15 Interviewing in qualitative research

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Reader's guide

This chapter is concerned with the interview in qualitative research. The term *qualitative interview* is often used to capture the different types of interview that are used in qualitative research. Such interviews tend to be far less structured than the kind of interview associated with survey research, which was discussed in Chapter 5 in terms of structured interviewing. This chapter is concerned with individual interviews in qualitative research; the focus group method, which is a form of interview but with several people, is discussed in the next chapter. The two forms of qualitative interviewing discussed in this chapter are unstructured and semi-structured interviewing. The chapter explores:

- the differences between structured interviewing and qualitative interviews;
- the main characteristics of and differences between unstructured and semi-structured interviewing; this entails a recognition that the two terms refer to extremes and that in practice a wide range of interviews with differing degrees of structure lie between the extremes;
- how to devise and use an interview guide for semi-structured interviewing;
- the different kinds of question that can be asked in an interview guide;
- the importance of tape-recording and transcribing qualitative interviews;
- approaches to sampling in studies using qualitative interviews;
- the significance of qualitative interviewing in feminist research;
- the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative interviewing relative to participant observation.

Introduction

The interview is probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research. Of course, as we have seen in Chapter 14, ethnography usually involves a substantial amount of interviewing and this factor undoubtedly contributes to the widespread use of the interview by qualitative researchers. However, it is the flexibility of the interview that makes it so attractive. Since ethnography entails an extended period of participant observation, which is very disruptive for researchers because of the sustained absence(s) required from work and/or family life, research based more or less exclusively on interviews is a highly attractive alternative for the collection of qualitative data. Interviewing, the transcription of interviews, and the analysis of transcripts are all very time-consuming, but they can be more readily accommodated into researchers' personal lives.

In Box 5.3 (p. 000), several different types of interview were briefly outlined. The bulk of the types outlined there—other than the structured interview and the standardized interview—are ones associated with qualitative research. *Focus groups* and *group interviewing* will be examined in the next chapter and the remaining forms of interview associated with qualitative research will at various points be explored in this chapter. However, in spite of the apparent proliferation of terms describing types of interview in qualitative research, the two main types are the

unstructured interview and the *semi-structured* interview. Researchers sometimes employ the term *qualitative interview* to encapsulate these two types of interview. There is clearly the potential for considerable confusion here, but the types and definitions offered in Box 5.3 are meant to inject a degree of consistency of terminology.

Differences between the structured interview and qualitative research interviews

Qualitative interviewing is usually very different from interviewing in quantitative research in a number of ways.

- The approach tends to be much less structured in qualitative research. In quantitative research, the approach is structured to maximize the reliability and validity of measurement of key concepts. It is also more structured because the researcher has a clearly specified set of research questions that are to be investigated. The structured interview is designed to answer these questions. Instead, in qualitative research, there is an emphasis on greater generality in the formulation of initial research ideas and on interviewees' own perspectives.
- In qualitative interviewing, there is much greater interest in the interviewee's point of view; in quantitative research, the interview reflects the researcher's concerns. This contrast is a direct outcome of the previous one.
- In qualitative interviewing, 'rambling' or going off at tangents is often encouraged—it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important; in quantitative research, it is usually regarded as a nuisance and discouraged.
- In qualitative interviewing, interviewers can depart significantly from any schedule or guide that is being used. They can ask new questions that follow up interviewees' replies and can vary the order of questions and even the wording of questions. In quantitative research, none of these things should be done, because they will compromise the standardization of the interview process and hence the reliability and validity of measurement.
- As a result, qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews (see Box 15.3 for an example). By contrast, structured interviews are typically inflexible, because of the need to standardize the way in which each interviewee is dealt with.
- In qualitative interviewing, the researcher wants rich, detailed answers; in quantitative research the interview is supposed to generate answers that can be coded and processed quickly.
- In qualitative interviewing, the interviewee may be interviewed on more than one and sometimes even several occasions (see Box 15.1 for an example). In quantitative research, unless the research is longitudinal in character, the person will be interviewed on one occasion only.

Box 15.1 **Unstructured interviewing**

Malbon (1999) describes his interviewing strategy for his research on 'clubbers' in the following way:

Clubbers were usually interviewed twice, with the second interview happening after we had been clubbing together. Both interviews were very much 'conversational' in style and I avoided interview schedules, although all interviews were taped. The first interview was designed to achieve three main goals: to put the clubber at ease while also explaining fully and clearly in what ways I was hoping for help; to begin to sketch in details of the clubbers' clubbing preferences, motivations and histories; and to allow me an opportunity to decide how to approach the night(s) out that I would be spending with the clubber . . .

The second interview provided a forum for what was invariably a more relaxed meeting than the first interview . . . The main content of the second interview consisted of comments, discussion and questions about the club visits we had made together, and the nature of the night out as an experience. In the latter half of these second interviews, discussion occasionally diversified in scope to cover wider aspects of the clubbers' lives: their relationships to work or study, their relationships with friends and loved ones, their hopes and fears for the future and their impressions of a social life beyond and after clubbing. (Malbon 1999: 33)

Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing

However, qualitative interviewing varies a great deal in the approach taken by the interviewer. The two major types were mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

- The almost totally *unstructured interview*. Here the researcher uses at most an *aide mémoire* as a brief set of prompts to him- or herself to deal with a certain range of topics. There may be just a single question that the interviewer asks and the interviewee is then allowed to respond freely, with the interviewer simply responding to points that seem worthy of being followed up. Unstructured interviewing tends to be very similar in character to a conversation (Burgess 1984). See Box 15.1 for an illustration of an unstructured interview style.
- A *semi-structured interview*. The researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an *interview guide*, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply. Questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule. Questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as they pick up on things said by interviewers. But, by and large, all of the questions will be asked and a similar wording will be used from interviewee to interviewee. Boxes 15.2 and 15.3 provide illustrations of these features.

In both cases, the interview process is *flexible*. Also, the emphasis must be on how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events—that is, what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour. Thus, Leidner (1993: 238) describes the interviewing she carried out in a McDonald's restaurant as involving a degree of structure, but adds that the interviews also 'allowed room to pursue topics of particular interest to the workers'. Once again, we must remember that qualitative research is *not* quantitative research with the numbers missing. The kinds of interviewing carried out in qualitative research are typical also of *life history* and *oral history* interviewing (see Box 15.4).

The two different types of interview in qualitative research are extremes and there is quite a lot of variability between them (the example in Box 15.2 seems somewhat more structured than that in Box 15.3, for example, though both are illustrative of semi-structured interviewing), but most qualitative interviews are close to one type of the other. In neither case does the interviewer slavishly follow a schedule, as is done in quantitative research interviewing; but in semi-structured interviews the

Box 15.2 **Semi-structured interviewing**

Lupton (1996) was interested in investigating people's food preferences and to this end her research entailed thirty-three semi-structured interviews conducted by four female interviewers (of whom she was one) living in Sydney in 1994. She writes:

Interviewees were asked to talk about their favourite and most detested foods; whether they thought there was such a thing as 'masculine' or 'feminine' foods or dishes; which types of foods they considered 'healthy' or 'good for you' and which not; which types of foods they ate to lose weight and which they avoided for the same reason; memories they recalled about food and eating events from childhood and adulthood; whether they liked to try new foods; which foods they had tasted first as an adult; whether there had been any changes in the types of food they had eaten over their lifetime; whether they associated different types of food with particular times, places or people; whether they ever had any arguments about food with others; whether they themselves cooked and if they enjoyed it; whether they ate certain foods when in certain moods and whether they had any rituals around food. (Lupton 1996: 156, 158)

Box 15.3 **Flexibility in semi-structured interviewing**

Like Lupton (Box 15.2), Beardsworth and Keil (1992) were interested in food-related issues, and in particular in vegetarianism. They carried out seventy-three 'relatively unstructured interviews' in the East Midlands. They write that the interviews were

guided by an inventory of issues which were to be covered in each session. As the interview programme progressed, interviewees themselves raised additional or complementary issues, and these form an integral part of the study's findings. In other words, the interview programme was not based upon a set of relatively rigid pre-determined questions and prompts. Rather, the open-ended, discursive nature of the interviews permitted an iterative process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier interviewees could be taken up and presented to later interviewees. (Beardsworth and Keil 1992: 261–2)

interviewer does follow a script to a certain extent. The choice of whether to veer towards one type rather than the other is likely to be affected by a variety of factors.

