it is

particularly important that the research team has a good understanding of what is already known about the nature and operation of the system under review.

It may also be necessary to obtain comments on or approval of the topic guide from a research commissioner or advisory group. This can be a very helpful process, especially where the advisers are highly knowledgeable about the research area or very clear about what they are seeking from the research. However, it can also sometimes need careful management, particularly if commentators are not familiar with qualitative research methods. It is common for people who are unused to qualitative research to feel a little nervous about the 'loose' structure of a topic guide compared with a survey questionnaire and to want to add follow-up questions or standard probes to the guide.

Preparation for fieldwork

After the briefing, it is important to spend time studying the guide, becoming really familiar with its structure and detailed contents, thinking about how different issues might be addressed, the type of responses they might yield and how they will need to be followed up. This sort of preparation is not designed to pre-empt what will come up in the interview or focus group, but it is helpful for the researcher to begin to think about the sort of direction the interview or group might take.

It has already been noted that the topic guide serves an important function in the documentation of the research. But in terms of what shapes the conduct of fieldwork, it should really be seen as just one element only – a written aid to take to and guide the interview. The individual researcher's skill at interviewing and their understanding of the research requirements will overlay the written guide. This will be evident in their working copies of the guide. Each researcher will want to customise their copy of the guide in ways that suit their own personal preferences and style. This will help them to memorise key areas and think about ways they want to approach a subject.

Before fieldwork begins, this would include highlighting or underlining different sections, writing key words in the margin, or noting how they plan to introduce particular subjects. This personal customisation is a valuable stage in thinking about how to use the written document in practice. As fieldwork progresses, they may also note ways of asking questions or probes they have found useful, or incorporate issues that have been raised by earlier participants that would be useful dimensions to explore with others.

Initial use and testing the topic guide

Initial interviews and focus groups will be an important test of the scope of the topic guide, and carrying out initial test fieldwork, or 'piloting' a topic

guide is a critical part of research. When assessing the scope of the guide, it is important to review whether it allows participants to give a full and coherent account of the central issues and incorporate issues they think are important. In other words, it should not constrain what participants want to say in relation to the research questions. If a research instrument is not working, because it is not generating the clarity, scope or depth of data sought, then it needs some revision. This is as true of qualitative research as it is of quantitative research. The difference is that 'pilot' interviews do not need to be excluded from the data set unless a very radical change of direction or coverage occurs. The data collected will still contribute to the research findings even if the emphasis changes slightly. However, if the first few interviews or group discussions suggest a revision of the research objectives, or a radical change in the way in which the data are collected, then there may be more reason to consider whether or not to keep the initial interviews or discussions.

A useful aid in the refinement of fieldwork strategies and topic guides is for members of the team to conduct initial interviews or focus groups working in pairs. This is helpful for discussion of how well the guide is working, how to respond to unanticipated issues or circumstances, and how to incorporate them in later data collection. It is also a useful check that there is consistent understanding of the research objectives and of the purpose of each section of the topic guide.

It is in any case very valuable for the research team to meet to review the topic guide after perhaps four or five interviews or the first couple of focus groups. This provides researchers with a chance to 'fine tune' the guide before the bulk of the fieldwork takes place. Revisions may include creating a more natural order of topics, adding (or removing) minor topics or follow-up questions, or thinking about language or ways of addressing topics that may have been problematic. It is also worth, at this stage, reflecting on the duration of interviews and focus groups and the amount of time spent on different topics, and considering whether this needs to be modified to ensure the appropriate depth is reached on key topics. Finally, an obvious point but one perhaps easily missed in the heat of fieldwork, is the importance of reflecting on whether the type of data being collected is what will be required to meet the research objectives.

To some degree, the first few episodes of data collection are also part of the briefing and familiarisation process, as it is not until a topic guide has been used in the field that it is possible to understand how it will work in different situations. Researchers will become less and less dependent on the topic guide as the study proceeds, using it more as an occasional prompt or guidance, or moving to a summary version of the guide as familiarity with the issues to cover increases.

The key roles of the topic guide, then, change as the study proceeds. Initially its creation helps to crystallise the researcher's conception of the study topic and shape their consideration of the fieldwork strategies that will be

required. In the field it acts as an *aide-mémoire*, helping to ensure that key issues are explored systematically but supporting flexible and responsive investigation. At the end of the study it is salient because it documents the fieldwork approach, and thus gives some insight into a stage of the research process which it can otherwise be difficult to describe.

KEY POINTS

- Despite the use of the term 'unstructured data collection', any qualitative research study requires some early consideration of the structure and content of data collection. The degree to which subject coverage and order can be specified in advance will vary, depending on the objectives of the research and the nature of data required.
- The topic guide is an *aide-mémoire* which guides the researcher during fieldwork and ensures some consistency in fieldwork approaches. However, it should be used flexibly and should enhance rather than inhibit responsive questioning. It is also an important public document of the approach to fieldwork. In practice, the order in which topics are addressed will be responsive to the fieldwork situation, but starting with a logical or 'natural' order will aid the researcher.
- The length and style of the topic guide will be shaped not only by the research questions but also by the size and experience of the research team, the type of fieldwork envisaged and the requirements of funders. It is helpful to list items as issues rather than as questions, identifying the subtopics to be explored and any follow-up questions that can be anticipated. Topic guides for group discussions need to be shorter than those for in-depth interviews. Fewer topics should be included, and there will be less scope for identifying specific areas for detailed exploration since these will also flow from how the group members respond to what other participants have said.
- Thought also needs be given to the value of using other fieldwork materials or enabling or projective techniques. These can be useful to aid expression and refinement of beliefs, and to understand the boundaries or contingencies of views.
- The whole research team should be involved in the creation of the guide where possible. A thorough briefing on the research objectives, the guide and fieldwork strategies is critical. Early fieldwork will be an important test of the guide, and it is helpful for the team to meet and review the guide after the first few episodes of data collection.

KEY TERMS

Unstructured data collection refers to the responsive, flexible and interactive questioning techniques used in in-depth data collection. It is sometimes compared with **semi-structured data collection**, where there is more pre-specifying of order and question-wording.

Topic guides are also known as interview schedules or interview guides. They list the key themes to be explored, broken down into topics and subtopics.

Enabling and projective techniques are a range of approaches to facilitate data collection. Enabling techniques include using **vignettes** (or short hypothetical examples or 'stories'), **card-sorting** (where written examples are ordered or sorted by participants), giving information, or mapping emergent issues for subsequent discussion. Projective techniques draw on the psychoanalytical concept of projection and are used to access material that is less conscious or more difficult for participants to articulate.

Fieldnotes are notes made by researchers 'in the field' and more typically used in ethnographic research, where they often form the primary data. However, in studies where data capture is by audio-recording, fieldnotes can usefully record feelings about the dynamic of data collection, information acquired outside the immediate context of an interview or focus group, or ideas for analysis.

Further reading

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Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. (1995) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

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6

In-depth Interviews

Robin Legard, Jill Keegan and Kit Ward

In-depth or unstructured interviews are one of the main methods of data collection used in qualitative research. Classic ethnographers such as Malinowski stressed the importance of talking to people to grasp their point of view (Burgess, 1982a), and personal accounts are seen as having central importance in social research because of the power of language to illuminate meaning:

> [T]he expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts. A crucial feature of language is its capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 126).

The in-depth interview is often described as a form of conversation (Burgess, 1982a, 1984; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). Indeed Sidney and Beatrice Webb described the method of the interview as being 'conversation with a purpose' (Webb and Webb, 1932: 130). As such it reproduces a fundamental process through which knowledge about the social world is constructed in normal human interaction (Rorty, 1980). But there are some obvious differences between normal conversation and in-depth interviews – their objectives, and the roles of researcher and participant, are quite different (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In reality, although a good in-depth interview will appear naturalistic, it will bear little resemblance to an everyday conversation.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the various perspectives on the interview raised by different traditions of qualitative research. We then look at the key features of in-depth interviews and the professional and personal skills they require. The chapter examines the nature of the 'contract' between participant and researcher, and the 'staging' of an interview. We then set out some key principles in asking questions and probing, and the techniques that inform good interview practice. We also cover how researchers can respond to difficult situations that may arise in interviewing. The chapter concludes with coverage of practical issues in organising interviews.

The in-depth interview

Perspectives on the interview

The different traditions of qualitative research described in Chapter 1 have resulted in a diversity of perspectives on in-depth interviewing. In particular, there are debates about how far knowledge is constructed in the interview or is a pre-existing phenomenon, and about how active or passive the role of the interviewer should be. As Chapter 5 describes, there is also diversity in how structured interviews are, and in how far the content is set by researcher or participant.

Two alternative positions on in-depth interviewing are put forward by Kvale (1996). The first, which he summarises as the 'miner metaphor', falls broadly within a modern social science research model which sees knowledge as 'given':

> knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal … [T]he knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions. (Kvale, 1996: 3)

The second, which Kvale calls the 'traveler metaphor', falls within the constructivist research model in which knowledge is not given but is created and negotiated. The interviewer is seen as a traveller who journeys with the interviewee. The meanings of the interviewee's 'stories' are developed as the traveller interprets them. Through conversations, the interviewer leads the subject to new insights: there is a transformative element to the journey.

> The traveler … asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as 'wandering together with'. (Kvale, 1996: 4 emphasis in original)

The researcher is thus an active player in development of data and of meaning. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) stress that the researcher is not simply a

'pipeline' through which knowledge is transmitted. They, too, see knowledge as constructed in the interview, through collaboration between interviewee and researcher.

This emphasis on knowledge as something that is created within the unique situation of the interview has led to concerns among some authors about the stability and validity of interview data (see Chapter 10 for discussion of validity generally). But other writers, while they acknowledge the influence of postmodern thinking on the nature of interviewing, nevertheless see the interview as meaningful beyond its immediate context. Interviews can:

> provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 100)

The influence of postmodernism, constructionism and feminism has also led to new perspectives on in-depth interviewing, and new forms of interview (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Kvale, 1996). Postmodern approaches emphasise the way in which a reality is constructed in the interview, and the relationship that develops between researcher and interviewee. In creative interviewing the researcher moves away from the conventions of interviewing, with lengthy or repeated interviews taking place in people's everyday world situations, and an emphasis on free expression (Douglas, 1985). In dialectical interviewing, the interview focuses on contradictions in the social and material world and on the potential for action and for change, with an emphasis on the transformative aspects of an interview. Heuristic approaches emphasise the personal experience of the interviewer, and see the process of interviewing as a collaboration between researcher and participant, sharing reflection and enquiry (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985).

Feminist research approaches have particularly raised issues about the form and features of in-depth interviewing (Finch, 1984; Nielsen, 1990; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2000; Reinharz, 1992), although as Olesen in particular has stressed there are many different feminist approaches. Feminist interviewing attempts to be more reflexive and interactive, aiming to take a non-hierarchical approach which avoids objectifying the participant. The distinction between the roles of researcher and participant becomes less stark: the interview is seen as a collaboration between them as they share in the process of negotiating coverage, language and understanding. Reciprocity is emphasised. The researcher feels free to step outside the formal role of the neutral asker of questions, expressing their own feelings and giving information about themselves (an issue discussed later in this chapter). Some feminist approaches emphasise the value of women interviewing women (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981), although the issue of cultural affinity is also discussed in relation to other characteristics and patterns of

characteristics (Olesen, 2000; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). This has led to questions about whether people should be interviewed by researchers who have similar socio-demographic characteristics, or who have experiences in common with them (see Chapter 3).

Finally, biographical, narrative, life history and oral history approaches (see Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Miller, 2000; Thompson, 2000) also bring different perspectives to the interview and have yielded different forms of interview. These methods are concerned with understanding cultural milieux and social worlds through personal accounts and narratives, with life history or biographical interviews covering an individual's whole life and oral history approaches concentrating on specific events or periods. The approaches involve intensive and extended data collection with several interviews with each participant, and participants are given a fairly free rein to shape their own narratives.

These different perspectives and traditions thus lead to different priorities, emphases and practices. But there are a number of features of in-depth interviewing which remain broadly consistent.

Key features of the in-depth interview

The first key feature of the in-depth interview is that it is intended to combine structure with flexibility. As Chapter 5 noted, even in the most unstructured interviews the researcher will have some sense of the themes they wish to explore, and interviews will generally be based on some form of topic guide (or interview schedule or guide) setting out the key topics and issues to be covered during the interview. However, the structure is sufficiently flexible to permit topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee, to allow responses to be fully probed and explored and to allow the researcher to be responsive to relevant issues raised spontaneously by the interviewee.

A second key feature is that the interview is interactive in nature. The material is generated by the interaction between the researcher and interviewee. The researcher will ask an initial question in such a way as to encourage the interviewee to talk freely when answering the question. The next intervention by the interviewer will usually be determined by the participant's answer. (How much of themselves researchers offer in this interaction is discussed below in this chapter.)

Thirdly, the researcher uses a range of probes and other techniques to achieve depth of answer in terms of penetration, exploration and explanation. An initial response is often at a fairly 'surface' level: the interviewer will use follow-up questions to obtain a deeper and fuller understanding of the participant's meaning. The in-depth format also permits the researcher to explore fully all the factors that underpin participants' answers: reasons, feelings, opinions and beliefs. This furnishes the explanatory evidence that is an important element of qualitative research.

Fourthly, the interview is generative in the sense that new knowledge or thoughts are likely, at some stage, to be created. The extent to which this is so may vary depending on the research questions, but it is likely that the participant will at some point direct themselves, or be directed by the researcher, down avenues of thought they have not explored before. Participants may also be invited to put forward ideas and suggestions on a particular topic and to propose solutions for problems raised during the interview.

The emphasis on depth, nuance and the interviewee's own language as a way of understanding meaning implies that interview data needs to be captured in its natural form. This means that interview data is generally tape recorded, since note taking by the researcher would change the form of data.

Finally, these key features together mean that qualitative interviews are almost always conducted face-to-face. It would be extremely difficult to conduct really detailed in-depth interviewing over the telephone. The interview is an intense experience, for both parties involved, and a physical encounter is essential context for an interview which is flexible, interactive and generative, and in which meaning and language is explored in depth.

Requirements of a qualitative interviewer

The success of the interview depends, to a large extent, on the personal and professional qualities of the individual interviewer. In contrast to quantitative interviewing, qualitative research interviewers are, themselves, research instruments, and there are some key requirements of them (Kvale, 1996; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Thompson, 2000). So what are the qualities that go to make up a successful depth interviewer?

In-depth interviewing makes a number of demands on the mental and intellectual abilities of an interviewer. First, the ability of the researcher to listen is fundamental to the art of interviewing. The researcher must hear, digest and comprehend the participant's answers in order to decide how to probe further. Second, good in-depth interviewing requires a clear, logical mind. The researcher needs to be able to think quickly to distil the essential points of what the participant is saying, exercise judgement about what to pursue, and simultaneously formulate the relevant question. Third, a good memory is an important attribute. It is often necessary to make a mental note of a point made earlier on by the participant and return to it at a judicious moment in the interview to seek further clarification or elaboration.

