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1 What do the key terms used about qualitative interviews mean?

Introduction

Interviews are ubiquitous in everyday life. We have all been interviewed, at school, at university, for jobs, in a medical setting, and seen or read interviews with others. We know the format, what to do and how to do it. Modern society has been called the 'interview', or even the 'confessional' society, the latter calling up a particular type of interview where intimate matters may be revealed (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Most of us are probably more personally familiar with the role of interviewee, but many of us will have undertaken interviews ourselves, and most of these will have been qualitative interviews in the broadest sense, one person asking another person questions on a particular topic or issue, and the other responding. We will also know from our own experience that these interviews can differ widely, from the confidential probing of the medical interview in a (relatively) private space, through the publicity oriented celebrity interview on screen or in print, to the perhaps aggressive questioning of a politician by a television journalist broadcast in the national news. So clearly both the immediate and broader social contexts are relevant to the way the interview will be conducted, experienced and understood.

In this book we want to move from our everyday experience and understanding of the characteristics of the interview, to the use of the qualitative interview as a methodological and research tool in social science. The interview is probably the most widely used method employed in qualitative research, a central resource for social science. Qualitative interviews have been the basis for many important studies across the range of disciplinary fields, but understandings of what it means to carry out such interviews have shifted over time in line with ebbs and flows in the prominence of particular philosophical approaches to understanding the social world and how it works (discussed in Chapter 2). These ebbs and flows have led to changing conceptions of the researcher: as objective

and so able to access objective knowledge about the interviewee and their social world; as implicated in the processes at play in the interview in a range of ways that affect their understanding of the knowledge that can be produced in the interview; or as an advocate speaking for or giving voice to the interviewee. Debates around these issues are explored in this book. A major theme coursing through the book relates to how to approach research and particular methodological tools, such as the qualitative interview that is the focus of this book. In general, the use of a particular method should be derived from the research topic, the research questions to which an answer is sought and the theoretical framework within which the researcher is working. The researcher moves from research concern and topic to research questions, to appropriate method via their underpinning philosophical stance and theoretical approach to understanding the social world, so constructing their methodology (Mason 2002; Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002).

The chapters of the book will describe the different forms that qualitative interviews can take and the kinds of tools or aids to discussion that can be used during interviews, always linking back to the topic and aims of the research being carried out, and its underpinning philosophical approach. The practicalities of qualitative interviewing are as ever undergoing change and challenges with the availability and use of new technologies, but are also subject to enduring issues around asking questions and listening to the answers, and the implications of the underlying power dynamics of broader social relations for research and interviewer – interviewee relations. In this chapter we provide definitions of qualitative interviews and discuss debates about changing descriptions of the interviewee as ‘research subject’, ‘interviewee’, ‘respondent’, or ‘participant’. We briefly discuss samples in qualitative interviews and review the changing wider social/economic context in which qualitative interviews are conducted. The chapter sets the scene for the book to follow.

What is a qualitative interview?

Most text books will tell you that interviews range through a continuum, from structured, through semi-structured, to unstructured (or focused) interviews (Bryman 2001, May 1997). The structured interview is at the quantitative end of the scale, and more used in survey approaches. The rest of the scale, semi-structured and unstructured, is the area occupied

by qualitative researchers, with the interviews characterized by increasing levels of flexibility and lack of structure. Many of the terms you will have discovered applied to qualitative interviewing appear in this part of the continuum, for example in-depth, informal, non-directed, open-ended, conversational, naturalistic, narrative, biographical, oral or life history, ethnographic and many more discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. The terms used for any particular interview type relate to the underlying philosophy and specific approach taken to research, discussed further in Chapter 2.

Briefly, the structured interview is based on a questionnaire with a sequence of questions, asked in the same order and the same way of all subjects of the research, with little flexibility available to the researcher. The major objective is for neutral interviewers to obtain comparable information from a potentially large number of subjects. It is typical of more positivist approaches, with methodological rules for its practice, and often is subjected to statistical methods of analysis.

A considerable range of qualitative approaches use semi-structured and unstructured interviews, as suggested by the list above. Jennifer Mason argues that, despite the large variations in style and tradition, all qualitative and semi-structured interviewing has certain core features in common:

1. The interactional exchange of dialogue (between two or more participants, in face-to-face or other contexts).
2. A thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach where the researcher has topics, themes or issues they wish to cover, but with a fluid and flexible structure.
3. A perspective regarding knowledge as situated and contextual, requiring the researcher to ensure that relevant contexts are brought into focus so that the situated knowledge can be produced. Meanings and understandings are created in an interaction, which is effectively a co-production, involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge. [Adapted from Mason 2002: 62]

With a colleague, one of us has pointed out that as well as being interactional, the interview is a social and potentially a learning event for both participants:

As a social event it has its own set of interactional rules which may be more or less explicit, more or less recognized by the participants. In addition . . . there are several ways in which the interview

constitutes a learning process. . . . Participants can discover, uncover or generate the rules by which they are playing this particular game. The interviewer can become more adept at interviewing, in terms of the strategies which are appropriate for eliciting responses. (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994: 135)

Both interviewers and interviewees can learn more about certain aspects of themselves and the other, with or without this being an explicit part of the interactional exchange. So, who are the players in a qualitative interview?