- Researchers who are concerned that the use of even the most rudimentary interview guide will not allow genuine access to the world views of members of a social setting or of people sharing common attributes are likely to favour an unstructured interview.
- If the researcher is beginning the investigation with a fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion of wanting to do research on a topic, it is likely that the interviews will be semi-structured ones, so that the more specific issues can be addressed.
- If more than one person is to carry out the fieldwork, in order to ensure a modicum of comparability of interviewing style, it is likely that semi-structured interviewing will be preferred. See Boxes 15.2 and 15.3 for examples.
- If you are doing multiple-case study research, you are likely to find that you will need some structure in order to ensure cross-case comparability. Certainly, all of my qualitative research on different kinds of organization has entailed semi-structured interviewing and it is not a coincidence that this is because most of it has been multiple-case study research (e.g. Bryman *et al.* 1994—see Box 13.8, p. 000; Bryman, Gillingwater and McGuinness 1996).

Preparing an interview guide

The idea of an interview guide is much less specific than the notion of a structured interview schedule. In fact, the term can be employed to refer to the brief list of memory prompts of areas to be covered that is

Box 15.4 **Life history and oral history interviews**

Two special forms of the kind of interview associated withB qualitative research are the *life history* and *oral history* interviews. The former is generally associated with the *life history method*, where it is often combined with various kinds of personal documents like diaries, photographs, and letters. This method is often referred to alternatively as the *biographical method*. A life history interview invites the subject to look back in detail across his or her entire life course. It has been depicted as documenting 'the inner experience of individuals, how they interpret, understand, and define the world around them' (Faraday and Plummer 1979: 776). However, the method is very much associated with the life history interview, which is a kind of unstructured interview covering the totality of an individual's life. Thomas and Znaniecki, who are among the pioneers of the approach as a result of their early use of it in relation to Polish immigrants to the USA, regarded it as 'the *perfect* type of sociological material' (quoted in Plummer 1983: 64). Their use, in particular, of a solicited autobiography that was written for them by one Polish peasant is regarded as an exemplification of the method.

However, in spite of Thomas and Znaniecki's endorsement, while there was a trickle of studies using the approach over the years (a table in Plummer (1983) points to twenty-six life histories dating from Thomas and Znaniecki's research in the 1910s and the publication of Plummer's book), it has not been a popular approach. It has tended to suffer because of an erroneous treatment of the life in question as a sample of one and hence of limited generalizability. However, it has certain clear strengths from the point of view of the qualitative researcher: its unambiguous emphasis on the point of view of the life in question and a clear commitment to the processual aspects of social life, showing how events unfold and interrelate in people's lives. The terms *life history* and *life story* are sometimes employed interchangeably, but R. L. Miller (2000: 19) suggests that the latter is an account someone gives about his or her life and that a life history dovetails a life story with other sources, such as diaries and letters (of the kind discussed in Chapter 18).

An example of the life history interview approach is provided by Lewis in the context of his research on the Sánchez family and their experiences of a Mexican slum:

> In the course of our interviews I asked hundreds of questions of [the five members of the Sánchez family] . . . While I used a directive approach to the interviews, I encouraged free association, and I was a good listener. I attempted to cover systematically a wide range of subjects: their earliest memories, their dreams, their hopes, fears, joys, and sufferings; their jobs; their relationship with friends, relatives, employers; their sex life; their concepts of justice, religion, and politics; their knowledge of geography and history; in short, their total world view of the world. Many of my questions stimulated them to express themselves on subjects which they might otherwise never have thought about. (Lewis 1961: p. xxi)

R. L. Miller (2000) distinguishes between certain aspects of life history inteviews. One distinction has to do with age and life course effects. The former relates to the ageing process, in the sense of biological ageing and its effects and manifestations; life course effects are the patterned features associated with the stages of the life course. He also points to the need to distinguish cohort effects, which are the unique clusters of experiences associated with a specific generation.

R. L. Miller (2000) suggests there has been a resurgence of interest in recent years and Chamberlayne *et al*. (2000) argue that there has been a recent 'turn to biographical methods'. To a large extent, the revival of the approach derives from a growth of interest in the role and significance of agency in social life. The revival is largely associated with the growing use of life story interviews and especially those that are often referred to as *narrative interviews* (see Box 19.6, p. 000). Moreover, the growing use of such interviews has come to be associated less and less with the study of a single life (or indeed just one or two lives) and increasingly with the study of several lives. Squire (2000: 198), for example, conducted narrative interviews with 'thirty-four people infected or affected by HIV, who used HIV support groups for HIV positive people, and for workers, carers and volunteers in the HIV field'. Some were interviewed on more then one occasion.

An *oral history interview* is usually somewhat more specific in tone in that the subject is asked to reflect upon specific events or periods in the past. It too is sometimes combined with other sources, such as documents. The chief problem with the oral history interview (which it shares with the life history interview) is the possibility of bias introduced by memory lapses and distortions (Grele 1998). On the other hand, oral history testimonies have allowed the voices to come through of groups that are typically marginalized in historical research (a point that also applies to life history interviews), either because of their lack of power or because they are typically regarded as unexceptional (Samuel 1976).

often employed in unstructured interviewing or to the somewhat more structured list of issues to be addressed or questions to be asked in semi-structured interviewing. What is crucial is that the questioning allows interviewers to glean the ways in which research participants view their social world and that there is flexibility in the conduct of the interviews. The latter is as much if not more to do with the conduct of the interview than with the nature of the interview guide as such.

In preparing for qualitative interviews, Lofland and Lofland (1995: 78) suggest asking yourself the question 'Just what about this thing is puzzling me?' This can be applied to each of the research questions you have generated or it may be a mechanism for generating some research questions. They suggest that your puzzlement can be stimulated by various activities: random thoughts in different contexts, which are then written down as quickly as possible; discussions with colleagues, friends, and relatives; and, of course, the existing literature on the topic. The formulation of the research question(s) should not be so specific that alternative avenues of enquiry that might arise during the collection of fieldwork data are closed off. Such premature closure of your research focus would be inconsistent with the process of qualitative research (Figure 13.1, p. 000), with the focus on the world view of the people you will be interviewing, and with the approaches to qualitative data analysis like grounded theory that emphasize the importance of not starting out with too many preconceptions (see Chapter 19). Gradually, an order and structure will begin to emerge in your meanderings around your research questions(s) and will form the basis for your interview guide.

You should also consider 'What do I need to know in order to answer each of the research questions I'm interested in?' This means trying to get an appreciation of what the interviewee sees as significant and important in relation to each of your topic areas. Thus, your questing will need to cover the areas that you need but from the perspective of your interviewees. This means that, even though qualitative research is predominantly unstructured, it is rarely so unstructured that the researcher cannot at least specify a research focus.