Curiosity – an enquiring mind – is an essential asset in an in-depth interviewer. It greatly helps if the instinct of the researcher is to want to know more about what they have been told. Thompson (2000) stresses that in-depth interviewing requires interest in and respect for people as individuals, and is not for people who cannot stop talking about themselves. Patton (2002) argues for patient curiosity:

If what people have to say about their world is generally boring to you, then you will never be a great interviewer. Unless you are fascinated by the rich variation in human experience, qualitative interviewing will become drudgery. (Patton, 2002: 341)

However active or passive the role of the interviewer, an in-depth interview is based around the ability of the interviewer to establish a good rapport with the participant. Researchers have to be able to establish a good working relationship with people from all walks of life, from people living in difficult circumstances to those in positions of power and influence. A good working relationship is achieved where the researcher seeks to put the participant at ease and to create a climate of trust. This involves demonstrating a real desire to understand from the perspective of the interviewee. It also involves the researcher displaying the confidence that comes from being professional, having a job of work to do and knowing how to do it. Trust is strengthened where the researcher appears to be comfortable with the interview situation, and with everything the interviewee has to say.

Creating the right rapport also involves demonstrating interest and respect, being able to respond flexibly to the interviewee, and being able to show understanding and empathy (Thompson, 2000). Adaptability is therefore a key requirement. This does not mean attempting to be like the interviewee; rather it involves respecting the individuality of the other person while retaining one's own identity.

Interviewees also respond positively where the interviewer displays a sense of 'tranquillity' – an inner stillness which communicates interest and attention and which is accompanied by a feeling of being comfortable with the interviewee and the situation. Humour also has its place in helping to foster a sympathetic interviewing environment: the ability to share a joke made by the interviewee or to lighten a situation with humour can facilitate the interviewing process.

Researchers need to establish their credibility with participants by asking relevant questions which are seen as meaningful by the participant and which are based on an understanding of the research subject. But equally the interview is not a forum for the researcher to make a show of their own knowledge. This can be particularly challenging in interviews with senior professionals or with peers. Researchers need a degree of humility, the ability to be recipients of the participant's wisdom without needing to compete by demonstrating their own.

Efficiency and careful preparation are also essential. This means, for example, being fully conversant with the objectives of the research and with the topic guide. It means planning an itinerary that allows for punctuality in keeping appointments, and ensuring that recording equipment is in good order.

Mason (2002) stresses the range of tasks that interviewing involves. At any one time the researcher needs to listen to what is being said and understand it; assess how it relates to the research questions; be alert to contradictions

with what has been said earlier; decide what to follow up or explore in more detail now and what to return to later; decide how to phrase the next question; pick up on nuances, hesitation, emotion and non-verbal signals; pace the interview; keep an eye on recording equipment, and deal with any distractions or interruptions that arise. Concentration and stamina are essential qualities for coping with these simultaneous demands.

One task that can be omitted from this list – and indeed that is best deliberately set aside during interviews – is analysis. During the interview, the researcher needs to be totally dedicated to interviewing. Their attention should be focused on listening and responding. It is deleterious to be thinking about analytical constructs, or considering how what is being said sits within analytical themes, during the interview since this means that the researcher will not be giving their full attention to what the participant is saying. It can lead to questions that are rooted in the researcher's over-hasty interpretation of what they are hearing, rather than questions which seek to understand the interviewee's interpretation and the meaning something holds for them.

The staging of an interview

Although the purpose of the interview is to understand the perspective of the interviewee, the researcher will nevertheless have a clear sense of the issues they wish to hear discussed. The researcher therefore has an important role to play in directing the interview process, and must be clear about how to 'stage-manage' the interview effectively so as to meet the purposes of the research.

A number of aspects of the process need to be considered for effective stage-management. Firstly, the researcher needs to be aware of the various stages that an interview passes through during the course of its existence and know how to direct the interview through each stage. Secondly, the researcher has to understand the terms of the contract between researcher and participant and know how to make them work for the benefit of the research. Thirdly, it is up to the researcher to make clear what the role of the participant should be during the interview.

Interview stages

An in-depth interview involves a number of stages (Robson, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979). In broad terms, the researcher's task is to ease the interviewee down from the everyday, social level to a deeper level at which they can together focus on a specific topic or set of topics. Towards the end, the researcher needs to signal the return back to the everyday level. The process needs to be fully completed before the researcher leaves the participant.

The stages of an interview, and the ways in which researchers can help to direct the participant through them, are as follows:

STAGE ONE: ARRIVAL
The interview process effectively begins the moment the researcher arrives on the participant's doorstep. The first few minutes after meeting can be crucial for establishing the relationship between researcher and participant which is a prerequisite for a successful in-depth interview. The researcher therefore needs to be aware that the participant may be feeling anxious or even slightly hostile initially. It is important at this stage for the participant to feel that they have control on their own territory, but the researcher should take responsibility for putting them at their ease. The researcher therefore needs to play the role of the guest while at the same time being quietly confident and relaxed, making conversation but avoiding the research topic until the interview begins. Once the participant seems comfortable with this stage of the process, it is time to move on.

STAGE TWO: INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH
This is the stage at which business begins. The researcher starts to direct the interaction by introducing the research topic. This involves providing a clear reiteration of the nature and purpose of the research, reaffirming confidentiality, and seeking permission to record the interview. It also involves making sure the environment is suitably quiet, private and comfortable for the interview to proceed without distraction (see below).

STAGE THREE: BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW
As Chapter 5 noted, the opening questions are an opportunity to collect important contextual information. Although it may be thought that beginning with a neutral topic is better than asking personal details, such as the interviewee's age or relationship status, having such information at the beginning is important to help with question formulation. For example, it may be useful to know that the participant has young children when it comes to exploring influences on their views and experiences. Asking for factual background information in the middle of the interview can break the flow. In addition, it is at the beginning of the interview that interviewees realise that their role is to 'open up' and give full answers. They can begin to do this most easily where the subject matter is something with which they are familiar.

In an informal way, the researcher thus asks for background information about their age, who they live with, whether they go out to work and so on. These questions are asked in a way that makes it clear they are not being read from a pre-formulated list. Follow-up questions (for example about how long the interviewee has lived in the area, brief details about their job) help to set the scene of an interview in which the participant will be required to give

detailed and spontaneous answers, and in which the researcher will probe and respond. The researcher can also judge from the initial reply how easily the interviewee will take to this role and can adapt their approach accordingly.

STAGE FOUR: DURING THE INTERVIEW

Chapter 5 described some general principles in shaping the main body of the interview. Here, the researcher is guiding the participant through the key themes – both those anticipated by the researcher and those which emerge from the interview. Each subject is explored in depth with a series of follow-up questions and probes. At this stage, the interviewee will be working at a deeper, more focused level than normal, discovering ideas, thoughts and feelings that may be dormant in daily life.

STAGE FIVE: ENDING THE INTERVIEW

About five to ten minutes before the end of the interview, the researcher can signal the approach of the end of the interview to allow the interviewee gradually to return to the level of everyday social interaction. Phrases such as 'the final topic ...' or 'in the last few minutes ...' are useful here. It is also important to check that the participant has not been left with any unfinished business: for example, feelings unexpressed or issues of burning importance left unmentioned.

STAGE SIX: AFTER THE INTERVIEW

What happens when the tape recorder is switched off is also important. The researcher thanks the participant warmly, and begins to help the participant to move out of interview mode by saying something, fairly briefly, about how their contribution will help the research. Any reassurances about confidentiality or the use of the interview data should also be given. This is the time to answer any questions raised by the interviewee during the interview (see further below), or to give any information about support groups or services (see Chapter 3). Moving away from the interview sometimes sparks some final reflections, or even new information, from interviewees. If these are significant, the researcher may feel it is appropriate to ask the interviewee to repeat them with the tape recorder running again, or may make a note of them after the interview.

The researcher should take their cue from the participant – if the participant seems to want to talk, either about the interview subject or more generally, it is important to be prepared to stay a little longer. By the time the researcher takes leave of the participant, the process of coming out of the interview should be fully completed and the participant, it is hoped, left feeling 'well'.

The interview 'contract'

Researchers need to feel confident that the participant has freely given their consent to be interviewed. While the researcher clearly has obligations to the

participant (discussed in Chapter 3), they also have permission to interview the participant within the terms on which consent has been given. In a sense, the participant has entered into a type of 'contract' by agreeing to take part in an interview. The terms of the contract are that the participant has agreed to be interviewed for a predetermined length of time, at a particular venue, on a particular topic, and under clear conditions of confidentiality.

Nevertheless, the researcher should also be aware that participants have the right to change their mind at any time. It is therefore advisable to take nothing for granted and to ensure that the terms are agreed. At the beginning of the interview the researcher restates the aims of the research and reaffirms confidentiality. Should the contract need to be changed for any reason during the interview, for example if extra time is required, the terms should be negotiated and agreed – never assumed.

Researcher and participant roles

Researcher and participant have different roles in the interview process. The researcher needs to be clear about his or her own role in the process, and needs to help the participant to understand what their role is to be at an early stage in the interview.

The role of the researcher is that of a facilitator to enable the interviewee to talk about their thoughts, feelings, views and experiences. However, the role of the facilitator is an active, not a passive, one. It does not mean sitting back and just letting the interviewee talk. On the contrary, it means managing the interview process to ensure that the required subjects are covered to the required depth, without influencing the actual views articulated.

Managing the interview process involves ensuring coverage of the agenda to be discussed within the interview, steering the interviewee back to topics from which they stray. It means exercising judgement about the length of time that should be devoted to any given topic and when to move on to the next one, and about how to respond if the interviewee moves on to unanticipated topics. The researcher has to decide what questions are asked and how they are phrased, and how to follow up until a satisfactory answer has been obtained.

Another important part of the researcher's function is to help interviewees to see what their role is in the interview process. The interviewee's role is to give fulsome answers, to provide more depth when probing questions are asked, to reflect and to think, and to raise issues they see as relevant but which are not directly asked about. By using open questioning techniques, demonstrating interest and actively encouraging the interviewee to talk, the researcher is intimating to participants that their role involves opening up and talking as opposed to giving simple answers. It is quite usual for people to start anticipating follow-up questions like 'why?' and start supplying the information without prompting. Participants also need to make judgements

about whether to include a subject not yet raised by the researcher or about how much detail to give. The researcher helps them to make those judgements by providing a clear articulation of the objectives of the research, and by asking questions which can clearly be seen to relate to those objectives.

Asking questions to achieve breadth and depth

The aim of the in-depth interview is to achieve both breadth of coverage across key issues, and depth of coverage within each. A number of writers describe different types of questions which are used to achieve this (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979).

A distinction can be made between content mapping and content mining questions. Content mapping questions are designed to open up the research territory and to identify the dimensions or issues that are relevant to the participant. Content mining questions are designed to explore the detail which lies within each dimension, to access the meaning it holds for the interviewee, and to generate an in-depth understanding from the interviewee's point of view. Any interview involves a combination of these question types and they are not confined to distinct parts of the interview. A content mapping question is asked to raise issues; content mining questions are used to explore them in detail; content mapping questions are used to raise further issues, and so on.

Both types, but particularly content mining questions, also involve probes. Probes are responsive, follow-up questions designed to elicit more information, description, explanation and so on. They are usually verbal, but non-verbal probes – such as a pause, a gesture, a raised eyebrow – are also highly effective. In content mapping questions, probes are used to help in mapping out the territory; in content mining questions, they are the essential tool through which depth is achieved.

Content mapping questions

There are a number of types of content mapping questions.

GROUND MAPPING QUESTIONS
Ground mapping questions are the first questions asked to 'open up' a subject. They are generally widely framed questions designed to encourage spontaneity and to allow the interviewee to raise the issues that are most relevant to them. With, at this stage, minimal probing, they will often generate a rich list of dimensions which will need to be followed up.

➢ Have you ever applied for a benefit?
– No, I haven't, I wouldn't want to.
➢ Why is that?

– I've always managed to be self-sufficient all my life and I couldn't bear to ask for money I wasn't entitled to.
➢ What makes you say you are not entitled to it?
– Well, I haven't paid towards it at all so I am not really entitled to anything, am I? I would feel very uncomfortable. It would feel like I was having to accept charity.

DIMENSION MAPPING QUESTIONS
Dimension mapping questions are used to focus the participant a little more narrowly on particular topics or concepts: they are used to signpost, structure and direct the interview. They may be used, for example, to structure a participant's account of a process or experience, perhaps in broadly chronological order, where they may be as simple as 'What happened next?' Or, as in the example above, they would be used to focus on each of the dimensions or topics raised by the interviewee in response to the initial ground mapping question, encouraging the participant to talk about each in turn (self-sufficiency, entitlement, contribution, charity) and uncovering the elements that make up each concept. The researcher might refer directly to the fact that the participant mentioned, for example, 'managing to be self-sufficient' and ask what they meant. More detailed probes (see below) would then be used to ensure that each of the elements that makes up the interviewee's conception of self-sufficiency is explored in depth.

PERSPECTIVE-WIDENING QUESTIONS
To understand the interviewee's perspective fully, they need to have an opportunity to give more than their first thoughts on a subject. Encouraging them to look at issues from different perspectives will uncover more layers of meaning and greater richness. The third type of content mapping questions are therefore ones through which the researcher widens the interviewee's perspective, stimulates further thought or ensures comprehensive coverage.

They may be questions which invite the participant to consider dimensions or subtopics which the researcher wishes to hear explored, rather than ones which have been generated by the interviewee. These are sometimes described as 'prompts' – items to which the researcher explicitly directs the interviewee's attention rather than ones raised by the interviewee through more open questioning. Such questions need to be raised with a light touch, so that dimensions which are not of relevance to the participant are not given undue emphasis and the unique perspective of the participant lost.

➢ Are there any other factors that would influence your decision? I'm thinking of things like whether the client has a job, their family commitments and so on.

Perspective-widening questions might also involve stimulating thought by putting to the participant issues or perspectives that have emerged in earlier

interviews or in other research. Again, it is important that this is done in a way which leaves the participant to answer freely:

> ➤ People talk a lot about the doctor–patient relationship. Do you see that as being relevant here?

A further technique involves checking out all sides of the interviewee's perspective, to ensure that the answer obtained is a comprehensive and fully rounded one – asking for other views or factors, encouraging them to think about positive as well as negative issues and so on.

> ➤ You've said you were delighted with it, but was there anything that fell short of your expectations?
> ➤ Are there other cases where your decision would be different?

Content mining questions

Content mining questions are the tools used for exploring what has been raised by the interviewee through different types of content mapping questions – obtaining a full description of phenomena, understanding what underpins the participant's attitude or behaviour and so on. Although some probes may have been called into play in content mapping, it is in content mining that they are used much more extensively. There are four broad groups: amplificatory, exploratory, explanatory and clarificatory.

AMPLIFICATORY PROBES

Participants rarely provide the level of depth of articulation that qualitative interviewing requires without further probing, and amplificatory probes are used to encourage them to elaborate further. They are important for obtaining full description and in-depth understanding of the manifestation or experience of a phenomenon.

Examples of amplificatory probes – each of which would be followed up with further probes until the researcher is satisfied there is nothing else to add – are:

> ➤ You said you have a very varied patient group. Can you tell me a little more about the types of patients you see?
> ➤ Can you give me an example of a case that was difficult in the way you've described?
> ➤ When you say he was on your side, what gave you that impression?
> ➤ What was it exactly that you liked about her manner?
> ➤ What was she saying or doing that made you feel she was ill-informed?

EXPLORATORY PROBES

A key role of qualitative research is to explore the views and feelings that underlie descriptions of behaviour, events or experience, and that help to show the meaning that experiences hold for interviewees:

> ➤ How did you respond when ...?
> ➤ What did you feel when ...?
> ➤ Why did you think it was important to ...?

Exploring impacts, effects and consequences also helps to illuminate experiences and behaviours, and to create a more rounded understanding of them:

> ➤ What effect did that have on you?
> ➤ Did that help you in any way?
> ➤ How did your approach change when you found that out?

EXPLANATORY PROBES

One of the hallmarks of the in-depth interview is probing for reasons – asking 'why?' Explanations are repeatedly sought for views, feelings, behaviours, events, decisions and so on. There is often an initial reluctance to do this among new researchers since it seems to be contravening social norms, to be impolite, to do so. Nevertheless it is fundamentally important for the researcher to understand the reasons for a participant's views and behaviours. Explanations are often multi-layered, and it is a key value of qualitative interviewing that responsive, iterative probing can uncover these layers. Where a simple 'Why?' feels too bald, there are a number of ways of softening the question:

> ➤ What was it that made her go up in your estimation?
> ➤ What makes you say that?
> ➤ What was it about the case that made you decide to ...?

CLARIFICATORY PROBES

Exploring issues in depth requires a high degree of precision and clarity. Clarificatory probes are therefore important, and used in different ways:

- *To clarify terms and explore language.* It is all too easy to assume the researcher understands the meaning of terms used by the interviewee. But exploring the language used will often show that the assumptions differed from the interviewee's reality, and will add real depth and richness to the researcher's understanding of the interviewee's perspective. It is therefore important to be alert to the use of emotive or descriptive words. In some cases, it is sufficient to repeat the word in the interrogative: 'Dodgy?' Other examples of probes to clarify language are:

  > ➤ How was it scary?
  > ➤ Could you just explain what you mean by it being a classic case of ...?
  > ➤ You said it was really special to see your granddaughter for the first time. In what way was it really special?

- *To clarify details, sequences etc.* There will be points in any interview where details, dates or sequences need to be clarified – whether someone is talking about the same colleague or a different one, whether they saw the

solicitor before they began mediation or only after, whether descriptions of a client's manner related to the same encounter or to different meetings, and so on.

- *Clarifying through testing an expressed position.* Asking clarifying questions which gently challenge or test the participant's account, without being confrontational, can encourage them to elaborate further:

  ➢ You said you were resigned to it, but did you *ever* think about leaving?
  ➢ Some people might have thought about leaving at that point. Did those sorts of feelings ever come into it for you?

- *Challenging inconsistency.* Finally, it is also important to be alert to conflicts or inconsistencies in the interviewee's account. These may arise because an issue that involves social norms is being addressed and the interviewee is gradually gaining confidence to express their real view. Or they may occur where someone is being encouraged to think about something for the first time so that their view is developing as they speak. Again, it is important to find a non-confrontational way of drawing the participant's attention to inconsistency or contradiction, and asking them to clarify:

  ➢ Earlier you were saying that you were delighted with how the project went but you've also said quite a lot about what didn't go so well. What are the main feelings you're left with?
  ➢ You began by saying that disability means not being able to do things physically, but you've just been talking about it as being what *other people* stop you from doing. Is it always both those things equally, or do you sometimes see it as one more than the other?

In-depth, iterative probing

Probes are not meant to be used in isolation. It is not sufficient to move on to the next point having asked just one probe ('why', for example). The response to that probe will then require another, and so on. This will reveal a whole mine of information around the particular point that would otherwise remain unexplored, and probing needs to continue until the researcher feels they have reached saturation, a full understanding of the participant's perspective.

This kind of iterative probing involves asking for a level of clarification and detail that can sometimes feel unnatural or artificial. It goes far beyond what is usual in everyday conversation. The researcher is putting aside their own knowledge and their own intuitive understanding, and asking for explanations of things they might think they comprehend. But this is essential to achieve the depth of understanding that is the aim of qualitative research. Questions which may feel obvious or banal, or even ridiculous, can reveal a layer of complexity or detail that the researcher would otherwise have missed. They can if necessary be prefaced by a phrase which recognises that an unusual level of clarification is being sought, such as:

➢ This may sound like an obvious question, but why ...?'
➢ I just want to make sure I've really understood you. What was it exactly that ...?'

Good probing is a little like detective work. The researcher is alert to clues that they have not yet heard the full answer, that something does not quite 'ring true' or 'add up', that the interviewee may be rationalising after the event, or giving what they perceive as the 'correct' answer. For example, an interviewee talking about reasons for not taking up physical activity may refer to lack of time. The researcher may have a hunch that time is not the only barrier to physical activity and may, through careful probing, elicit that other factors are also at work:

- really don't have any time to do any sort of activity except walking to the bus stop on my way to work. I'd love to if I could, I really would. But I don't finish work till after 6 and then I have to help my wife with the three children. I am also a school governor which takes up a lot of my time.
➢ What sort of things do you do at weekends?
- Well, there is the shopping and then I have to mow the lawn and generally look after the garden and ferry the kids around, take them to friends, swimming, you know.
➢ Do you go swimming with them?
- No. I have a couple of times but I don't usually.
➢ Why is that?
- I suppose if I'm honest I am really quite lazy physically and I have never much cared for swimming or any other kind of sport.

With further probing, it transpires that the interviewee's aversion to physical exercise dates back to being teased about his physical aptitude at school.

Question formulation

Using broad and narrow questions

It is often said that good in-depth interviewing involves open questions. These are contrasted with dichotomous yes/no questions which call for affirmation rather than description (Patton, 2002). Certainly, in-depth interviewing does not involve a series of yes/no questions, and researchers have to work hard to ask questions which encourage a fulsome response. Although short, open questions look deceptively easy, they are much harder to implement in practice. Asking closed questions is a habitual aspect of ordinary social intercourse and one has to make a conscious effort to think in an 'open' way in an interview. For example, rather than asking 'So did you then make an appointment to see your doctor?', a question like 'What happened next?' would allow the interviewee to mention all the actions they took, their discussions with other people and their feelings, as well as whether they did indeed make an appointment to see their doctor.

However, to suggest that in-depth interviewing involves only open questions is to understate the specificity that good interviewing requires. Both content mapping and content mining involve asking questions which vary in terms of how broad or narrow they are. For example, content mapping as we have described involves very wide questions to map the territory or a dimension. But it might involve asking whether a particular motivation or view was relevant – a question which could be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no', and which would then need further probing. Content mining, similarly, primarily involves broad and open questions but may also require narrow questions. In fact, understanding the interviewee's perspective in depth can require a high degree of specificity. For example, in a study looking at impacts of a welfare to work programme it would be essential to know whether someone was looking for work before they used the service, and whether they were doing so after, as well as understanding broader issues like their feelings about work, the meaning work holds for them, and their perceptions of barriers or difficulties.

Closed questions can also play a role in controlling the interview process. They are useful, for example, where the participant's answer is straying from the question and the researcher needs them to focus on the particular topic. They are also helpful where a participant is extremely voluble and the researcher needs to structure their response by asking narrower questions to ensure an issue is discussed in the detail required.

Avoiding leading questions

The researcher's questions in an in-depth interview are designed to yield a full answer: they are not intended to influence the answer itself. However, it is all too easy to ask a question that suggests a possible answer to the interviewee, such as 'Were you furious when he said that?' or – even worse – 'You must have been furious when he said that.'

A much better version of the question, which allows the participant to supply the response and will reveal what they actually felt, would be:

➢ How did you react when he said that?

The participant is then free to supply whatever responses he or she chooses. In this case, possible responses might be:

- I was shattered
- Oh, I didn't take any notice of him
- I hit him and threw him out of the house

If necessary, a question which might seem to invite a particular response can be 'neutralised' by adding 'or not?':

➢ Would you like to have done that, or not?

Asking clear questions

The most effective questions are those that are short and clear, leaving the interviewee with no uncertainty about the sort of information sought. There are various pitfalls to avoid here. First, it is sometimes tempting to preface a question – perhaps to make it seem less intrusive if it covers a delicate issue, or to link it with something said earlier by the participant, or to explain how the question was prompted by the researcher's understanding of the subject. Although some explanation will occasionally be necessary to clarify the relevance of the question, preambles can easily become so convoluted that the question itself gets lost or obscured. Where this temptation arises, the most effective solution is usually to 'think simple' and ask the question in as straightforward a way as possible.

Double questions too should be avoided. In the heat of the moment, it is very easy to ask two questions in one: 'How old were you when that happened and what effect did it have on you?' This is a relatively simple example of a double question. However, where they are more complex it becomes very confusing for the participant to remember or to answer both halves. People's inclination is generally to answer the easier part, and the one that would generate richer data will be lost. It is much more effective to ask one question at a time, follow it up with whatever probes are appropriate, and then ask the next question.

Third, it is important to avoid questions that are too abstract or theorised. The most effective questions are those to which the interviewee can relate directly and which are clearly pertinent to their own views or circumstances. Although the researcher's question may derive from their understanding of relevant social theory, it is important to find a way of translating it into a simple, concrete question phrased in everyday language. It is, paradoxically, these questions that are most likely to generate the rich data that actually further theoretical understanding (Kvale, 1996).

Finally, it is important to be sensitive to the language and terminology used by people, and to 'mirror' it as far as possible. Using official or bureaucratic language where someone has used more colloquial language can set up a barrier which might impede the interview process. It is also, of course, important to explore the specific terms used by people where this might shed light on their underlying perceptions, values or attitudes.

Further techniques for achieving depth

As well as the ways in which questions are asked, there are some further techniques that are central to achieving depth of coverage.

Listening and remembering

A fundamental principle of in-depth interviewing is to listen. This does not just mean listening to the words but really trying to hear the meaning of what the participant is saying, understanding where there is a subtext that needs to be explored, and hearing the nuances in the participant's account. Indeed, Herbert and Irene Rubin subtitled their 1995 book on qualitative interviewing: *The Art of Hearing Data*. The interactive nature of the in-depth interview means that the researcher's next question should be determined by the interviewee's answer, not determined in advance. It is important to find a way of clearing one's mind of plans for conducting the rest of the interview and concerns about how things are going, to listen really acutely. Although it may seem a passive role, listening is in fact an active part of interviewing (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), and it is listening to which a good interviewer's energies and attention will be most directed.

One of the spin-offs from really hearing what someone is saying is that it helps the interviewer remember points that need to be followed up at a later stage in the interview. One response from an interviewee may trigger four or five points to probe in the researcher's mind. However, a swift decision has to be taken about the immediate issue that needs to be followed up. In such cases, the researcher should make a mental note to return to the other issues raised, either once they have dealt with the immediate issue or later in the interview when they are dealing with a relevant topic:

> ➤ Can I take you back to something you said earlier ...
> ➤ You said earlier that you felt embarrassed about ... why was that?

Facilitating the relationship with the participant

The importance of the researcher establishing an effective working relationship with the participant has already been stressed. The following are some of the ways in which the researcher can assist the relationship during the interview:

EXPRESSING INTEREST AND ATTENTION
This is achieved by maintaining eye contact with the interviewee, giving the odd smile and the occasional nod designed to express attention (not approval), and by asking follow-up questions which demonstrate that the researcher has heard what has been said and wants to know more. These are signals to the participant to continue giving full answers and that what they are saying is relevant and valuable.

ESTABLISHING THAT THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS
It is sometimes useful to say this at the start of the interview, but it is important to convey it throughout the interview through a non-judgemental

manner. It also means not correcting mistakes or misunderstandings. A participant may be misinformed about their entitlement to a particular social security benefit, for example, or about the designated procedure for assessing a claimant's eligibility. Rather than correcting them and running the risk that they would feel foolish and clam up, the researcher's task is to find out how they formed this impression and what its consequences were.

BEING SENSITIVE TO TONE OF VOICE AND BODY LANGUAGE
People often convey their state of mind through their tone of voice, manner or body language. The researcher should be constantly receptive to these clues. So, for example, if the interviewee sounds doubtful about a view, this should act as a signal to the researcher to explore further. This might involve simply allowing them to continue talking, or asking whether they have other views or experiences, or saying 'you look (or sound) a little doubtful' and giving them an opportunity to reflect or clarify further.

Body language and speech patterns can be important clues that there is more depth to be found. They also add a context and flavour to the interview that a researcher may feel has enriched their understanding during the interview – for example, where a participant was particularly emphatic about a point, or seemed angry or frustrated. But this context will be lost if it is not verbalised and explained, and thus captured in the recording. The researcher needs to ensure the underlying feeling is made explicit, and then explained, for example by saying 'You sound very certain about that – what makes you so certain?', or 'You look a little uncomfortable as you're talking – why is that?' These emotional contexts can also be usefully recorded in fieldnotes (see Chapter 5) although this is no substitute for directly addressing it in the interview, since the researcher's interpretation of it may simply be wrong.

ALLOWING THE PARTICIPANT TIME TO REPLY
In an in-depth interview, people are asked to think and give views about issues that are not necessarily top of mind for them. They require time to think about a particular point and then formulate their response. It can be tempting for interviewers to fill these pauses with explanation or supplementary questions. However, moments of silence in in-depth interviews are usually very productive and it pays dividends for the research if the interviewer can hold the pause until the participant is ready to speak. Contemplative silences or those that indicate the participant is thinking should never be filled.

PACING THE INTERVIEW
It is important to ensure that sufficient time is allowed to cover all the topics on the topic guide. If it seems that extra time may be needed, this should be negotiated with the participant as early as possible.

HANDLING EXTRANEOUS INFORMATION

Depending on the sampling and selection methods (see Chapter 4), the researcher may have fairly detailed information about the participant relating to the subject matter. This information may be of some use in preparing for the interview, although it is important not to over-plan since additional – or contradictory – information may emerge during the course of the interview. But it is usually more effective for the dynamic of the interview to approach the subject fresh with the participant, rather than to introduce information that has not come from the interview.

A different approach might be appropriate if someone has already taken part in a survey interview as part of the same research programme, which has generated detailed factual information. Here, it may be appropriate to refer to and check the information known, to avoid undue repetition. This would be less useful, however, in relation to information about attitudes or feelings collected by the survey, where approaching these issues fresh in the in-depth interview would be more likely to unlock the detailed account required.

Turning assumptions and interventions into questions

The aim of an in-depth interview is to obtain as full and unbiased an account as possible of the participant's perspective on the research topic, and the researcher's task is to use every means at their disposal to aid this. Assumptions, comments or other interventions can inhibit the interview process, and such reactions should be turned into a question.