Some basic elements in the preparation of your interview guide will be:

- create a certain amount of order on the topic areas, so that your questions about them flow reasonably well, but be prepared to alter the order of questions during the actual interview;
- formulate interview questions or topics in a way that will help you to answer your research questions (but try not to make them too specific);
- try to use a language that is comprehensible and relevant to the people you are interviewing;
- just as in interviewing in quantitative research, do not ask leading questions;
- remember to ensure that you ask or record 'facesheet' information of a general kind (name, age, gender, etc.) and a specific kind (position in company, number of years unemployed, number of years involved in a group, etc.), because such information is useful for contextualizing people's answers.

There are some practical details to attend to before the interview.

- Make sure you are familiar with the setting in which the interviewee works or lives or engages in the behaviour of interest to you. This will help you to understand what he/she is saying in the interviewee's own terms.
- Get hold of a good tape recorder and microphone. Qualitative researchers nearly always tape-record and then transcribe their interviews. This procedure is important for detailed analysis required in qualitative research and to ensure that the interviewees' answers are captured in their own terms. If you are taking notes, it is easy to lose the phrases and language used. Also, because the interviewer is supposed not to be following a strictly formulated schedule of questions of the kind used in structured interviewing, he or she will need to be responsive to the interviewee's answers so that it is possible to follow them up. A good microphone is highly desirable because many interviews are let down by poor recording.
- Make sure as far as possible that the interview takes place in a setting that is quiet (so there is no or

little outside noise that might affect the quality of the tape recording) and private (so the interviewee does not have to worry about being overheard).

- Prepare yourself for the interview by cultivating as many of the criteria of a quality interviewer suggested by Kvale as possible (Box 15.5).

After the interview, make notes about:

- how the interview went (was interviewee talkative, cooperative, nervous, well-dressed/scruffy, etc.?);
- where the interview took place.
- any other feelings about the interview (did it open up new avenues of interest?);
- the setting (busy/quiet, many/few other people in the vicinity, new/old buildings, use of computers).

These various guidelines suggest the series of steps in formulating questions for an interview guide in qualitative research presented in Figure 15.1.

Kinds of question

The kinds of questions asked in qualitative interviews are highly variable. Kvale (1996) has suggested nine different kinds of question. Most interviews will contain virtually all of them, although interviews that rely on lists of topics are likely to follow a somewhat looser format. Kvale's nine types of question are as follows.

- *Introducing questions*: 'Please tell me about when your interest in *X* first began?'; 'Have you ever . . .?'; 'Why did you go to . . .?' .
- *Follow-up questions*: getting the interviewee to elaborate his/her answer, such as 'Could you say some more about that?'; 'What do you mean by that . . .?'; even 'Yeeees?'
- *Probing questions*: following up what has been said through direct questioning.
- *Specifying questions*: 'What did you do then?'; 'How did *X* react to what you said?'
- *Direct questions*: 'Do you find it easy to keep smiling when serving customers?'; 'Are you happy with the way you and your husband decide how money should be spent?' Such questions are perhaps best left until towards the end of the interview, in order not to influence the direction of the interview too much.
- *Indirect questions*: 'What do most people round here think of the ways that management treats its

Box 15.5 **Kvale's list of qualification criteria of an interviewer (plus two others)**

Kvale (1996) has proposed a very useful list of ten criteria of a successful interviewer.

- *Knowledgeable*: is thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview; pilot interviews of the kind used in survey interviewing can be useful here.
- *Structuring*: gives purpose for interview; rounds it off; asks whether interviewee has questions.
- *Clear*: asks simple, easy, short questions; no jargon.
- *Gentle*: lets people finish; gives them time to think; tolerates pauses.
- *Sensitive*: listens attentively to what is said and how it is said; is empathetic in dealing with the interviewee.
- *Open*: responds to what is important to interviewee and is flexible.
- *Steering*: knows what he/she wants to find out.
- *Critical*: is prepared to challenge what is said, for example, dealing with inconsistencies in interviewees' replies.
- *Remembering*: relates what is said to what has previously been said.
- *Interpreting*: clarifies and extends meanings of interviewees' statements, but without imposing meaning on them.

To Kvale's list I would add the following.

- *Balanced*: does not talk too much, which may make the interviewee passive, and does not talk too little, which may result in the interviewee feeling he or she is not talking along the right lines.
- *Ethically sensitive*: is sensitive to the ethical dimension of interviewing, ensuring the interviewee appreciates what the research is about, its purposes, and that his or her answers will be treated confidentially.

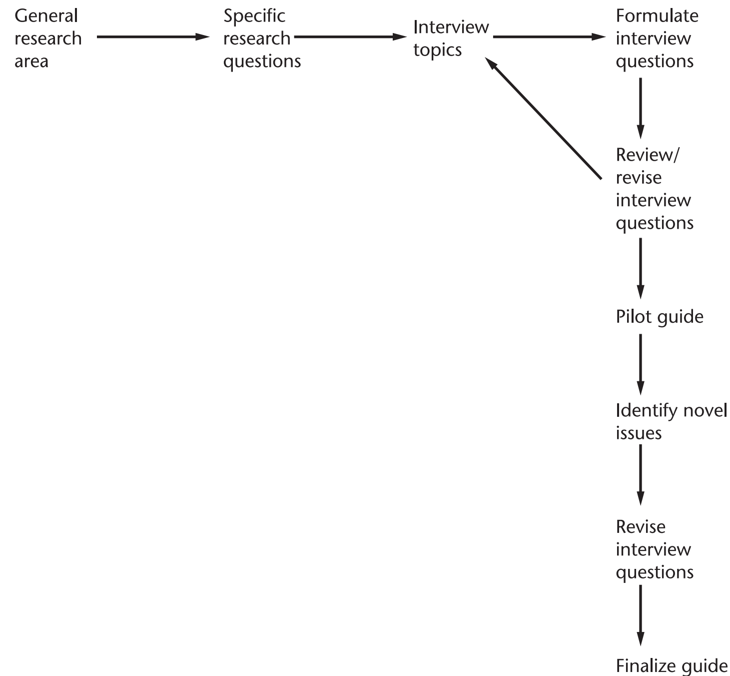

Fig. 15.1 Formulating questions for an interview guide

staff?', perhaps followed up by 'Is that the way you feel too?', in order to get at the individual's own view.

- *Structuring questions*: 'I would now like to move on to a different topic'.
- *Silence*: allow pauses to signal that you want to give the interviewee the opportunity to reflect and amplify an answer.
- *Interpreting questions*: 'Do you mean that your leadership role has had to change from one of encouraging others to a more directive one?'; 'Is it fair to say that what you are suggesting is that you don't mind being friendly towards customers most of the time, but when they are unpleasant or demanding you find it more difficult?'

As this list suggests, one of the main ingredients of the interview is listening—being very attentive to what the interviewee is saying or even not saying. It means that the interviewer is active without being too intrusive—a difficult balance. But it also means that, just because the interview is being tape-recorded (the generally recommended practice whenever it is feasible), the interviewer cannot take things easy. In fact, an interviewer must be very attuned and responsive to what the interviewee is saying and doing. This is also important because something like body language may indicate that the interviewee is becoming uneasy or anxious about a line of questioning. An ethically sensitive interviewer will not want to place undue pressure on the person he or she is talking to and will need to be prepared to cut short that line of questioning if it is clearly a source of concern.