- *Never assume.* It is easy to assume an understanding of what someone means by the terms they use, but it is surprising how often the assumption turns out to be incorrect when the interviewee is given an opportunity to explain what they mean. Similarly, it is essential not to assume that the reason for a particular course of action or belief is clear, or that it can be implied from what has already been said. It is surprising how often what seems clear takes on a deeper and richer meaning – or sometimes an altogether different meaning – when the interviewee is asked for a little more explanation. A very useful rule of interviewing is to turn an assumption into a question.
- *Refrain from commenting on an answer.* While it may be thought to help in establishing rapport, commenting on an answer by saying for example 'that's interesting', can introduce an element of judgement into the interview and interrupt the flow, inhibiting active listening and probing.
- *Refrain from summarising the interviewee's answer.* Summarising what people have said is rarely helpful. It is difficult to capture the full meaning relayed by the participant in a short summary, and attempts to do so may seem glib or patronising to the participant. The likelihood is that the summary will be partial or inaccurate, which will not aid the interview.

Summarising also prevents the interview moving on, halting the flow when a better response would be a question which seeks more depth, such as asking the participant to explain further or to give an example. If it seems important for the researcher to check that they have understood a response, they should do so in the form of a question which makes it easy for the interviewee to provide further clarification:

> ➤ Can I just check that I have got this right? Is what you are saying ...? Have I understood that right or have I missed something?

- *Refrain from finishing off an answer.* It is important to avoid 'putting words into the interviewee's mouth', however tempting it may be to finish off their answer. It is always better to allow them time to finish, asking a further question if this will help them to make their point, or gently pointing out that they have left a sentence unfinished. For example:

  - I felt angry, you know, really –'
  > ➤ You felt really –?

  - There are lots of factors I take into account in deciding what sort of financial settlement might be appropriate: Each party's needs, their resources, the length of the marriage –'
  > ➤ Are there any other factors?

- *Avoid extraneous remarks.* Extraneous remarks such as 'Right', 'okay', 'yes' or 'I see' can encourage the participant to close down, to see what they have already said as sufficient. They are sometimes used by nervous interviewers as a prelude to moving to a new question, where a follow-up question is actually what is required. For example, if a participant said: 'It isn't really up to me to decide where we go on holiday', a nervous interviewer might say: 'Oh right. So where did you last go on holiday?' A more relaxed researcher will find out who does take the decision, why this is, and how the participant feels about it. Prefacing questions with 'And' or 'So' is another habit of new and nervous interviewers, but it results in a tone which is less spontaneous and relaxed.

Neutrality and avoidance of self-disclosure

As noted earlier, a key area where different theoretical perspectives on interviewing are manifested is the issue of how far the researcher should enter into a two-way exchange with the participant, giving information or views as well as seeking them.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) stress that qualitative interviewers should aim to achieve empathy without becoming over-involved. They must learn to empathise with different points of view, and if this is unacceptable to them they may need to draw boundaries around the kind of research they undertake. Retaining an objective and neutral approach may be particularly

challenging if a researcher is personally drawn to or involved in their research subject. But considering how these challenges might arise and how they might be met is an essential part of their preparation for fieldwork. While complete objectivity and neutrality may ultimately be a chimera, it is important to be vigilant in striving for balance in interviews.

If the participant expresses a view with which the researcher strongly agrees or disagrees, their task is always to find out what underpins the participant's view rather than to express their own or to enter into debate. Even views or comments which are offensive to the researcher should be explored. This is undeniably difficult if the researcher feels that to let a view go unchallenged might be seen to imply collusion with it. However, a question such as 'How did you come to that view?' or 'Why do you see it that way?' is a useful vehicle for exploring unattractive views in a way that avoids collusion and challenges the assumption that the view is widely held or shared by the researcher. This is likely to be a more effective strategy than a direct challenge. Equally, it is important for the researcher to remain detached and calm where people use language or become emotional in ways which the researcher might find shocking or distressing.

People sometimes seek approval of their views, or of their actions, from researchers. Again, both favourable and adverse comments should be avoided. Neutrality is a more effective response, and more in keeping with the researcher's role as independent questioner rather than counsellor or adviser.

Since qualitative interviews are essentially aimed at encouraging participants to talk about their personal views and experiences, there is a debate in the research community about whether or not researchers should also disclose some details about themselves. Earlier writers on feminist approaches such as Graham (1984) and Oakley (1981) saw the interview as a reciprocal exchange in which the interviewer will show feelings because there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (Oakley, 1981: 49). Ann Oakley's research with women before and after they became mothers has been particularly influential. Her study involved four interviews with women before and after their child was born, and she was often present at the birth too. Perhaps understandably, given the intensity of the research and the experience it was exploring, she felt that the prevailing rhetoric of the researcher as a depersonalised extractor of data was wrong. She felt that not to answer women's questions, which often sought information about the medical or physiological aspects of childbirth but also asked about her, would be exploitative, and would inhibit rapport and be inconsistent with the way in which feminist researchers wanted to treat other women.

But answering questions and giving personal views or details is also problematic, and can inhibit the objective of obtaining a fulsome, open response which is as free as possible from the researcher's influence. For instance, a participant being interviewed about her use of childcare may ask whether the researcher has children. Indicating that she has may temporarily create a reciprocity or intimacy, but can also begin to hinder the participant's account. The participant may give less detailed responses on the grounds that the researcher 'knows what it's like'. It may colour their perceptions of the researcher and cause them to censor their own views or comments (did the researcher make different choices about work and childcare; do they spend more time with their children; might they disapprove of the choices made by the interviewee). The interviewee may want to maintain the intimacy by staying on common ground, reluctant to raise experiences or views they think the researcher may not share. Equally, for the researcher to disclose that she does not have children may create distance between them, perhaps making the interviewee reluctant to talk about more difficult aspects of parenting.

Once one question has been answered, it is difficult to avoid answering further questions and the researcher loses time that could be spent more valuably hearing from the participant. A better response would be to say that the researcher wants to focus on the participant and their experience during the interview, but to offer to answer questions – and to ensure the participant has the opportunity to ask them – once the interview has ended. Maintaining a warm and interested, but neutral, presence is certainly a delicate balance, and one that becomes harder where research is more intense or, as Oakley says 'where there is least social distance between the interviewer and interviewee' (1981: 55).

Responding to different interviewing situations

The interviewing situation is to a certain extent always a venture into the unknown in that it is impossible to predict the precise course the interview will take. Situations arise in the course of an interview which may require special handling on the part of the researcher. In some cases, the situation can be anticipated in advance. In others, it may suddenly present itself without warning.

Conducting sensitive interviews

Sensitive interviews come in two forms. First, the nature of the topic itself may be intrinsically sensitive. Obvious examples are topics relating to issues like sex, financial problems, bereavement, relationship breakdown or serious illness, which deal with very private and emotionally charged issues. The researcher can anticipate this in advance and be mentally prepared in various ways:

- It is helpful for researchers to remind themselves that the participant has consented to be interviewed on the subject, and the researcher therefore has permission to address it – sensitively and appropriately – unless that consent is withdrawn or comes into question.

- Reassurance about confidentiality at the outset of the interview will help to put the participant at ease about disclosing potentially sensitive information.
- Any unease or embarrassment on the part of the researcher will communicate itself to the participant and may make them reticent about discussing the topic. Even questions that appear to be somewhat intrusive or sensitive should be asked in a matter-of-fact way. Researchers will often be surprised at how willing people are to talk about sensitive subjects, and at how their own discomfort seems to be greater than that of the interviewee.
- It is helpful to acknowledge the sensitivity of the area and that the participant is being asked to bare their soul:

  > ➤ I know this may be difficult for you, but how did you feel when you found out that you wouldn't be able to have children?

- As noted in Chapter 3, it is helpful to have details of local or national support groups or sources of information relevant to the research subject for people who may be distressed about their experiences. But the researcher should not step outside their role and become a counsellor or adviser.

The second type of sensitive interview arises where a topic that appears fairly innocuous becomes highly sensitive because some aspect of the discussion triggers a strong emotional response in the interviewee – perhaps because it raises a particular incident in someone's past that the researcher could not have anticipated. These situations draw on more general strategies for dealing with strong emotions in interviews, which the next section addresses.

RESPONDING TO EMOTION

Where a strong emotional response, such as anger, distress or embarrassment, occurs in the interview situation, the first signs are often expressed through facial expression, tone of voice or body language. At this stage the researcher should register the fact mentally but not interrupt the interviewee if they continue talking.

If the participant becomes very distressed or upset it is important to acknowledge this and respond appropriately:

- It is important to be guided by the participant as to what they are and are not willing to address. People may want to continue to talk about subjects even though they find them distressing. However, if this is not clear, consent to continue the interview, and to continue to cover the issue that prompted distress, needs to be reaffirmed by asking whether the participant is happy to continue with that topic.
- Even if a participant becomes tearful, they may want to continue. The researcher should not make this decision for them, but should check

whether they would like to take a break, and if so switch off recording equipment. However, if a participant is so distressed that they are unable to indicate whether or not they want to continue, the researcher should stop recording and give the interviewee a chance to recover before asking whether they want to continue.

- The interviewee's distress should be acknowledged by the researcher's body language – maintaining eye contact and communicating an empathetic willingness to listen – or by comments such as 'It sounds as if that was a difficult time for you' which indicate empathy but an interest in hearing more. More direct comments of sympathy that convey the researcher's own emotional reaction or feelings should be avoided.
- Whatever the researcher's own reaction to the situation, they should not display their own emotions during the interview but deal with them later.

In some cases, people may display anger and hostility. Here it is important to remain calm and not take the anger personally, to acknowledge that the interviewee has strong feelings about the topic and ask them to say more about it.

> ➤ It sounds as if that was something you felt very strongly about. Can you say a bit more about how it affected you?

It may be helpful to explain why the line of questioning is relevant to the research topic if this may not be clear to the interviewee. And, again, it may be necessary to reaffirm consent by checking whether the participant is willing to continue. The researcher should be prepared to move on to another topic, and should seek permission to return to it if necessary.

RESPONDING TO ANXIETY OR RETICENCE

Some people may seem particularly anxious about the interview, or reticent in their responses. If the researcher senses this before the interview begins, it is helpful to spend more time trying to put them at their ease by chatting generally before beginning the interview. Taking time over the introductory information about the nature and purpose of the study, confidentiality, and how the study findings will also be used will be particularly important. It should be stressed that there are no right and wrong answers and that the researcher is interested in everyone's views.

Strategies for addressing reticence or anxiety during the course of the interview include:

- spending more time on the opening subjects to give the participant an opportunity to feel more at ease
- spending more time earlier on more factual, concrete and descriptive topics before moving on to their feelings and emotions. Intangible or conceptual questions should also be left until the participant seems more at ease

- using very open questions that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer to encourage the interviewee to talk
- speaking clearly and calmly, ensuring that questions are clear and straightforward
- showing interest and attention and giving plenty of positive reinforcement by maintaining eye contact, nodding and smiling encouragement
- stressing that the researcher is interested in everything they have to say, even if it is something the interviewee has not thought about before
- acknowledging that other people have sometimes found it a difficult topic to talk about
- if necessary, stimulating ideas by referring to what other participants have said and asking for their view.

RESPONDING TO DOMINANCE OF THE INTERVIEW AGENDA

There is a delicate balance to be struck between allowing the participant to speak freely and raise issues of relevance to them, and ensuring that the key research issues are addressed. Getting this balance right becomes more difficult where a participant is particularly dominant. This may arise because they are in a position of authority and used to setting the agenda or see themselves as an expert in an area, or because for some other reason they find the interview situation difficult. Their behaviour may arise in a number of ways:

- Saying they have very little time: the time required for the interview should always be reaffirmed at the beginning of the interview. If this is very curtailed, the researcher will need to decide whether to focus on a few key topics only, or to try to rearrange the interview.
- Asking the researcher questions: questions about the conduct or purpose of the study should be answered by giving factual information but not entering into a discussion. But the researcher should be polite but firm about not answering questions about their own views, until the interview is over.
- Returning repeatedly to the same point: the importance of the point should be acknowledged, but the need to cover other subjects stressed.
- Answering the question of their choice rather than the one asked by the researcher: it is important to bring them back to the original question.
- Giving very brief answers or saying they have no view or relevant experience: this should not always be accepted at face value. The same question can be asked in different ways, or returned to later in the interview.

Again, it is helpful for researchers to remind themselves that the participant has agreed to be interviewed, and to persist with the interview.

RAMBLING RESPONSES

People sometimes ramble, become very repetitive, or get side-tracked by tangential issues when answering a question. The researcher's task is to try

and bring the participant back on track. Ways of doing this without causing offence are:

- at the first available opportunity, to ask a question which re-routes them to a relevant point
- to use body language to indicate that the researcher wants to interrupt (leaning forward, beginning to voice a question, raising a hand slightly)
- to acknowledge that what they have said is important and has been noted – they may be returning repeatedly to a point because they feel it has been ignored
- if they continue to return to the same point, to move the interview on to a completely different part of the required subject matter, or to return to a relevant issue they raised earlier
- if necessary, to withdraw signs of encouragement and approval – removing eye contact, looking down at the topic guide and other ploys designed to indicate less than rapt attention
- to ask more direct, structured questions which give less scope for long replies, at least until the participant seems more willing to remain on relevant topics
- if they are digressing and talking about other people, to bring the topic back to themselves: 'what about you?'
- mentioning that time is moving on and that there are a few other topics that need to be addressed. Rambling responses are sometimes an indication of tiredness or loss of concentration on the participant's part, and saying that only a little more of their time is required or that there is one remaining issue for discussion will often reinvigorate them.

Every interview situation is unique, and every interview a step into unknown territory. What is important is to be alert to changes in the dynamic of the interview and in the participant's demeanour, to ponder what might be bringing about this change, and to shape the response accordingly. Addressing a dominant or rambling participant needs to be done with grace and humour, avoiding confrontation. The researcher needs to show their respect for the participant, but at the same time to respect their own right to carry out the interview so long as the participant consents.

Practical considerations

Scheduling appointments

The length of interviews will vary between studies, and between participants. It should not be constrained by the researcher, but should reflect how long the interviewee wants or needs to spend in the interview. Generally, at least an hour is required, but it will be difficult for both researcher and

interviewee to concentrate if the interview lasts for more than two hours. In scheduling appointments, it is important to bear in mind the degree of mental concentration required to conduct qualitative interviews. It is important to allow time between interviews to assimilate what has been heard, to prepare for and travel to the next appointment, and to rest so the researcher feels calm and alert when he or she arrives. Allowance should be made in the work schedule for interviews starting late or over-running, and for participants asking questions or needing reassurance and an opportunity to come out of the research topic after the interview. In practice, this means it is rarely possible to carry out more than three interviews in a day – and even then only if long journeys are not involved.

It is not uncommon when interviewing professionals in particular to find that the agreed time is no longer available, and the researcher will need to decide whether to try to rearrange the appointment. As Chapter 5 noted, it is useful to consider which areas of the topic guide should be seen as key if time remains short.