Remember as well that in interviews you are going to ask about different kinds of things, such as:

- values—of interviewee, of group, of organization;
- beliefs—of interviewee, of others, of group;
- behaviour—of interviewee, of others;
- formal and informal roles—of interviewee, of others;
- relationships—of interviewee, of others;
- places and locales;
- emotions—particularly of the interviewee, but also possibly of others;

Box 15.6 **Part of the transcript of a semi-structured interview**

Interviewer	OK. What were your views or feelings about the presentation of different cultures, as shown in, for example, Jungle Cruise or It's a Small World at the Magic Kingdom or in World Showcase at Epcot?
Wife	Well, I thought the different countries at Epcot were wonderful, but I need to say more than that, don't I?
Husband	They were very good and some were better than others, but that was down to the host countries themselves really, as I suppose each of the countries represented would have been responsible for their own part, so that's nothing to do with Disney, I wouldn't have thought. I mean some of the landmarks were hard to recognize for what they were supposed to be, but some were very well done. Britain was OK, but there was only a pub and a Welsh shop there really, whereas some of the other pavilions, as I think they were called, were good ambassadors for the countries they represented. China, for example, had an excellent 360 degree film showing parts of China and I found that very interesting.
Interviewer	Did you think there was anything lacking about the content?
Husband	Well I did notice that there weren't many black people at World Showcase, particularly the American Adventure. Now whether we were there on an unusual day in that respect I don't know, but we saw plenty of black Americans in the Magic Kingdom and other places, but very few if any in that World Showcase. And there was certainly little mention of black history in the American Adventure presentation, so maybe they felt alienated by that, I don't know, but they were noticeable by their absence.
Interviewer	So did you think there were any special emphases?
Husband	Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it, but thinking about it now, it was only really representative of the developed world, you know, Britain, America, Japan, world leaders many of them in technology, and there was nothing of the Third World there. Maybe that's their own fault, maybe they were asked to participate and didn't, but now that I think about it, that does come to me. What do you think, love?
Wife	Well, like you, I hadn't thought of it like that before, but I agree with you.

- encounters;
- stories.

Try to vary the questioning in terms of types of question (as suggested by Kvale's nine types, which were outlined above) *and* the types of phenomena you ask about.

Using an interview guide: An example

Box 15.6 is taken from an interview from a study of visitors to Disney theme parks (Bryman 1999). The study was briefly mentioned in Chapter 4 as an example of a snowball sampling procedure. The interviews were concerned to elicit visitors' interpretations of the parks that had been visited. The interview is with a man who was in his sixties and his wife who was two years younger. They had visited Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and were very enthusiastic about their visit.

The sequence begins with the interviewer asking what would be considered a 'direct question' in terms of the list of nine question types suggested by Kvale (1996) and outlined above. The replies are very bland and do little more than reflect the interviewees' positive feelings about their visit to Disney World. The wife acknowledges this when she says

'but I need to say more than that, don't I?' Interviewees frequently know that they are expected to be expansive in their answers. This sequence occurred around halfway through the interview, so the interviewees were primed by then into realizing that more details were expected. There is almost a tinge of embarrassment that the answer has been so brief and unilluminating. The husband's answer is more expansive but not particularly enlightening.

There then follows the first of two important prompts by the interviewer. The husband's reponse is more interesting in that he now begins to answer in terms of the possibility that black people were under-represented in attractions like the American Adventure, which tells the story of America through tableaux and films via a debate between two audio-animatronic figures—Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin. The second prompt yields further useful reflection, this time carrying the implication that Third World countries are under-represented in World Showcase in the Epcot Centre. The couple are clearly aware that it is the prompting that has made them provide these reflections when they say: 'Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it' and 'Well, like you, I hadn't thought of it like that before'. This is the whole point of prompting—to get the interviewee to think more about the topic and to provide the opportunity for a more detailed response. It is not a leading question, since the interviewees were not being asked 'Do you think that the Disney company fails to recognize the significance of Black history (or ignores the Third World) in its presentation of different cultures?' There is no doubt that it is the prompts that elicit the more interesting replies, but that is precisely their role.

Tape recording and transcription

The point has already been made on several occasions that, in qualitative research, the interview is usually tape-recorded and transcribed whenever possible (see Box 15.7). Qualitative researchers are frequently interested not just in *what* people say but also in the *way* that they say it. If this aspect is to be fully woven into an analysis, it is necessary for a complete account of the series of exchanges in an interview to be available. Also, because the

Box 15.7 **Why should you record and transcribe interviews?**

With approaches that entail detailed attention to language, such as conversation analysis and discourse analysis (see Chapter 17), the recording of conversations and interviews is to all intents and purposes mandatory. However, researchers who use qualitative interviews and focus groups (see Chapter 16) also tend to record and then transcribe interviews. Heritage (1984: 238) suggests that the procedure of recording and transcription interviews has the following advantages:

- it helps to correct the natural limitations of our memories and of the intuitive glosses that we might place on what people say in interviews;
- it allows more thorough examination of what people say;
- it permits repeated examinations of the interviewees' answers;
- it opens up the data to public scrutiny by other researchers, who can evaluate the analysis that is carried out by the original researchers of the data (that is, a secondary analysis);
- it therefore helps to counter accusations that an analysis might have been influenced by a researcher's values or biases;
- it allows the data to be reused in other ways from those intended by the original researcher—for example, in the light of new theoretical ideas or analytic strategies.

However, it has to be recognized that the procedure is very time-consuming. It also requires good equipment, usually in the form of a good-quality tape recorder and microphone but also, if possible, a transcription machine. Transcription also very quickly results in a daunting pile of paper. Also, recording equipment may be offputting for interviewees.

Box 15.8 **Getting it taped and transcribed: An illustration of two problems**

Rafaeli *et al*. (1997) conduct semi-structured interviews with twenty female administrators in a university business school in order to study the significance of dress at the workplace. They write:

Everyone we contacted agreed to participate. Interviews took place in participants' offices or in a school lounge and lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. We recorded and tran scribed all but two interviews: 1 participant refused to be taped, and the tape recorder malfunctioned during another interview. For interviews not taped, we recorded detailed notes. We assured all participants that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous and hired an outside contractor to transcribe the interviews. (Rafaeli *et al*. 1997: 14)

interviewer is supposed to be highly alert to what is being said—following up interesting points made, prompting and probing where necessary, drawing attention to any inconsistencies in the interviewee's answers—it is best if he or she is not distracted by having to concentrate on getting down notes on what is said.

As with just about everything in conducting social research, there is a cost (other than the financial cost of tape recorders and tapes), in that the use of a tape recorder may disconcert respondents, who become self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved. Most people accede to the request for the interview to be tape-recorded, though it is not uncommon for a small number to refuse (see Box 15.8). When faced with refusal, you should still go ahead with the interview, as it is highly likely that useful information will still be forthcoming. This advice also applies to cases of tape recorder malfunction (again see Box 15.8). Among those who do agree to be tape-recorded, there will be some who will not get over their alarm at being confronted with a microphone. As a result, some interviews may not be as interesting as you might have hoped. In qualitative research, there is often quite a large amount of variation in the amount of time that interviews take. For example, in Chattoe and Gilbert's (1999) study of budgeting in what they call 'retired households', the twenty-six interviews they carried out lasted between thirty minutes and three hours; in the research in Box 15.8, the twenty interviews varied between forty-five minutes and three hours. It should not be assumed that shorter interviews are necessarily inferior to longer ones, but very short ones that are a product of interviewee non-cooperation or anxiety about being tape-recorded are likely to be less useful, though it is not being suggested that this applies to Chattoe and Gilbert's shorter interviews. In the extreme, when an interview has produced very little of significance, it may not be worth the time and cost of transcription. Thankfully, such occasions are relatively unusual. If people do agree to be interviewed, they usually do so in a co-operative way and loosen up after initial anxiety about the microphone. As a result, even short interviews are often quite revealing.

The problem with transcribing interviews is that it is very time consuming. It is best to allow around five to six hours for transcription for every hour of speech. Also, transcription yields vast amounts of paper, which you will need to wade through when analysing the data. Beardsworth and Keil (1992: 262) report that their seventy-three interviews on vegetarianism (see Box 15.3) generated 'several hundred thousand words of transcript material'. It is clear, therefore, that, while transcription has the advantage of keeping intact the interviewee's (and interviewer's) words, it does so by piling up the amount of text to be analysed. It is no wonder that writers like Lofland and Lofland (1995) advise that the analysis of qualitative data is not left until all the interviews have been completed and transcribed. To procrastinate may give the researcher the impression that he or she faces a monumental task. Also, there are good grounds for making analysis an ongoing activity, because it allows the researcher to be more aware of emerging themes that he or she may want to ask about in a more direct way in later interviews (see

Box 15.3 for an example). The preference for ongoing analysis is also very much recommended by proponents of approaches to qualitative data analysis like grounded theory (see Chapter 19).

It is easy to take the view that transcription is a relatively unproblematic translation of the spoken into the written word. However, given the reliance on transcripts in qualitative research based on interviews, the issue should not be taken lightly. Transcribers need to be trained in much the same way that interviewers do. Moreover, even among experienced transcribers errors can creep in. Poland (1995) has provided some fascinating examples of mistakes in transcription that can be the result of many different factors (mishearing, fatigue, carelessness). For example, one transcript contained the following passage:

I think unless we want to become like other countries, where people have, you know, democratic freedoms . . .

But the actual words on the audiotape were:

I think unless we want to become like other countries, where people have no democratic freedoms . . . (Poland 1995: 294)

Steps clearly need to be taken to check on the quality of transcription.

Flexibility in the interview

One further point to bear in mind is that you need to be generally flexible in your approach to interviewing in qualitative research. This advice is not just to do with needing to be responsive to what interviewees say to you and following up interesting points that they make. Such flexibility *is* important and is an important reminder that, with semi-structured interviewing, you should not turn the interview into a kind of structured interview but with open-ended questions. Flexibility is important in such areas as varying the order of questions, following up leads, and clearing up inconsistencies in answers. Flexibility is important in other respects, such as coping with audio-recording equipment breakdown and refusals by interviewees to allow a recording to take place (see Box 15.8). A further element is that interviewers often find that, as soon as they switch off their tape recorders, the interviewee continues to ruminate on the topic of interest and frequently will say more interesting things than in the interview. It is usually not feasible to switch the machine back on again, so try to take some notes either while the person is talking or as soon as possible after the interview. Such 'unsolicited accounts' can often be the source of revealing information or views (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This is certainly what Parker found in connection with his research on three British organizations—a National Health Service District Health Authority, a building society, and a manufacturing company—which was based primarily on semi-structured interviews: 'Indeed, some of the most valuable parts of the interview took place after the tape had been switched off, the closing intimacies of the conversation being prefixed with a silent or explicit "well, if you want to know what I really think . . .". Needless to say, a visit to the toilet to write up as much as I could remember followed almost immediately' (Parker 2000: 236).

Sampling

Many, if not most, of the issues raised in connection with sampling in ethnographic research apply more or less equally to sampling in qualitative interviewing. Very often, the lack of transparency that is sometimes a feature of qualitative research (referred to in Chapter 13) is particularly apparent in relation to sampling. It is sometimes more or less impossible to discern from researchers' accounts of their methods either *how* their interviewees were selected or *how many* there were of them. Often, qualitative researchers are clear that their samples are convenience or opportunistic ones, and, on other occasions,

Box 15.9 **A snowball sample**

For their study of vegetarians, Beardsworth and Keil (see Box 15.3) describe their sampling approach as follow:

The drawing of a simple random sample in order to ensure statistical representativeness is clearly impossible in that it is not feasible to enumerate the total United Kingdom population of self-defined vegetarians. . . . For these reasons it was concluded that the only practicable mode of tracing suitable respondents would be through the use of 'snowball' sampling techniques. Quite clearly, such techniques cannot possibly claim to produce a statistically representative sample, since they rely upon the social contacts between individuals to trace additional respondents. (Beardsworth and Keil 1992: 261)

Through this sampling procedure, they were able to conduct seventy-three interviews.

the reader suspects that this is the case. For the study referred to in Box 15.2, Lupton (1996) used four interviewers, each of whom interviewed 'personal contacts'. The resort to convenience sampling is usually the product of such factors as the availability of certain individuals who are otherwise difficult to contact, such as homeless people (Wardhaugh 1996), or a belief that, because it aims to generate an in-depth analysis, issues of representativeness are less important in qualitative research than they are in quantitative research. Sometimes, convenience samples may be the result of restrictions placed on the researcher—for example, when members of an organization select interviewees rather than give the researcher a free rein to do so. Snowball sampling is sometimes used to contact groups of people for whom there is no sampling frame. This approach was employed in my study of visitors to Disney theme parks and by Beardsworth and Keil in their study of vegetarians (see Box 15.9).

Sometimes, a probability sampling approach is employed. The research on organizational dress by Rafaeli *et al.* (1997; see Box 15.8) employed such an approach. The authors write: 'First, we identified a stratified random sample of 20 people from the population of full-time, permanent administrative employees in the organization' (1997: 13–14). The stratifying criteria were administrative section and hierarchical level. A similar kind of sampling strategy occurs when a sample of interviewees is taken (sometimes randomly, sometimes by ensuring a 'spread' in terms of stratifying criteria) from a much larger sample generated for social survey purposes. This approach allows the researcher to sample purposively (if not randomly) and so ensure a wide range of characteristics of interviewees. King (1994) used this approach for a study of general practitioners who had taken part in a survey of GP referrals eighteen months earlier. Similarly, for their study of media representations of social science research, Fenton *et al.* (1998) carried out a mail questionnaire survey of social scientists who had received coverage of their research in the content analysis referred to in Box 9.2 (p. 000). A total of 123 questionnaires were posted and, of those returned, twenty social scientists were selected to be interviewed. The interviews were of a semi-structured kind.

In addition, a theoretical sampling approach might be employed (see Box 14.8 and Figure 14.3, pp. 000, 000). This approach entails sampling interviewees until your categories achieve theoretical saturation (see Box 14.9, p. 000) and selecting further interviewees on the basis of your emerging theoretical focus. The approach is supposed to be an iterative one—that is, one in which there is a movement backwards and forwards between sampling and theoretical reflection, but it may be that the researcher feels that his or her categories achieve theoretical saturation at a relatively early stage. For example, for their research on organization dress, which was referred to in Box 15.8, Rafaeli *et al.* (1997: 14) employed initially a stratified random sampling approach (see above), but then evaluated their data 'after completing interviews with the 20 individuals selected and concluded that, because we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967), no additional interviews were necessary'. A sampling approach that is more in tune with Glaser and

Box 15.10 Theoretical sampling in a study of family obligations

Finch and Mason's (1990: 26) Family Obligations Project was a study of 'patterns of support, aid and assistance . . . between adult kin' in Manchester. Initially, survey research, using a structured interview, was conducted and yielded nearly 1,000 completed interviews. A sample of these interviewees was then approached to be interviewed by semi-structured interview. The initial sample for this phase of the investigation was selected purposively—that is, with specific target subgroups in mind. These were divorced and/or remarried people and the youngest group at the time of the survey (18–24 years of age). Their rationale for this purposive selection is as follows: 'Since fieldwork was principally to be concerned with understanding the process of negotiation between relatives, we decided that it would be much more useful to focus upon individuals who might currently or recently have been involved in processes of negotiation and renegotiation of family relationships' (1990: 33).