Venues

The choice of venue for in-depth interviews is often left to the participant. It will usually be their home, or (if they are interviewed in their professional capacity) their workplace. But some participants may prefer to be interviewed away from their personal surroundings, and researchers need to be willing to find another venue if this is what the participant wants. The environment needs to be conducive to concentration: private, quiet and physically comfortable. Researchers therefore have to develop strategies for adapting the environment for this purpose. It may be necessary to ask whether there is a space where the interview can be carried out without disturbing other household members, to ask for a radio or television to be turned off, and to ask whether a chair can be rearranged to allow interviewee and researcher to face each other comfortably with recording equipment appropriately positioned. In professional interviews, it is helpful if telephones can be directed to another extension or to voicemail to avoid interruption.

Recording

It is highly desirable to audio-record the interview and for the researcher to take few if any notes during the interview. This allows the researcher to devote his or her full attention to listening to the interviewee and probing in-depth. It provides an accurate, verbatim record of the interview, capturing the language used by the participant including their hesitations and tone in far more detail than would ever be possible with note-taking. Audio-recording also becomes a more neutral and less intrusive way of recording the interview. Note-taking

can give participants unintended cues – that they should slow down or pause if the researcher is writing; that they have said enough if the researcher is not. It is rare for participants to refuse to be taped so long as the researcher provides a clear, logical explanation about its value, reassures about confidentiality and explains what happens to tapes and transcripts.

Being comfortable with the operation of recording equipment, checking it works before and immediately after the interview, and having spare tapes and batteries on hand is essential.

Other people attending the interview

There are times when it is helpful for two members of the research team to attend an interview, particularly at the beginning of fieldwork when it allows the interviewing strategies and the topic guide to be reviewed (see Chapter 5) or for training purposes. The reason should be explained and the participant's consent sought when the appointment is made, and the second person's presence explained again at the beginning of the interview. If the second person is a representative of the funding organisation, this should be made clear: confidentiality will need to be stressed. It is generally more effective for the interview to be conducted largely by one researcher only, with the second invited to ask further questions at specific points or at the end of the interview. It is difficult to develop a line of questioning and to probe in depth if the interviewing role is being shared, and dealing with two interviewers at once can become confusing for the participant. More than one additional person would be intrusive to the interviewing relationship.

Overall, being interviewed provides what is likely to be, for many people, an unusual experience in which someone else is dedicated to listening to them, encouraging them to reflect and speak freely, and reinforcing the value and worth of what they have to say. People seem generally to find some satisfaction in the experience – they are sometimes surprised at how much they had to say, and they are very receptive to the idea of being interviewed again where studies involve a longitudinal element. The end of the interview is not the time to ask for reflections or feedback on the process, unless this is specifically relevant to the interview (for example, if part of the purpose of the study was to explore how far a very sensitive issue can be pursued). This can otherwise feel to the interviewee like a request for reassurance for the researcher. But there is a dearth of research into what the experience of being interviewed is really like for participants, and this subject merits much more investigation.

Finally, a well-conducted interview will seem a very precious thing to the researcher. They will feel privileged to have been given access to the participant's social world, to their meanings and experiences. That richness will be a joy when they move on to analysis. But a poor interview, with issues only

half explored, will be a hindrance, and even the finest analysis will not be able to retrieve it.

KEY POINTS

- There are a number of different theoretical perspectives on in-depth interviewing, and different types of interview. But the features which are broadly consistent across research models are their flexible and interactive nature, their ability to achieve depth, the generative nature of the data and the fact that it is captured in its natural form.
- In-depth interviewing calls for a diverse and challenging range of qualities in researchers. A key skill is the ability to listen and to hear, but their role as facilitator is an active rather than a passive one.
- Achieving breadth and depth involves asking a combination of content mapping questions (to map territory and identify the component elements of dimensions) and content mining questions (to explore them in detail). Both types of question, especially the latter, require probing questions of which there are a range of types. Clear, non-leading questions are key. Dichotomous questions are of little value, but to suggest that only open questions have a role is to understate the specificity that good in-depth interviewing achieves.
- Assumptions, extraneous comments and a temptation to summarise should all be turned into questions. An empathetic but neutral stance is required, and sharing personal information during the interview can hinder the in-depth interview process.
- Any topic can raise sensitive issues or strong emotions. There are a range of strategies for dealing with these, but recognition and acknowledgement of the participant's reactions are key.

KEY TERMS

Probes are responsive questions asked to find out more about what has been raised. Their aim is always to obtain greater clarity, detail or depth of understanding – for example to elicit further description, an example, an explanation, and so on. Their key feature is that they relate directly to what has already been said by the interviewee, often referring to the exact phrase or term that they have used. Probes are a crucial element of any in-depth interview.

Prompts are questions which come from the researcher rather than directly from what the interviewee has said. They are used where the researcher wants to ask the interviewee to reflect on something else – perhaps something raised in other interviews, or that the researcher thought might be relevant from their own reading or thinking.

Leading questions are those which could be perceived as indicating a preferred, expected or acceptable response, and should be avoided.

Open questions are questions which require more than a single word, or a handful of words to be answered. **Closed questions** are those which can be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

Reciprocity is the idea of researchers giving something back to those they interview by sharing their own views, experiences, or reflections on what has been said. It is a feature of some approaches to feminist research in particular, but carries some cautions with it.

Further reading

Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Lofland, J. and Lofland, L.H. (1995) *Analyzing Social Settings*, 3rd edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. (1995) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Spradley, J. (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*, New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston

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7

Focus Groups

Helen Finch and Jane Lewis

The use of focus groups in social research increased considerably over the last two decades of the twentieth century. (We use the phrase 'group discussions' as being synonymous with focus groups, as we described in Chapter 2.) They originated among social scientists working in applied and academic research settings. Fontana and Frey (1993) trace the origins of focus groups back to the 1920s, when they were used mainly in the development of survey instruments. Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (Merton et al., 1956) adopted them in the 1940s and 1950s as an aid to the development of training and information materials, and Lazarsfeld originally used them for radio audience research (see Morgan, 1997).

Since the mid-twentieth century, focus groups developed as a research technique most strongly in market research (Bloor et al., 2001), where they have been used extensively for exploring issues such as brand images, packaging and product choice. They have also been adopted enthusiastically in political, and particularly party political, research. Their use here has perhaps been somewhat overenthusiastic, and they have sometimes been used and interpreted inappropriately, without due regard to their qualitative and group-based nature. But they are now well established as a mainstream method across the fields of social research, where they are widely used and are an extremely valuable research approach.

This chapter begins by exploring the unique features of focus groups, and describing different types of groups. We then look at the processes groups go through and the stages of conducting focus groups. We look at the techniques involved in handling discussion, and at how the group process can be harnessed to enrich data collection. Finally, we consider the context in which the discussion takes place, in terms of group size and composition, the physical environment and the organisation of focus groups. The chapter should be read in conjunction with earlier chapters, particularly Chapters 2 and 3 which distinguish the features and uses of focus groups from in-depth interviews. Much of the discussion in Chapter 5 (designing fieldwork strategies) and Chapter 6 (asking questions in in-depth interviews) will also be relevant.

Features and types of focus group

Key features of the focus group

The group context of focus groups creates a process which is in some important respects very different from an in-depth interview. Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants present their own views and experience, but they also hear from other people. They listen, reflect on what is said, and in the light of this consider their own standpoint further. Additional material is thus triggered in response to what they hear. Participants ask questions of each other, seek clarification, comment on what they have heard and prompt others to reveal more. As the discussion progresses (backwards and forwards, round and round the group), individual response becomes sharpened and refined, and moves to a deeper and more considered level.

A focus group is therefore not a collection of individual interviews with comments directed solely through the researcher. This is better described as a 'group interview', and lacks both the depth of individual interviews and the richness that comes with using the group process (Bloor et al., 2001; Bryman, 2001; Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). Instead, focus groups are synergistic (Stewart and Shamdasi, 1990) in the sense that the group works together: the group interaction is explicitly used to generate data and insights (Morgan, 1997), as we describe below.

A further feature of focus groups is the spontaneity that arises from their stronger social context. In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. The language they use, the emphasis they give and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display. As all this emerges from discussion within the group, the perspective is less influenced by interaction with the researcher than it might be in a one-to-one interview. In a sense, the group participants take over some of the 'interviewing' role, and the researcher is at times more in the position of listening in.

> The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of the individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others – just as they are in real life. (Kreuger and Casey, 2000: 11)

This stronger social context offers an opportunity to see how ideas and language emerge in a more naturalistic setting than an in-depth interview, how they are shaped through conversation with others. It reflects the social constructions – normative influences, collective as well as individual self-identity, shared meanings – that are an important part of the way in which we perceive, experience and understand the world around us (Bloor et al., 2001). But this does not lessen the researcher's load: focus groups need to be carefully managed for this to happen.

> Focus groups are naturalistic rather than natural events and cannot and should not be left to chance and circumstance; their naturalism has to be carefully contrived by the researcher. (Bloor et al., 2001: 57)

Types of focus groups

Typically, focus groups involve around six to eight people who meet once, for a period of around an hour and a half to two hours. This format can be used for a wide range of population groups and research objectives. As with in-depth interviews, there will be variation in the extent to which discussion is structured, if the researcher has a strong sense of the issues to be explored; or flexible, allowing the group itself to shape the agenda and the flow of discussion (see further Chapter 5). Chapter 3 also noted that group discussions can be used in combination with in-depth interviews, either before or after interviews, and with a different size and structure depending on their purpose within the overall research study.

There are further variations in the application of group-based discussion methods and the form that groups may take. Although focus groups generally meet just once, reconvened groups can be valuable when studies address issues that are intangible or unfamiliar to respondents. The group is reconvened perhaps a week or two after it first meets. The intervening period provides an opportunity for group members to reflect on what they have heard and for the issue to become more familiar to them. They may be asked to carry out tasks between the sessions (looking at materials, keeping a diary, discussing the issues raised with others) to aid this process.

Some group discussion settings may take the form of a workshop, implying a larger group, meeting for a longer session, with a more structured agenda involving specific tasks or activities, perhaps with small group work as well as the group coming together as a whole.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century there has been an emphasis on using research for consultative purposes, particularly as the shortcomings of traditional public consultation techniques (such as public meetings and written consultations) for reaching all social groups were recognised. This led to some innovations in the application of research methods, and particularly of group discussion methods.

For example, citizens' juries bring together groups of between 12 and 20 people who, over the course of several days, hear from 'witnesses', deliberate, and make recommendations about courses of action (Coote and Lanaghan, 1997; Davies et al., 1998; Stewart et al., 1994; White et al., 1999). Deliberative Polls (Fishkin, 1995) focus on measuring how views and attitudes change as the study group becomes better informed. They involve a baseline survey, followed by small group discussions and the opportunity to hear from expert panels over several days. The survey is repeated at the end of the deliberative session. Consultative panels have been conducted in different forms, and involve drawing people together in a series of sessions to deliberate and contribute to decision-making.

The common features of these methods are that they combine opportunities for accessing information with discussion and deliberation. Citizens' juries and consultative panels generally also require some sort of recommendation as an output. These new forms of groups are not without their difficulties. Making consultation accessible and attractive to people remains a challenge, particularly given the substantial commitment of time and thought required, and the validity of data is compromised if decisions or recommendations are forced by pressure of time or pressure to reach agreement. However, they are an interesting application of focus group research methods to decision-making, particularly useful in more unfamiliar, technical or complex areas where information provision is important.

Although group-based research usually involves a physical coming-together of participants this is not always the case. Nominal groups have been used for some time. Here, views are gathered from group members individually and collated and circulated for comment – the group may or may not meet at a later stage. The Delphi technique is a particular application of this. A panel of experts is asked individually to provide forecasts in a technical field, with their views summarised and circulated for iterative forecasting until consensus is reached (Stewart and Shamdasi, 1990; Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

Advances in technology are also leading to growing interest in virtual groups, where again participants do not physically meet. Teleconferencing technology allows telephone groups to be conducted, particularly with less mobile or particularly time-pressed populations. Online focus groups are also being used more (see Bloor et al., 2001). They may involve synchronous discussion, in which participants can log on at the same time and exchange views in real time, using online chat software. Alternatively, discussion may be asynchronous with people logging on to make comments as and when they want to. Clearly, here and in nominal groups the role of the researcher will be quite different from their moderation of a live group, an issue discussed by Bloor and colleagues.

Group-based research can, then, take many different forms. Although this chapter is primarily concerned with more typical forms, in which a small

number of participants come together once only, it is important to consider whether other forms may be more appropriate, and how the techniques described below can be applied to other group contexts.

Group processes and the stages of a focus group

The group process

An understanding of group processes and models of small group behaviour is helpful to offer insight into what can happen in focus groups, and why. From this can be implied appropriate strategies to facilitate the group as it goes through different phases.

Based on an examination of studies of small groups, Tuckman (1965) in collaboration with Jenson (Tuckman and Jenson, 1977) identified five stages in small group development which demonstrate a sequence that groups tend to pass through. The model was based on examination of studies of small groups which were mainly therapy and training groups. However, it also resonates with the process of small groups assembled for research, and has proved valuable in informing moderation techniques (see Figure 7.1).
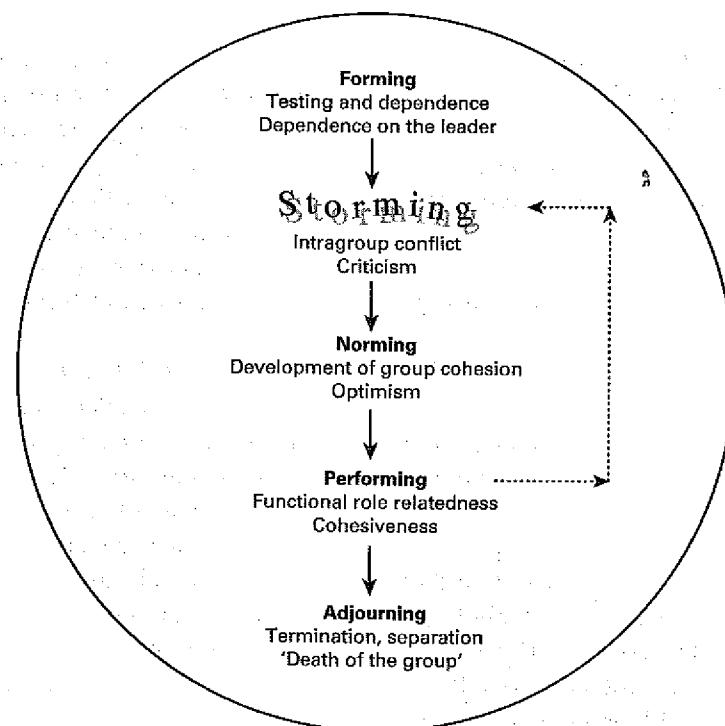
Forming
Testing and dependence
Dependence on the leader

Storming
Intragroup conflict
Criticism

Norming
Development of group cohesion
Optimism

Performing
Functional role relatedness
Cohesiveness

Adjourning
Termination, separation
'Death of the group'

Figure 7.1 **A model of group phases (Based on: Tuckman and Jenson, 1977)**

In the 'forming' phase, individuals may be guarded, tense and anxious, and concerned about inclusion and acceptance. They tend to address comments solely to the moderator, not yet engaging with other group members. Occasionally, people respond to anxiety by overstatement, perhaps seeming confrontational or dismissive of the subject matter. In a group discussion, this is the stage at which background information is usefully collected so that participants are on familiar ground, introducing themselves to each other and beginning to get the measure of the researcher and the rest of the group. If substantial research topics are introduced in this phase it can be illuminating to see where people begin in addressing them, but it is important to bear in mind the possible influence of their uncertain feelings about the group environment on what they say.