Finch and Mason sampled five at a time from the total of each of these subgroups who were willing to be interviewed again (112 in the divorced/remarried subgroup and 117 young adults). Individuals were sampled using random numbers. In addition, the authors wanted to interview the kin groups of individuals from the initial social survey as providing examples of 'negotiations between relatives over issues concerning financial or material support' (1990: 38). They decided to conduct two further interviews with the focal person in a negotiation over family obligations and one interview with each of that person's relatives. However, the sampling strategy was based on the selection not of individuals as cases but of *situations*. In order to make the data comparable, they searched out individuals and their kin who had been identified in the survey—for example, as having moved back into their parents' home following a divorce. A further element in their sampling strategy was that the authors 'tried to keep an eye on the range of experiences that [they] were studying, and to identify any obvious gaps' (1990: 43). As a result of this ongoing 'stocktaking exercise', as they call it, they identified certain gaps in their data: men, because by and large they were the focus of interviews as part of kin networks rather than initial key informants in their own right; unemployed people, particularly because of high levels at the time of the research; ethnic minorities; social classes I, IV, and V; widows and widowers; and stepchildren and stepgrandparents. As Finch and Mason's experience shows, the process of theoretical sampling is not only one that gives priority to theoretical significance in sampling decisions, but is also one that forces researchers to sharpen their reflections on their findings during the fieldwork process.

Strauss's (1967) idea of theoretical sampling is provided by Finch and Mason's (1990) account of their Family Obligations Project (see Box 15.10).

The chief virtue of theoretical sampling is that the emphasis is upon using theoretical reflection on data as the guide to whether more data are needed. It therefore places a premium on theorizing rather than the statistical adequacy of a sample, which may be a limited guide to sample selection in many instances.

Feminist research and interviewing in qualitative research

Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing have become extremely prominent methods of data gathering within a feminist research framework. In part, this is a reflection of the preference for qualitative research among feminist researchers, but it also reflects a view that the kind of interview with which qualitative research is associated allows many of the goals of feminist research to be realized. Indeed, the view has been expressed that, 'Whilst several brave women in the 1980s defended quantitative

methods, it is nonetheless still the case that not just qualitative methods, but the in-depth face-to-face interview has become the paradigmatic "feminist method"' (Kelly *et al*. 1994: 34). This comment is enlightening because it implies that it is not simply that qualitative research is seen by many writers and researchers as more consistent with a feminist position than quantitative research, but that specifically qualitative interviewing is seen as especially appropriate. The point that is being made here is not necessarily that such interviewing is somehow more in tune with feminist values than, say, ethnography (especially since it is often an ingredient of ethnographic research). Instead, it could be that the intensive and time-consuming nature of ethnography means that, although it has great potential as an approach to feminist research (see Chapter 14), qualitative interviewing is often preferred because it is usually less invasive in these respects.

However, it is specifically interviewing of the kind conducted in qualitative research that is seen as having potential for a feminist approach, not the structured interview with which social survey research is associated. Why might one type of interview be consistent with a sensitivity to feminism and the other not? In a frequently cited article, Oakley outlines the following points about the standard survey interview.

- It is a one-way process—the interviewer extracts information or views from the interviewee.
- The interviewer offers nothing in return for the extraction of information. For example, interviewers using a structured interview do not offer information or their own views if asked. Indeed, they are typically advised not to do such things because of worries about contaminating their respondents' answers.
- The interviewer–interviewee relationship is a form of hierarchical or power relationship. Interviewers arrogate to themselves the right to ask questions, implicitly placing their interviewees in a position of subservience or inferiority.
- The element of power is also revealed by the fact that the structured interview seeks out information from the perspective of the researcher.
- Because of these points, the standard survey interview is inconsistent with feminism when women interview other women. This view arises because it is seen as indefensible for women to 'use' other women in these ways.

Instead of this framework for conducting interviews, feminist researchers advocate one that establishes

- a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee;
- a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer;
- the perspective of the women being interviewed;
- a non-hierarchical relationship.

In connection with the reciprocity that she advocates, Oakley noted, for example, that, in her research on the transition to motherhood, she was frequently asked questions by her respondents. She argues that it was ethically indefensible for a feminist not to answer when confronted with questions of a certain kind with which she was confronted (see page 000 for an illustration of this point). For Oakley, therefore, the qualitative interview was viewed as a means of resolving the dilemmas that she encountered as a feminist interviewing other women. However, as noted in previous chapters, while this broad adherence to a set of principles for interviewing in feminist research continues, it has been tempered by a greater recognition of the possible value of quantitative research.

An interesting dilemma that is perhaps not so easily resolved is the question of what feminist researchers should do when their own 'understandings and interpretations of women's accounts would either not be shared by some of them [i.e. the research participants], and/or represent a form of challenge or threat to their perceptions, choices and coping strategies' (Kelly *et al*. 1994: 37). It is the first type of situation that will be examined, at least in part, because, while it is of particular significance to feminist researchers, its implications are somewhat broader. It raises the tricky question of how far the commitment of seeing through the eyes of the people you study can and/or should be stretched. Two examples are relevant here. Reinharz (1992:

28–9) cites the case of an American study by Andersen (1981), who interviewed twenty 'corporate wives', who came across as happy with their lot and were supportive of feminism only in relation to employment discrimination. Andersen interpreted their responses to her questions as indicative of 'false consciousness'—in other words, she did not really believe her interviewees. When Andersen wrote an article on her findings, the women wrote a letter rejecting her account, affirming that women can be fulfilled as wives and mothers. A similar situation confronted Millen (1997) when she interviewed thirty-two British female scientists using 'semi-structured, in-depth individual interviewing' (Millen 1997: 4.6). As Millen (1997: 5.6, 5.9) puts it:

> There was a tension between my interpretation of their reported experience as sex-based, and the meaning the participants themselves tended to attribute to their experience, since the majority of respondents did not analyse these experiences in terms of patriarchy or sex–gender systems, but considered them to be individualised, or as 'just something that had to be coped with'. . . . From my external, academically privileged vantage point, it is clear that sexism pervades these professions, and that men are assumed from the start by other scientists to be competent scientists of status whilst women have to prove themselves, overcome the barrier of their difference before they are accepted. These women, on the other hand, did not generally view their interactions in terms of gendered social systems. There is therefore a tension between their characterisation of their experience and my interpretation of it . . .

Three interesting issues are thrown up by these two accounts. First, how can such a situation arise? This is an issue that pervades qualitative research that makes claims to reveal social reality as viewed by members of the setting in question. If researchers are genuinely seeing through others' eyes, the 'tension' to which Millen refers should not arise. However, it clearly can and does, and this strongly suggests that qualitative researchers are more affected by their own perspectives and research questions when collecting and analysing data than might be expected from textbook accounts of the research process. Secondly, there is the question of how to handle such a 'tension'—that is, how do you reconcile the two accounts? Andersen's (1981) solution to the tension she encountered was to reinterpret her findings in terms of the conditions that engender the contentment she uncovered. Thirdly, given that feminist research is often concerned with wider political goals of emancipation, a tension between participants' world views and the researcher's position raises moral questions about the appropriateness of imposing an interpretation that is not shared by research participants themselves. Such an imposition could hardly be regarded as consistent with the principle of a non-hierarchical relationship in the interview situation.

Therefore, while qualitative interviewing has become a highly popular research method for feminist researchers because of its malleability into a form that can support the principles of feminism, interesting questions are raised in terms of the relationship between researchers' and participants' accounts. Such questions have a significance generally for the conduct of qualitative research.

Qualitative interviewing versus participant observation

The aim of this section is to compare the merits and limitations of interviewing in qualitative research with those of participant observation. These are probably the two most prominent methods of data collection in qualitative research, so there is some virtue in assessing their strengths, a debate that was first begun many years ago (Becker and Geer 1957*a*, *b*; Trow 1957). In this section, interviewing is being

compared to participant observation rather than ethnography, because the latter invariably entails a significant amount of interviewing. So too does participant observation, but in this discussion I will be following the principle that I outlined in Box 14.1 (p. 000)—namely, that the term will be employed to refer to the specifically observational activities in which the participant observer engages. As noted in Box 14.1, the term 'ethnography' is being reserved for the wide range of data collection activities in which ethnographers engage—one of which is participant observation—along with the written account that is a product of it.

Advantages of participant observation in comparison to qualitative interviewing

Seeing through others' eyes

As noted in Chapters 1 and 13, this is one of the main tenets of qualitative research, but, on the face of it, the participant observer would seem to be more adept at gaining a foothold on social reality in this way. The researcher's prolonged immersion in a social setting would seem to make him or her better equipped to see as others see. The participant observer is in much closer contact with people for a longer period of time; also, he or she participates in many of the same kinds of activity as the members of the social setting being studied. Research that relies on interviewing alone is likely to entail much more fleeting contacts, though in qualitative research interviews admittedly last many hours and re-interviewing is not unusual.

Learning the native language

Becker and Geer (1957*a*) argued that the participant observer is in the same position as a social anthropologist visiting a distant land, in that in order to understand a culture the language must be learned. However, it is not simply the formal language that must be understood in the case of the kinds of social research in which a participant observer in a complex urban society engages. It is also very often the 'argot'—the special uses of words and slang that are important to penetrate that culture. Such an understanding is arrived at through the observation of language use.

The taken for granted

The interview relies primarily on verbal behaviour and as such matters that interviewees take for granted are less likely to surface than in participant observation, where such implicit features in social life are more likely to be revealed as a result of the observer's continued presence and because of the ability to observe behaviour rather than just rely on what is said.

Deviant and hidden activities

Much of what we know about criminal and deviant subcultures has been gleaned from participant observation. These are areas that insiders are likely to be reluctant to talk about in an interview context alone. Understanding is again likely to come through prolonged interaction. Many of the examples in Chapter 14 entailed participant observation of criminal or deviant worlds, such as drug taking, violent gangs, pilferage, illegal commerce, and hooliganism. Ethnographers conducting participant observation are more likely to place themselves in situations in which their continued involvement allows them gradually to infiltrate such social worlds and to insinuate themselves into the lives of people who might be sensitive to outsiders. For similar reasons, participant observers have found that they are able to gain access to areas like patterns of resistance at work or to groups of people who support a deviant ideology, like the National Front.

Sensitivity to context

The participant observer's extensive contact with a social setting allows the context of people's behaviour to be mapped out fully. The participant observation interacts with people in a variety of

different situations and possibly roles, so that the links between behaviour and context can be forged.

Encountering the unexpected and flexibility

It may be that, because of the unstructured nature of participant observation, it is more likely to uncover unexpected topics or issues. Except with the most unstructured forms of interview, the interview process is likely to entail some degree of closure as the interview guide is put together, which may blinker the researcher slightly. Also, participant observation may be more flexible because of the tendency for interviewers to instil an element of comparability (and hence a modicum of structure) in their questioning of different people. Ditton's (1977) decision to focus on pilferage in the bakery in which he was a participant observer at a very late stage in the data collection process is an illustration of this feature.

Naturalistic emphasis

Participant observation has the potential to come closer to a naturalistic emphasis, because the qualitative researcher confronts members of a social setting in their natural environments. Interviewing, because of its nature as a disruption of members' normal flow of events, even when it is at its most informal, is less amenable to this feature. It is unsurprising, therefore, that, when referring to naturalism as a tradition in qualitative research, Gubrium and Holstein (1997; see Box 13.1, p. 000) largely refer to studies in which participant observation was a prominent component (e.g. Whyte 1995).

Advantages of qualitative interviewing in comparison to participant observation

Issues resistant to observation

It is likely that there is a wide range of issues that are simply not amenable to observation, so that asking people about them represents the only viable means of finding out about them within a qualitative research strategy. For example, consider Beardsworth and Keil's (1992) research on vegetarianism (see Boxes 15.3 and 15.5). It is not really feasible for investigators to insinuate themselves into the lives of vegetarians in order to uncover issues like reasons for their conversion to this eating strategy. For most people, vegetarianism is a matter that surfaces only at certain points, such as meals and shopping. It is not really sensible or feasible to carry out participant observation in relation to something like this, which is clearly highly episodic.

Reconstruction of events

Qualitative research frequently entails the reconstruction of events by asking interviewees to think back over how a certain series of events unfolded in relation to a current situation. Beardsworth and Keil (see Boxes 15.3 and 15.5) employed the symbolic interactionist notion of *career* to gain an understanding of how people came to be vegetarians. Similarly, for their study of the impact of male unemployment McKee and Bell (1985; see Box 2.22, p. 000, and the reference to this work in Chapter 13) asked husbands and their wives to reconstruct events following unemployment. Yet another example is Pettigrew's (1985) research on Imperial Chemicals Industries (ICI), which entailed interviewing about contemporaneous events but also included 'retrospective interviewing', as Pettigrew calls it (see Box 2.23, p. 000). This reconstruction of events is something that cannot be accomplished through participant observation alone. See Box 15.11 for a further example.

Ethical considerations

There are certain areas that could be observed—albeit indirectly through hidden hardware like a microphone—but would raise ethical considerations. McKeganey and Barnard's (1996; see Box 15.11) research on prostitution furnishes an example of this. One of the areas they were especially interested in was negotiations between prostitutes and their clients over the use of condoms in

Box 15.11 Information through interviews: research on prostitution

McKeganey and Barnard (1996) have discussed their strategies for conducting research into prostitutes and their clients. Their research was based in a red light area in Glasgow. Their approach was largely that of observer-as-participant (see Figure 14.2), in that their research was based primarily on interviews with prostitutes and their clients, as well as some (frequently accidental) observation of interactions and overheard conversations. The interviews they conducted were especially important in gaining information in relation to such areas as: how the prostitutes had moved into this line of work; permitted and prohibited sex acts; links with drug use; experience of violence; and the management of identity. In the following passage, a prostitute reconstructs her movement into prostitution:

> I was 14 and I'd run away from home. I ended up down in London where I met a pimp. . . . He'd got me a place to stay, buying me things and everything and I ended up sleeping with him as well. . . . One night we got really drunk and stoned and he brought someone in. . . . [Then] after it happened I thought it was bad, I didn't like it but at least I was getting paid for it. I'd been abused by my granddad when I was 11 and it didn't seem a million miles from that anyway. (1996: 25)

One area of particular concern to McKeganey and Barnard was the spread of HIV/AIDS infection and its implications for prostitutes and their work. This area was specifically addressed in interviews. For example,

> I've got a couple of punters who'll say I'll give you so and so if you'll do it without [a condom]. But never, I always use a condom for anal sex, oral sex and even for hand jobs, there's no way I'll let them come anywhere near me. (1996: 66)

> You still get the bam-pots [idiots] asking for sex without. I had one the other night—I said, 'where have you been living—on a desert island?' (1997: 66)

the light of the spread of HIV/AIDS infection. It is not inconceivable that such transactions could have been observed with the aid of hidden hardware and it is possible that some prostitutes would have agreed to being wired up for this purpose. However, clients would not have been party to such agreements, so that ethical principles of informed consent and invasion of privacy would have been transgressed (see Box 14.3, p. 000). As a result, the researchers relied on interview accounts of such negotiations or of prostitutes' stances on the matter (see Box 15.11), as well as the views of a small number of clients.