'Storming' is a period of tension or criticism that may be shown up in a number of ways. It may be typified by dominance or one-upmanship from some individuals, by silent aloofness from others, or by the adoption of particular roles – the 'expert' perhaps – as a defensive position. Strong differences may emerge in this phase of the group which may provide useful material to return to, but these differences may diminish later as people express themselves with more complexity and subtlety. Again, it is important not to place too much reliance on strong statements made at this stage without reflecting on how the views expressed are articulated later in the discussion.

This is followed by the group settling down to a calmer phase of sharing, similarity and agreement, or 'norming', in which the norms of the group are established. The group begins to work cooperatively and may be particularly keen to find common ground, to agree with each other and to reinforce what others say. Participants may in this phase begin to put into practice the 'ground rules' that the researcher has set down (see below) – giving way to others, not speaking all at once. This is the stage at which social norms will be most influential, revealing what are seen as socially acceptable views or behaviours. These may be a valuable part of the research data although again it is important to reflect on how what is said compares with views expressed later, as group members gradually become more comfortable with the environment and feel able to express less normative views. But the researcher will need to find ways to prevent the 'norming' from masking attitudes and diversity (see below).

The 'performing' phase which follows finds the group working interactively in open discussion on the research issues. This is likely to be with energy, concentration, enjoyment and a less guarded stance, allowing both agreement and disagreement between participants. At this point the researcher can almost sit back, observe and listen, and let the group get on with the task in hand. The group will often return in a more reflective environment to points discussed earlier. They will be able to tackle the most challenging topics, working together with a synergy developing which

achieves greater depth of insight. This is the most productive phase of the group process, but it takes time to reach it.

Finally, in the 'adjourning' phase, the group works towards ending. Participants may take the opportunity to reinforce something they have said earlier or to give their final thoughts. The researcher will thank them for what has been achieved. The group, or at least some members, may feel reluctant to leave – the stage is sometimes called 'mourning'.

The phases will be apparent by the mood and energy level of the group, indicated by both verbal and non-verbal behaviour. But as with all models, it does not always work out precisely like this in practice. Not all the phases will necessarily be discernible though it is likely that elements will be noted. Nor do the phases necessarily remain in this linear sequence, although it would probably be unhelpful to let the group move too far through the process without some 'norming'. There may be a circular process, with the group dynamic perhaps reverting back from 'performing' to 'storming' behaviour, for example on introduction of a new topic of discussion or a specific task. The essential point for the researcher, however, is to recognise that the phases are a normal part of the group process, to allow them to happen, to help them along, and to structure the discussion appropriately taking them into account.

The stages of a focus group

This section focuses on the stages that moderating a group discussion involves and the tasks for the researcher within each, reflecting the group development phases described above.

STAGE ONE: SCENE SETTING AND GROUND RULES
Management of the start of the session is of vital importance. Preparation on the part of the researcher for the handling of this stage can pre-empt difficulties later in the discussion. As participants arrive, the researcher thanks them warmly for coming, welcomes them and tries to put them at their ease by friendly conversation, avoiding the research topic. When the group is complete the researcher makes a more formal start to the session, with a personal introduction, outline of the research topic, and background information on the purpose of the study and its funder. Confidentiality is stressed, and an explanation is given of what will happen to the data and of proposals for reporting.

The researcher's introduction should not be too lengthy or too technical, but sufficient to reassure that this is a bona fide research study to which participants are invited to contribute. It should also emphasise points that may increase participants' motivation to take an active role in the discussion.

These might include more specific details on why the research is being undertaken or how it will be used; perhaps with emphasis on the opportunity that the forum provides for active consultation, or for involvement in decision-making.

The researcher also includes an indication of expected roles, and reassurance. It is explained that the session will be in the form of a discussion and that group participants should not wait to be invited before they step in. The researcher stresses that there are no right or wrong answers, that everyone's views are of interest, that the aim is to hear as many different thoughts as possible. They may add that there are likely to be different views or experiences among the group, and that people should feel free to say what they think, and if they agree or disagree with other participants' views, to say so. Explanation is given of the need to record the discussion in order to provide a full account of everything that is said. Participants are asked not to talk over each other. Depending on the subject area, it may also be helpful to ask the group to treat what other people say as confidential and not to be repeated outside the session. This will be particularly important if people know each other and are part of a wider network – colleagues or co-residents, for example.

At this stage, participants are likely to be feeling both curiosity and concern. Their unspoken fears – 'What's this all about?', 'Might there be a hidden agenda?', 'Might I be shown in an unfavourable light?' – need to be put to rest. The style and content of the introduction will need to be adapted to the type of people in the group though it will be necessary for all groups to take time over this important initial stage.

STAGE TWO: INDIVIDUAL INTRODUCTIONS
Switching on the tape recorder, the researcher asks the group to introduce themselves in turn by saying their names and giving other simple background information (items usually specified by the researcher – see Chapter 6). As each individual speaks, the researcher might decide to probe a little, to draw out a fuller response and begin to set the tone of an in-depth discussion.

These background points serve a number of purposes. They allow participants to introduce themselves to each other, beginning to build up a degree of familiarity. They provide a chance for each individual both to speak and to listen, to rehearse two roles essential in the process of discussion. The information provided by individual participants may be used by the researcher during the discussion, for example as part of a probe to draw people out or to ensure that what might be different perspectives are drawn in. They also serve to link a voice (and its spatial location) with a name and other personal characteristics, on the recording tape. This is useful in the

transcription process, particularly in research studies that require individual response to be tracked as far as possible through the discussion.

The researcher jots down a spatial diagram of participants' names (and perhaps brief background details) as the individual introductions proceed, for their own use as an *aide-mémoire* to refer to throughout. For some groups, name-cards or badges can be useful, if participants are accustomed to this rather more formal set-up.

When the personal introductions are complete, the researcher may choose to make a brief comment about the composition of the group as a whole. They may highlight differences that have just been revealed, pointing out the benefit of this for contrasting views and experiences in the forthcoming discussion. Or they may note similarities, particularly as a prelude to exploring a sensitive issue in depth. This can reinforce the feeling of now being 'a group' and one in which all the group members are included, whatever their situation.

STAGE THREE: THE OPENING TOPIC

After the individual introductions, the researcher starts off the general discussion by introducing the opening topic. This may be something fairly neutral, general and easy to talk about, or it may be a more conceptual or definitional issue about which group members' spontaneous thoughts are sought (see Chapter 5).

The researcher's aim at this point is to promote discussion and to use the opening topic to engage as many of the participants as possible. At first their response may be faltering, between silences, perhaps with just one or two people speaking, directing their comments to the researcher. Or one individual may speak at length about their own personal views or situation; or a spirited discussion may start straightaway, spanning a range of topics.

The researcher continues to be verbally active, asking further questions (or rephrasing the same question) around the particular topic and enquiring generally about other people's views to open out the response. It is beneficial to get everyone to say something at this early stage in the group, as an individual's silence can become harder for them to break as the group proceeds and they feel more and more left out. Widening the discussion at this early stage also helps to wean off dependence on the researcher. But it can take time before individuals respond to each other rather than referring their comments directly to the researcher. The researcher encourages group interaction by allowing short silences to invite thought, or draws links between issues that different people have raised, perhaps highlighting differences and similarities in views. Non-verbal cues are also employed, for example maintaining eye contact around the group, leaning forward in an interested fashion, and perhaps gesturing with hands in a manner to invite the group to continue.

Issues will be raised early in this initial discussion that relate to key topics requiring full debate – indeed sometimes it can seem as if the entire topic

guide has been covered within the first five minutes. The researcher might interject if this occurs, noting the points made, and explain that this important issue is something to return to later for fuller discussion. Or the researcher might judge that it would now be appropriate to select one of the issues mentioned and move the discussion on to it.

STAGE FOUR: DISCUSSION

At this point, following initial discussion, the researcher new to group discussions may feel things are getting out of control. Now what? Their role is one of juggling: balancing the need to promote group interaction against the need for some individual detail, and the value of free-flowing debate against the need for coverage of specified topics.

Through active listening and observation, the researcher will keep a mental note of what is being said and will probe both the group as a whole and individual members, using open questions expressed in simple language. The researcher listens to the terms used by respondents, explores their meaning to respondents and mirrors that language in formulating further questions or comments. It will be necessary to direct the flow over other relevant topic areas if they are not raised spontaneously by the group, and to keep the discussion broadly focused on the research subject. At the same time, attempts are made to include everyone and to balance the contributions of individual members, and the group process is engaged to generate new insights and thoughts. All these tasks are described in more detail in the sections which follow. The discussion will generally be lively at this stage, but if there are short silences it is best to avoid the temptation to fill them. Holding back usually means that someone in the group will take responsibility for keeping the discussion going.

STAGE FIVE: ENDING THE DISCUSSION

The final topic will have been decided in advance, with an eye to how it fits in with the overall shape of the discussion and group developmental phases. It is advisable to try to finish on a positive and completed note, as with individual interviews – for example covering ideas or suggestions about what might be done to improve a situation, following a discussion about problems (Chapter 5). This is particularly important if emotionally difficult material has been raised during the discussion.

Attention needs to be paid to pacing the end of the discussion in order to allow time for the group to prepare for it and to avoid too abrupt a finish. The researcher therefore signals its approach, for example with mention of 'the final topic', and finally, with questions that enquire about '– anything else to say before we finish?' or '– anything we've left out, or that people feel they haven't had a chance to say?'

Finally, the researcher ends the discussion and thanks the group, stressing how helpful the discussion has been. In some studies it may be advisable to reaffirm confidentiality, especially if sensitive issues have been covered, and

to reiterate the purpose of the research and how it will be used. The researcher should be prepared to stay awhile after the tape recorder has been switched off. People often seem to enjoy the experience of a group discussion and, having become part of it, can be reluctant to leave.

Conducting the discussion

An overview of the researcher's role

The researcher uses the group process to encourage open, interactive discussion, but also controls it to bring everyone in, prevent dominance, and steer the group away from irrelevant areas. Yet the process in which the researcher is engaged remains one of gathering information on a specific topic of enquiry. The role of the researcher in relation to a focus group is therefore something of a hybrid. Partly it involves the role of a moderator with its connotations of restraint, as one who 'restrains or presides over a meeting'; partly it involves the role of a facilitator, as one who 'makes easy' or 'assists the progress of' a process. This section describes the techniques used by researchers in conducting the discussion, and the following section looks at some further strategies for making effective use of the group process.

The necessary level of researcher interventions will vary between groups, and will depend on both the dynamic in an individual group and the nature of the research subject, particularly how much interest it holds for participants. Some groups are taciturn and unforthcoming (just as some individual respondents are) and require the researcher to maintain a more verbal presence: questioning, probing and drawing out. Others are lively. It is as if the group is the respondent.

The researcher's role is critical to the success of the group discussion. It requires energy and can be demanding and challenging. The sort of people who are good at it are able to relate well in groups and possess qualities to put people at ease, though the skills are able to be learned and come with practice. Many of the skills are those that are required for in-depth interviews (see Chapter 6), but also important are adaptability, confidence, the ability to project oneself in positive ways to encourage the group, and a combination of assertiveness and tact.

Flexibility or structure: controlling the discussion

How much the researcher needs to intervene to structure the discussion will depend partly on the type of research study. It will be necessary to impose some structure to ensure that issues are covered, but the balance between imposed structure and flexibility of discussion, in which the issues are

generated from within the group, will vary between different studies (see Chapters 3 and 5).

The researcher's aim is to allow as much relevant discussion as possible to be generated from within the group while at the same time ensuring that the aims of the research are met. There is more scope in a focus group than in an individual interview for spontaneous emergence of issues, prompted by the variety of different people's contributions. This means that discussion is further removed from researchers' directions and led more by respondents. The way participants introduce topics is itself interesting and revealing – it is more 'grounded', or 'naturally occurring'.

The researcher will therefore remain as non-directive as possible but will nevertheless be pacing the debate to ensure that all the key issues are covered as fully as possible (though not necessarily in a predesignated order) within the allotted time. This will involve deciding when to move on to another topic; making a mental note of issues that arise early and which will need to be covered later in more depth; keeping the discussion relevant and focused; and choosing when to allow more free-ranging discussion with minimal intervention, and when to use silence as a means of promoting further reflection and debate. All of this becomes easier for the researcher when the subject matter and the way groups relate to it becomes more familiar, after the initial groups of the study have been conducted.

It is not uncommon for a group discussion to divert into irrelevant tangents, and this happens more easily than in in-depth interviews. At times the researcher will therefore need to steer it back by reminding the group of the topic, if it meanders too far into less relevant territory. For example, participants may dwell on an alternative topic, one that they would perhaps prefer to discuss, or they may relate repeated and lengthy anecdotes. Some tangential discussion will be inevitable, and necessary as it may contain nuggets of new information. It should therefore not be cut off too abruptly. But because time is limited, decisions will need to be made by the researcher about what is and is not relevant and when to move on.

Introducing a question linked to the relevant subject area will help to steer the discussion back. It may be necessary to draw attention to the fact that talk has veered away, and perhaps to remind people of the purpose of the research. A gentle touch, humour and perhaps an apology can be helpful here.

Probing for fuller response

As in individual interviews, the researcher probes to ensure issues are covered in depth. The aim is to clarify, to delve deeper and to cover all angles, rather than accepting an answer at its face value. Group members also play a part in this, questioning each other, but an additional purpose in probing in a group is to open out discussion and widen the range of response. A distinction between probing of the group as a whole rather than of individuals

within the group therefore needs to be borne in mind. It is likely that both types of interventions will be needed, though too much of the latter can interrupt the flow of discussion. After probing an individual's comment if this is needed to understand it fully, the group researcher would then open out the discussion. There are a number of ways of doing this:

- asking generally 'How do other people feel?' or 'What does everyone else think?'
- repeating the question, or a fragment of it
- highlighting a particular comment that has been said and asking for thoughts on it
- asking the group directly, 'Can you say a bit more about that?'
- looking around or gesturing to the rest of the group to come in
- maintaining an expectant silence, to allow the group time to reflect further on the issue
- highlighting differences in views and encouraging the group to discuss and explain them.

Noting non-verbal language

Throughout the discussion, the researcher will be alert to group participants' body language. This important communication, additional to their verbal response, is noteworthy from two points of view. First, it adds views or emphasis relating to the discussion topic. People will often demonstrate their agreement or disagreement by nodding or shaking their head, or by utterances which may not be picked up by the person who transcribes the tape. They need to be encouraged to verbalise these indications of view – otherwise episodes of unanimity or strong agreement, which the researcher notes clearly at the time, are lost from the data. The researcher may, for example, say 'Everyone's nodding vigorously – why is that?' or 'You've all gone rather quiet! Why is this subject harder to talk about?' Secondly, body language provides an indicator of participants' feelings relating to the group process at any particular time. The researcher can see who is trying to inter-ject, who is looking worried or lost, who is looking bored – and from this discern an appropriate way to bring them into the discussion.