Reactive effects

The question of reactive effects is by no means a straightforward matter. As with structured observation (see Chapter 8), it might be anticipated that the presence of a participant observer would result in reactive effects (see Box 8.10, p. 000). People's knowledge of the fact that they are being observed may make them behave less naturally. However, participant observers, like researchers using structured observation, typically find that people become accustomed to their presence and begin to behave more naturally the longer they are around. Indeed, members of social settings sometime express surprise when participant observers announce their imminent departure when they are on the verge of disengagement. Interviewers clearly do not suffer from the same kind of problem, but it could be argued that the unnatural character of the interview encounter can also be regarded as a context within which reactive effects may emerge. Participant observation also suffers from the related problem of observers disturbing the very situation being studied, because conversations and interactions will occur in conjunction with the observer that otherwise would not happen. This is by no means an easy issue to resolve and it seems likely that both participant observation and qualitative interviewing set in motion reactive effects but of different kinds.

Less intrusive in people's lives

Participant observation can be very intrusive in people's lives in that the observer is likely to take up a lot more of their time than an interview. Interviews in qualitative research can sometimes be very long and re-interviewing is not uncommon, but the impact on people's time will probably be less than having to take observers into account on a regular basis, though it is likely that this feature is will vary from situation to situation. Participant observation is likely to be especially intrusive in terms of the amount of people's time taken up when it is in organizational settings. In work organizations, there is a risk that the rhythms of work lives will be disrupted.

Longitudinal research easier

One of the advantages of participant observation is that it is inherently longitudinal in character because the observer is present in a social setting for a period of time. As a result, change and connections between events can be observed. However, there are limits to the amount of time that participant observers can devote to being away from their normal routines. Consequently, participant observation does not usually extend much beyond two to three years in duration. When participant observation is being conducted into an area of research that is episodic rather than requiring continued observation, a longer time period may be feasible. Armstrong's (1993) research on football hooliganism, which was referred to several times in Chapters 13 and 14, entailed six years of participant observation, but, since football hooligans are not engaged full-time in this area of activity, the research did not require the researcher's continued absence from his work and other personal commitments. Interviewing can be carried out within a longitudinal research design somewhat more easily because repeat interviews may be easier to organize than repeat visits to participant observers' research settings, though the latter is not impossible (e.g. Burgess 1987, who revisited the comprehensive school in which he had conducted participant observation). Following up interviewees on several occasions is likely to be easier than returning to research sites on a regular basis.

Greater breadth of coverage

In participant observation, the researcher is invariably constrained in his or her interactions and observations to a fairly restricted range of people, incidents, and localities. Participant observation in a large organization, for example, is likely to mean that knowledge of that organization far beyond the confines of the department or section in which the observation is carried out is likely not to be very extensive. Interviewing can allow access to a wider variety of people and situations.

Specific focus

As noted in Chapter 13, qualitative research sometimes begins with a specific focus, and indeed Silverman (1993) has been critical of the notion that it should be regarded as an open-ended form of research. Qualitative interviewing would seem to be better suited to such a situation, since the interview can be directed at that focus and its associated research questions. Thus, the research by my colleagues and myself on the police had a very specific research focus in line with its Home Office funding—namely, conceptions of leadership among police officers (Bryman, Stephens, and A Campo 1996). The bulk of the data gathering was in two police forces and entailed the interviewing of police officers at all levels using a semi-structured interview guide. Because it had such a clear focus, it was more appropriate to conduct the research by interview rather than participant observation, since issues to do with leadership notions may not crop up on a regular basis, which would make observation a very extravagant method of data collection.

Overview

When Becker and Geer (1957*a*: 28) proclaimed over forty years ago that the 'most complete form of the sociological datum . . . is the form in which the participant observer gathers it', Trow (1957: 33)

reprimanded them for making such a universal claim and argued that 'the problem under investigation properly dictates the methods of investigation'. The latter view is very much the one taken in this book. Research methods are appropriate to researching some issues and areas but not others. The discussion of the merits and limitations of participant observation and qualitative interviews is meant simply to draw attention to some of the considerations that might be taken into account if there is a genuine opportunity to use one or the other in a study.

Equally, and to repeat an earlier point, the comparison is a somewhat artificial exercise, because participant observation is usually carried out as part of ethnographic research and as such it is usually accompanied by interviewing as well as other methods. In other words, participant observers frequently buttress their observations with methods of data collection that allow them access to important areas that are not amenable to observation. However, the aim of the comparison was to provide a kind of balance sheet in considering the strengths and limitations of a reliance on either participant observation or qualitative interview alone. Its aim is to draw attention to some of the factors that might be taken into account in deciding how to plan a study and even how to evaluate existing research.

Key points

- **Interviewing in qualitative research is typically of the unstructured or semi-structured kind.**
- **In qualitative research, interviewing may be the sole method in an investigation or may be used as part of an ethnographic study, or indeed in tandem with another qualitative method.**
- **Qualitative interviewing is meant to be flexible and to seek out the world views of research participants.**
- **If an interview guide is employed, it should not be too structured in its application and should allow some flexibility in the asking of questions.**
- **The qualitative interview should be tape-recorded and then transcribed.**
- **As with ethnographic research, investigations using qualitative interviews tend not to employ random sampling to select participants.**
- **The qualitative interview has become an extremely popular method of data collection in feminist studies.**
- **Whether to use participant observation or qualitative interviews depends in large part on their relative suitability to the research questions being addressed. However, it must also be borne in mind that participant observers invariably conduct some interviews in the course of their investigations.**

Revision questions

Differences between the structured interview and interviews in qualitative research interviews

- How does qualitative interviewing differ from structured interviewing?

Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing

- What are the differences between unstructured and semi-structured interviewing?
- Could semi-structured interviewing stand in the way of flexibility in qualitative research?
- What are the differences between life history and oral history interviews?
- What kinds of consideration need to be borne in mind when preparing an interview guide?
- What kinds of question might be asked in an interview guide?
- What kinds of skill does the interviewer need to develop in qualitative interviewing?
- Why is it important to tape-record and transcribe qualitative interviews?

Sampling

- Compare theoretical sampling and snowball sampling.

Feminist research and interviewing in qualitative research

- Why has the qualitative interview become such a prominent research method for feminist researchers?
- What dilemmas might be posed for feminist researchers using qualitative interviewing?

Qualitative interviewing versus participant observation

- Outline the relative advantages and disadvantages of qualitative interviewing and participant observation.
- Does one method seem more in tune with the preoccupations of qualitative researchers than the other?