Controlling the balance between individual contributions

CREATING SPACE FOR EVERYONE TO CONTRIBUTE
Part of the researcher's role is to ensure that every participant gets a chance to contribute to the debate. While it is unlikely that each individual will con-tribute equally, there will at times be a need to exert a degree of restraint or of encouragement, and to some extent to 'orchestrate' the flow of contribu-tions. This can involve addressing dominance from one or more participants,

reticence from others, or simultaneous over-talk within the group (see further below). Like the conductor of an orchestra, the researcher's use of non-verbal communication will be significant here, often with powerful effect. In facilitating the discussion, the role of the researcher is quite physical, far more so than in one-to-one interviews. Their body language – facial expression, glance, gesture and body posture for example – can often pre-empt the need for verbal intervention to control the balance between participants.

It can be tempting for the researcher to intervene too soon. By holding back awhile the group participants may regulate the balance themselves. It depends which phase the group is in. One individual's overbearing manner, or another's lengthy silence, may be a characteristic of the 'storming' phase of the group for example, which in time will probably settle down. Only later might the researcher need to take action, proceeding from indirect to increas-ingly direct means of addressing the problem if it persists, in ways described below. Until then, the maintenance of eye contact with each individual around the group will probably suffice, together with general requests for new contributions to the discussion.

ADDRESSING DOMINANT PARTICIPANTS
There will be occasions when it is necessary to restrain the contributions of an individual participant if they are dominating the discussion – for exam-ple, always the first to respond to a question, or making very lengthy or repetitive comments. The other participants may become increasingly silent and perhaps begin to look directly at the researcher, implicitly appealing to them to step in.

The researcher could try a range of strategies, first finding indirect ways to shift attention away from the dominant participant so that others may speak, but adopting a direct approach if this is unsuccessful. Non-verbal attempts might include withdrawing eye contact from the dominant person; leaning away; looking at others in the group, and gesturing to others to speak. If this still has little effect, verbal interventions would similarly first be general, inviting others to speak ('Let's hear some other opinions'), before becoming more specific, requesting that they be given an opportunity ('It's helpful to have heard your experience but I want to hear from others too').

It is important to avoid a confrontation. The public nature of the group means that, perhaps more than in an in-depth interview, respondents may feel rebuked. The researcher might therefore take pains to emphasise the value of the dominant person's contribution but also the importance of hear-ing from all participants, perhaps employing humour in the exchange, or apologising for having to curtail a response.

DRAWING OUT RETICENT PARTICIPANTS
It can be difficult to judge the cause of a silent group member's reserve, although if possible the response would be tailored to this. The person may be naturally quiet, or lack confidence in groups, or perhaps be uncomfortable

due to the group composition, feeling significantly different in some way from other participants (see further below). It could be that he or she is just not able to get a word in edgeways during a voluble discussion, particularly in larger groups. But reticent participants often have viewpoints or experiences that are perhaps different from the main and therefore of particular interest to the research.

People who are shy or anxious will be encouraged by the researcher's reassurance, to the group as a whole or specifically to them, that anything people have to say would be useful. But this may not be sufficient. Although it would be counterproductive to pressurise an individual to contribute, it will sometimes be necessary to take more active steps, initially in an indirect manner, to provide encouragement.

Eye contact alone can give confidence. The researcher could ask the group as a whole, though looking in the direction of the silent individual, for further thoughts or ideas, or could look expectantly in their direction during a pause in the discussion. It may be possible to link a specific question with something that is already known about the person, from the introduction perhaps or from anything else that they may have indicated so far, that would make the question relevant to them. For example, the researcher might ask 'What about people here who have children?' – remembering from the introduction that the silent person does indeed have children. In a more direct way, a question would be put to the silent individual: 'You haven't had a chance yet to say what you think' or 'How did your experience compare with what's been said so far?' Any questions posed in this situation would need to be open questions rather than ones that might elicit a mere 'yes' or 'no' or a factual response.

If, having tried these strategies several times, the person remains uncommunicative, the researcher might decide to leave matters as they are and focus instead on the other discussants, especially if the group is quite large in size. The researcher would continue to look encouragingly towards the silent member of the group from time to time and include them in questions addressed to the group as a whole, but not use more direct approaches to try to draw them in.

AVOIDING SIMULTANEOUS DIALOGUE
At times it can be necessary to stop group participants talking over each other, in order to distinguish different views on the recording tape and to allow time for everyone to express themselves. This might be done by addressing one individual among those talking and asking for their view, or by asking the group directly to stop so that *each* point of view can be heard. It can be sufficient to look very attentively at just one person who is talking, and simply pointing to the tape recorder can sometimes work. Whatever tactic is used, it is important to make time to return to the individuals who were silenced, to hear their views.

Focusing on participants' personal views

A particular type of behaviour that emerges more in group discussions than in in-depth interviews is avoidance of expressing personal views, and this can be a type of resistance or 'storming' behaviour. It might be easier for group respondents to take a more distant or second-hand standpoint, such as that read in the media for example, or to present views known to be politically acceptable, than risk expressing a personal view. The researcher needs to get the focus back on the participant by asking them directly what *they* think. A gentler approach is needed if a participant is referring to third parties to introduce subjects that have an element of taboo (talking about 'other people's' experience of debt or relationship violence, for example). Here, rather than asking that person directly about their own experience, the group as a whole could be asked whether they have personal experience of these issues.

Using the group process: some further strategies

A good focus group is more than the sum of its parts. The researcher harnesses the group process, encouraging the group to work together to generate more in-depth data based on interaction. This section looks at some further ways in which the group process can be used to stimulate new thinking and reflective discussion.

Encouraging in-depth exploration of emergent issues

The researcher helps the group to create a reflective environment in which the group can take an issue, approach it as they choose and explore it fully. It is important to allow time for this, and to let the discussion flow. But the researcher also needs to be actively helping the group to achieve greater depth, encouraging them to focus on emergent areas that they think will be illuminating to explore. The researcher does this by engaging with the substance of what is being said, probing for more detail and depth, sometimes reframing what is said, or asking the group to reflect on a different angle of it. In doing so the researcher tries to stay close to the data as it emerges and to encourage the group to build on what they have generated.

There are a number of useful approaches here:

- If a potentially interesting issue has been raised by one group member, the researcher may allow discussion to continue, seeing whether others will pick up on it.
- The researcher may decide to draw attention more directly to the point, asking for more comments on it or asking a specific question about it of the group.

- They may encourage the group to reflect on the links or relationships between what individual participants are saying. For example, if respondents have given examples of poor service, the researcher might ask what the examples have in common, whether they stem from the same causes.
- If divergent views are being expressed (for example about the priorities a service should address), the researcher may ask whether these are in conflict with each other or can be reconciled; or what the appropriate priority within or balance between them is; or why such differences of view arise.
- They may encourage respondents to focus on the implications or consequences of what has been raised in individual examples.

An example of this comes from a study of concepts and experiences of disability in which a series of groups were held with non-disabled people (as well as groups and in-depth interviews with disabled people) (Woodfield et al., 2002).

One group of non-disabled people began by describing their images of disabled people, focusing on serious, visible, physical conditions and particularly wheelchair users. The researcher commented on the fact that this is what they had raised, and asked whether they had other images. The group began to discuss mental health and intellectual impairments. People also mentioned temporary conditions and long-term illness. The researcher commented on how diverse these examples now were, and asked how useful the umbrella term of disability was. The group began to question the appropriateness of administrative definitions of disability (for example in relation to benefit entitlement) given the broader way in which they were now understanding it.

The researcher then asked what the different conditions that had now been mentioned had in common. This led to respondents raising concepts of 'otherness', 'difference', 'incompleteness'. They then commented that these concepts could also apply to sexual orientation, ethnicity and gender, and began to discuss how these issues linked with disability. Without further questions from the researcher, the group moved on to discuss how disability and other forms of 'otherness' are reinforced by society through discrimination. The researcher asked whether this process works differently for disability in any way, and they talked about discrimination being further entrenched through the physical inaccessibility of buildings and facilities. The group began to talk about legislation as the key to tackling discrimination and about the need to enforce physical access and employment rights through regulation. To return to the issue of the social construction of disability, the researcher asked whether the label 'disability' was meaningful or useful. The group talked about the way in which labels might impact on disabled people's self-image, and lead to reactions of pity among non-disabled people. This led several people in the group to a shared conclusion that social constructions and perceptions of disability are important, that wider social change is required and that legislation alone is not sufficient.

Having begun with images of wheelchairs, the group moved to a discussion of disability that was more layered. The researcher's questions sharpened the focus on different concepts or themes which emerged from the discussion. The resulting data was probably much richer than what would have emerged from in-depth interviews. With the researcher encouraging the group to work together and to build discussion from individual people's contributions, the group achieved more insight than they could have gained individually.

If the group is working well together they may deepen the commentary themselves, through asking questions of each other, reflecting and refining their own views, building on what others have said and developing more in-depth discussion of the issues that emerge. This happens when group members are really engaged with the research subject, and also if they are particularly articulate and informed about it. It may seem in these circumstances as if the researcher's interventions are relatively minor. However, the researcher will be making decisions all the time about what to probe to focus and deepen the discussion, and to include other participants or issues.

For example, in the study referred to in Chapter 5 which explored linkages between sexuality and homelessness among young lesbians and gay men (O'Connor and Molloy, 2001), group discussions with representatives of housing services were carried out after a series of in-depth interviews with young people. The groups were used to look at how organisations providing housing can respond to the needs of young lesbians and gay men, and key findings from the in-depth interviews were presented to the group. This, and the fact that participants were articulate and knowledgeable about the subject area, meant that the group largely carried itself through an in-depth discussion of a complex set of issues. The researchers probed to ensure that each issue was explored in detail, following up new points that emerged, and asking questions about the linkages between issues. The group began by discussing whether young gay and lesbian people could or should be housed together and moved through the following areas:

- the advantages and disadvantages of housing young lesbians and gay men together in designated housing, or making housing provision generic so that different groups live together
- the organisational difficulties involved in creating designated housing
- other ways of meeting young people's needs, such as housing lesbians and gay men in areas of towns where they are less likely to experience offensive treatment from neighbours
- questioning the assumption that lesbians and gay men are two groups that should be seen as similar, discussing how they differ and how subgroups within each have specific and different needs (reflecting age, ethnicity etc.)
- how the individual circumstances of different young lesbians and gay men can make it difficult for them to make contact with housing services in the first place

- concluding by stressing the need for multiplicity in provision (of which designated and generic housing was just one part), for diversity in staffing, better outreach work, more effective networking between providers and better signposting of young people to specific providers who can meet their needs.

Although all these issues could have been raised by the researchers, the fact that they emerged from the internal reflections of the group made for a richer discussion, one in which the energy and ownership of the group, and the connections they made between different issues, was displayed.

Exploring diversity of view

The group context provides a key opportunity to explore difference and diversity. It is not only that differences will be displayed as the discussion progresses (and thus more immediately than across individual in-depth interviews). There is a particular opportunity in group discussions to delve into that diversity – to get the group to engage with it, explore the dimensions of difference, explain it, look at its causes and consequences.

The diversity of views may be quite apparent, in which case the researcher can draw attention to it and ask why it has arisen, or what underlies it. But sometimes difference is more subtle, and people in the group agree with each other's positions or statements although they are actually inconsistent or contradictory. Here a little theatre may be required: the researcher can look puzzled, say they are confused, and ask the group to clarify things. This encourages the group to confront and acknowledge diversity and to refine what is being said in the light of it.

Challenging social norms and apparent consensus

A common criticism of focus groups is that the group exerts a pressure on its participants to conform to a socially acceptable viewpoint and not to talk about divergent views or experiences. As the discussion unfolds, the group participants may focus on their similarities or present just one side of the issue, or their contributions may reflect prevailing social norms. This can be linked to the dynamics in the group, and is a particular characteristic of the 'norming' phase (see above), though it could happen at any time throughout the discussion. The researcher needs to be alert to what is going on, and to find ways of challenging social norms and apparent consensus. There are a number of ways of approaching this:

- asking whether anyone has a different view, or deliberately drawing out an individual respondent who the researcher thinks may feel differently

- stressing that disagreement or difference in view is both acceptable and wanted. This would be said in the researcher's introduction (see above), but might be reiterated during the debate
- trying to find the boundaries of social norms by asking whether there are circumstances or situations under which the group would feel differently
- playing the role of devil's advocate, or challenging unanimity by presenting an alternative viewpoint (though taking care not to present this viewpoint as the researcher's own): 'Some people might say ...' or 'So are you really all saying that you would *never* ...'.

It can also be helpful to encourage the group to recognise and confront the normative view, and in doing so implying that other views are permitted. For example a study looking at public perceptions of the appropriate priority of first and subsequent families in the child support payment levels set out by the Child Support Agency (O'Connor and Kelly, 1998) involved group discussions with women whose partners had children from previous relationships. The group was stressing the importance of encouraging their partners to stay in touch with their children and to support their ex-partners, and suggesting that this was more important than providing for new partners and children. The researcher commented on how supportive they were all being, said that the Child Support Agency might be surprised by it, and asked whether that was how they always felt. The group began to acknowledge that their feelings were actually more complex and described occasions when they felt their partner had leant too far towards their first family. Some highlighted the particular circumstances that meant their partners were able to support the first family without compromising the second, and talked about how their views would change in other circumstances.

In practice, if the researcher is able to create an environment in which people feel safe and comfortable with speaking frankly, group-based research can be very effective for discussing topics which involve social norms. Once one person expresses an unusual or non-conformist view, others will often be emboldened to do the same, and there can be a more frank and open exchange than might happen in an individual interview.

Enabling and projective techniques

Finally, enabling and projective techniques – described in detail in Chapter 5 – can be used very effectively in group discussions. People respond well to them in a group, and they can seem less contrived than in an individual interview. The techniques help to focus discussion and to refine the formulation and expression of views. The material they generate can highlight variation in imagery and perspective, leading to fruitful discussion of similarities and differences and why they occur. The group process thus creates a particularly useful forum in which to use them.

Group composition and size

The size and composition of a group will be critical in shaping the group dynamic and determining how, and how well, the group process works. Features that are relevant here are the degree of heterogeneity or homogeneity within the group, existing relationships between group members, and the size of the group.

Heterogeneity versus homogeneity

As a general rule, some diversity in the composition of the group aids discussion, but too much can inhibit it. An element of diversity is like the grit in an oyster, important for the production of a pearl. Participants tend to feel safer with, and may prefer being with, others who share similar characteristics, but this does not necessarily make for the fullest discussion. Although it can facilitate disclosure, things can become too cosy and the researcher will need to work hard to tease out differences in views. Recognising their shared experience, participants can also assume that others know what they mean rather than articulate it fully.

Conversely, a very heterogeneous group can feel threatening to participants and can inhibit disclosure. If the group is too disparate, it is difficult to cover key topics in depth. In studies researching sensitive subjects, the shared experience of 'everyone in the same boat' is particularly important to facilitate disclosure and discussion. Sensitive topics therefore leave less scope for diversity, although some difference between group participants is nevertheless desirable. For example, in a study of women's decisions about terminating a pregnancy, it would be essential that a group involved only women who had had abortions. It would be advisable to have separate groups for younger and older women, and perhaps also for those who had already had children at the point when they made their decision and those who had not. But within these parameters, it would be helpful to construct the group to ensure some diversity in circumstances such as age, social class and relationship status, and experiences of different healthcare providers in the public and charity sector.

The ideal is therefore usually a point of balance between the two extremes of heterogeneity and homogeneity, with as much diversity as the group can take but no more.

As well as the sensitivity of the subject, three further issues need to be considered in weighing up the extent of diversity to build into group composition. First, it is usually necessary for respondents in each group to have broadly the same proximity to the research subject. There needs to be a degree of commonality in how they relate to the research topic – something similar in their experience of it or their connection with it. For example, in a study about attitudes to the environment it might be decided to exclude from some focus groups people who are active in environmental groups, since other group participants might hold back in discussing particular

views or behaviours or may defer to them as 'experts'. A group discussion might usefully combine users and non-users of a particular service if the purpose was to discuss the various types of help or services people had used and the reasons for using different types. But if the particular service itself, and experiences of it, were to be a key topic, non-users would have little to contribute to significant parts of the discussion.

Second, the socio-demographic makeup of the group can influence how frank and fulsome discussion will be – particularly in relation to characteristics such as age, social class, educational attainment, gender and ethnicity. People are likely to feel more comfortable among others who they see as being from the same broad social milieu, and it is unhelpful if there are significant imbalances in social power or status within the group.

A third consideration is that it may be a specific requirement of the research to look at differences between subgroups within the sample (see further Chapter 3) – for example, differences between age groups, between people with and without children, or between current and past service users. Although this could be addressed in a focus group which cuts across these sample categories, too much diversity would make it difficult to see subgroupings among participants and to ensure that the differences are drawn out in the discussion. The influences of particular circumstances or experiences can sometimes be explored with more subtlety and insight if they are reflected in focus groups of different composition, with for example past and current service users, or people with and without children, involved in separate group discussions. Diversity in other characteristics represented within each focus group would still, however, be desirable.

Token representation should be avoided – for example, one man in a group which otherwise comprises women, or one person from a particular minority ethnic group. If one participant is markedly different from others in the group then any discomfort they feel is likely to influence how much they disclose. They may feel that their own experience is too remote from that of the other participants and remain silent, or they may resent the implication that they alone are expected to speak for the broad group they represent. For these reasons, at least three people would generally be required to represent a particular subgroup, characteristic or circumstance which is likely to be significant within the group's structure.

However carefully group composition is planned, it is not always possible to achieve the balance planned: not everyone who says they will attend will actually do so. The researcher will need to be alert to possible feelings of 'difference' and should make special efforts to include participants who might feel they do not belong.

Strangers, acquaintances and pre-existing groups

Focus groups are typically held with strangers as this facilitates both open questioning and disclosure. People often speak more freely in front of others

who they do not know and whom they are unlikely to see again: there is little fear of subsequent gossip or repercussion.

However, groups with people who already know each other are also common. For example, the purpose of the study might be to investigate a work-related issue among colleagues, views about institutional accommodation among co-residents, or attitudes towards an activity among people who carry it out together. In these situations it can be beneficial to work with a pre-existing group.

Kitzinger and Barbour see pre-existing groups as generally very helpful:

> These are, after all, the networks in which people might normally discuss (or evade) the sorts of issues likely to be raised in the research session and the 'naturally occurring' group is one of the most important contexts in which ideas are formed and decisions made. (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 8–9)

Pre-existing groups can trigger memories of shared situations and are valuable for exploring shared meanings and contexts such as how an organisation understands a policy objective and how this translates into practice, or how the use of illegal drugs within a group of friends is shaped by their shared values. They can also provide an atmosphere in which participants can feel safe enough to reveal shared subversive behaviour which might be unsayable in front of strangers.

However, there is a danger that shared assumptions mean issues are not fully elaborated because their meaning is taken for granted, or that the group norms dominate in the session. The researcher may have to work hard to move discussion into new territory. Certainly substantial differences in status between group members who know each other should be avoided – an important consideration particularly when research is carried out in people's workplace.

What is more difficult is where the researcher finds, unexpectedly, that some participants are acquainted. The researcher would then be on the lookout for shared views and assumptions and might need to probe particularly fully to draw out differences. If the researcher becomes aware of the relationship before the group begins, asking acquaintances not to sit next to each other during the discussion might also help.

Group size

Focus groups typically involve around six to eight participants, but the optimum group size will depend on a number of issues:

- *The amount that group participants are likely to have to say on the research topic.* If they are likely to be highly engaged with or interested in it, or particularly articulate, a smaller group is desirable (for example, among professionals discussing an aspect of their practice).

- *The sensitivity or complexity of the issue.* Sensitive or complex issues are better tackled in smaller groups.
- *The extent to which the researcher requires breadth or depth of data.* If breadth is key, for example to reveal quickly the range or diversity in opinions on an issue, a larger group will be more effective. If depth is critical, a smaller group is better.
- *The population group involved.* Some are likely to feel more comfortable in a smaller group, such as children or, conversely, older people. A smaller group is also more accessible to people with communication difficulties.
- *The structure and tasks involved in the session.* A workshop approach, with specific tasks and subgroup work, is more effective with larger numbers.

If the group is larger – above about eight participants – not everyone will be able to have their say to the same extent. With less opportunity to speak, active participation will be uneven. There are more likely to be some participants who say very little, and there is greater potential for subgroups to emerge which can be unhelpful for group dynamics. This can make things harder to manage for the researcher who will need to be more of an active presence in controlling the balance between contributions. It may result in a somewhat faltering discussion or one that remains at a superficial level. Identifying individual speakers' voices on the recording tape also becomes more difficult.

In groups that are smaller than about five or six, the researcher may similarly need to be more active, but in the sense of energising or challenging the group (in the way that other members might, if they were there). If the group is smaller because some people did not attend on the day, the composition of the group may be skewed away from what was originally planned, perhaps with just one individual representing a certain subgroup or characteristic. The researcher will need to be alert to this, and may also need to put across other points of view to stimulate discussion.

If the group is very small, with fewer than four participants, it can lose some of the qualities of being a group, particularly if there is a lot of difference between respondents. However, paired interviews and triads (see Chapters 2 and 3) can be an effective hybrid of in-depth interviews and group discussions, useful for example for in-depth discussion among colleagues or people who know each other well. Here, more commonality between participants is likely to be necessary to avoid the process becoming a collection of interviews.

Practicalities in organising the group

The organisational details of the focus group need to be sorted out at the planning stage of the study, and before potential participants are approached, since they may affect willingness to attend. Decisions will always be

informed by the proposed composition of the group and by the subject matter of the discussion. Rather than prescribe general rules therefore, this section highlights a checklist of points to bear in mind (summarised in Box 7.1). The guiding principle behind these decisions is to organise a setting to which the specially selected group of people will be happy to come, in which they will feel sufficiently at ease to take part in discussion, and where the discussion can be adequately recorded.

**BOX 7.1 ORGANISING A FOCUS GROUP: A CHECKLIST OF
PRACTICALITIES**

Timing
  Time of day
  Day of the week
  Time of year
  Number of groups per day

Venue
  Type of establishment (ethos)
  Building (access)
  Location (proximity, safety)
  Room (size, comfort, privacy, quiet, ambience)
  Availability of second room if needed
  Physical arrangement (seating, table)

'Hosting' the group
Management of:
  Transport/childcare
  Refreshments
  Incentives (cash, vouchers)
  Other people who come with participants

Observers and co-moderators
  Role
  Seating

Recording
  Quality of equipment
  Familiarisation
  Checking before and after group

Time and place

The time of day and day of the week when the potential participants are likely to be available to attend the group needs to be thought through in

advance. Competing activities which could discourage attendance also need to be thought about (such as major sporting events) and certain times of year would be avoided – around Christmas or other peak holiday periods. Because it is not possible to suit everyone's timetable, especially for studies which involve mixed populations, the overall design of the study is likely to include group discussions at different times of day to accommodate a variety of schedules.

The researcher's own working schedule is a further factor to be taken into account. If more than one group per day is planned, sufficient time is required between each to allow for dispersal of the first group's participants, arrival of the next group, and for recovery time in between. It is rarely feasible to conduct more than two group discussions in succession per day unless they are very brief.

Choosing the venue involves thinking about its location and the type of place that it is: the type of establishment, building and immediate environment. The venue should be appropriate to the participants and to the subject of study in terms of its ambience or any likely associations that it may hold. For focus groups that are held with members of a pre-existing group, the venue may be the place where the group is already located and as such has the advantage of being familiar. Otherwise, options such as a hotel, a hired room within a pub or a community centre should be considered.

A further characteristic for consideration is the room in which the discussion takes place: its size, comfort and privacy. It is important to check out potential distractions such as background noise (as the group who competed with bell-ringing practice from a nearby church would testify). A second room may be necessary. If participants are accompanied by a family member or friend, these people would ideally wait outside the group room. It is also helpful to have a second room if two consecutive groups are scheduled, as a place where early arrivals for the second group can wait.

Provision at the discussion venue

The physical arrangement of the room needs to facilitate discussion, with chairs positioned in such a way that participants can all be seen by the researcher and can see each other – a circle or oval. A table in the middle of the group confers the practical advantage of a base on which to stand the tape recorder and refreshments and can also offer participants a feeling of psychological protection of sorts. It should be no larger than is necessary.

Simple refreshments, such as tea, coffee or other drinks are usually served before the discussion starts, as group members arrive. Although the researcher

moderating the group may be able to perform this role, it is ideally undertaken by a second person, such as the person who recruited participants for the group, or a co-moderator or observer. This person acts as a host to welcome people, to serve refreshments, and deal with any incentives or arrangements for transport or childcare (see Chapter 3) that may have been agreed beforehand.

Co-moderation is useful if exercises or projective techniques are to be used, and in the early part of fieldwork to test and review fieldwork strategies and the topic guide (see Chapter 5). If more than one person is moderating the discussion, they would sit beside each other in the circle. It is generally more effective to agree in advance which researcher will be responsible for leading the discussion, or for each to take responsibility for different parts, to avoid confusion over the flow of questioning and discussion. Any observers would be outside the circle and out of eyeshot of the majority of the participants, for example in a corner of the room. Observers should be introduced at the start and should maintain an unobtrusive presence. Any written notes they make (for example about the dynamic of the group, issues to take to other groups, reflections on the topic guide) should be kept to a minimum.

Recording

A good quality tape recorder is essential, with a remote multidirectional microphone, and is far more important in focus groups than for individual in-depth interviews. Otherwise, sections of the discussion, or softer voices, or the contributions of people sitting further away from the microphone may be lost. The tape recorder is usually positioned adjacent to the researcher, with the microphone in the centre of the table. The researcher should be familiar and comfortable with its use (see Chapter 6). People starting out often find that their biggest disappointment is not the way the discussion went, but that their recording of it has failed because they were unfamiliar with the equipment.

Before the participants arrive it is essential to check that the tape recorder is functioning: that the recording level is appropriate, the batteries charged, tape inserted, and that a spare tape is to hand. After the discussion has ended, checks should be made as soon as possible that no technical problems have prevented recording.

Focus groups, to conclude, call on a wide range of expertise, from the practical organisational skills described in this section to the ability to put people at their ease, respond sensitively to group dynamics and create a sense of joint endeavour. But the skills come with experience, and with that experience researchers will find focus groups a research technique which is highly stimulating and can bring real insight.

KEY POINTS

- Focus groups are more than a collection of individual interviews. Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants' contributions are refined by what they hear others say, and the group is synergistic in the sense that it works together. The group setting aids spontaneity and creates a more naturalistic and socially contextualised environment.
- The researcher needs to be aware of the different phases through which groups can pass, and to make use of each. A useful model identifies five sequential phases: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning.
- The interaction between participants is important in determining the flow of discussion, but the researcher guides it, probing both the group as a whole and individuals, trying to ensure that everyone has their say, that the research issues are covered, that discussion stays on track, and picking up on body language. Group participants take on some of the interviewing role, asking questions of each other.
- The group process is harnessed to enrich the discussion. This involves making time for reflection and refinement of views; focusing on and reframing emergent issues to encourage the group to go deeper into them; highlighting diversity within the group and encouraging people to explore its dimensions and causes, and challenging apparent consensus where this is led by conformity to social norms.
- Diversity in group composition enriches the discussion, but there also needs to be some common ground between participants – based on how they relate to the research topic or their sociodemographic characteristics. The ideal group size will be affected by how much people will have to say, the sensitivity of the issue, the balance required between breadth and depth of coverage, and the participant population. The role of the researcher will vary in groups of different sizes and degrees of diversity.
- Practical arrangements are also key to the success of group discussions: the time, the venue, the layout of the room and the quality of recording equipment are all important.

KEY TERMS

Group dynamics refers to the relationships between group members which change during the course of the group and influence the energy and direction of the group. They are shaped by **processes** which may be evident in any small group and which vary depending on the **stage**

of the group, and are also influenced by the **composition** of the group, the subject matter, the broader environment and the behaviour of the researcher.

Non-verbal communication refers to the physical behaviour of the researcher or participants: their facial expression, where their gaze is directed, their hand gestures and their posture. It gives the researcher important clues as to the possible feelings of individual participants, and is a useful tool employed by the researcher to control the discussion.

Norms are behaviours or beliefs which are required, desired or designated as normal within a group, shared by that group or with which members believe they are expected to conform. It is important to be alert to the ways in which adherence to social norms within a group might inhibit disclosure and open discussion.

Further reading

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8

Analysis: Practices, Principles and Processes

Liz Spencer, Jane Ritchie and William O'Connor

Analysis is a challenging and exciting stage of the qualitative research process. It requires a mix of creativity and systematic searching, a blend of inspiration and diligent detection. And although there will be a stage dedicated to analysis, the pathways to forming ideas to pursue, phenomena to capture, theories to test begins right at the start of a research study and ends while writing up the results. It is an inherent and ongoing part of qualitative research.

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the analysis of qualitative data was a relatively neglected subject, both in the literature and in researchers' accounts of their methods. As a result, it was often hard to decipher what people had done with the rich, unwieldy and often tangled pile of data they held in the transcripts, fieldnotes and documentary evidence collected. At one level, it appeared an almost esoteric process, shrouded in intellectual mystery. At another, it appeared largely haphazard with discovery falling from the evidence as if somehow by chance. Either way, the processes that had occurred in carrying out qualitative analyses were largely obscure.

Fortunately, this has changed and there is now much better documentation of the different approaches to carrying out qualitative analysis that have developed. Nevertheless, while such accounts explain how to sift, label, order or even reduce qualitative data, many stop short of explaining how classification or explanation is achieved or how theories or hypotheses are generated. In other words, there is now much greater visibility about how