The changing subject of research

You might have noticed that in writing about interviews earlier we referred to the 'subjects' of the research, and the eagle-eyed will have seen Mason (above) referring to both the researcher and the researched as 'participants'. What those who are being researched are called are not just neutral terms, but also indicate ways of thinking about them and how they are understood as relating to the interview, and consequently reflect the philosophical stance of the researcher. Terms for the researched have included subject, respondent, informant, interviewee and participant, the sequence here suggesting a movement from passive to active. Subject is typical of the close-ended, structured interview, matched by an interviewer who is expected to introduce no biases into the research and data, and deliver objectivity by asking the same questions in the same way of all those who appear for the interview, ignoring as far as possible the subjectivity of the subject. Criticisms of this position come from those who are interested in the views, understandings and subjectivities of the people they research in differing ways, including those who take interpretive, feminist, postmodern, emancipatory and critical realist approaches, all discussed in Chapter 2. Historically, respondent and informant have been associated with ethnographic methods, where key figures are sought when researching particular groups or cultures, to provide useful information on the community being studied. Participant emerges from this field approach too, and applies specifically to the researcher in a method typical of ethnography: participant observation. Here the researcher is still an outsider, although hoping to become more of an insider, or more accepted, by participating in the activities of the group being researched. Interviewee is

matched by interviewer, the similarity of terms suggesting more equality in the research relationship. Participant takes this further, and carries with it from feminism and other interpretivist positions certain understandings of the part played by researched and researcher. Participation in research can empower the interviewee, and many feminists have sought to give voice in their research to those, particularly women, who have been unheard or silenced in earlier social science research. From this perspective, reflexivity is called for in the researcher, who must recognize themselves both as part of the research process and the power relations that permeate the research encounter of the qualitative interview (Hammersley 2012). Both researcher and researched bring with them concepts, ideas, theories, values, experiences and multiply intersecting identities, all of which can play a part in research interaction in the qualitative interview.

Changes over time in the terms used for participants in research reflect changes in the underlying philosophical positions adopted. Broadly they chart movement from the notion of the neutral interviewer, standardization and exclusion of bias at the heart of more positivist approaches, to ideas of reflexive construction, difference and shifting positionalities of researcher and researched that have emerged from feminist, postmodern and interpretivist stances. The historical shifting philosophical phases through which this sequence of changes has emerged is outlined in Chapter 2. Throughout this book we use terms such as researcher and interviewer, and interviewee, participant, respondent and subject, according to the context in which they occur.

Sampling in qualitative interviewing

Sampling in qualitative research has suffered a similar problem to qualitative research in general with the representative random probability samples of quantitative research regarded as the norm to which it should be compared and so found wanting. It is helpful to note Giampietro Gobo's robust view that probability samples are very rarely achieved (or achievable) in social science (Gobo 2007: 405–406). At the risk of repetition, it is odd to talk of a sample or sampling in qualitative social research without a context since whom you research and interview is totally dependent on the nature and design of your study. Some would argue that even the term sample is inappropriate, given that the focus of data generation in qualitative research is on the process rather than an end point of numbers.

In brief, your sample must provide the data you need to produce answers to your research questions, and this process is theory driven in the way described above.

A major characteristic of qualitative research then is that it is theoretically driven, and this also applies to the construction and selection of the sample in a qualitative interview study. The term 'theoretical sampling' was introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) in the context of the development of grounded theory, and over time definitions and practices of both theoretical sampling and grounded theory have been modified by Strauss and others (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Many qualitative researchers use this approach to sampling without necessarily accepting the techniques and strategies advocated by Strauss and colleagues, nor indeed the specific relationship with grounded theory. A more general way of thinking about theoretical sampling in qualitative research is that selection is made on the basis of relevance for your theory, in order to produce a sample that will enable you to develop the theoretical ideas that will be emerging in an iterative process between your theory and your data, and to enable you to test these emerging ideas. This suggests that you will not necessarily start with your sample set in stone, but will modify it and seek further cases in the light of your ongoing analysis of data and the theoretical development emerging from your study. This emerging sample will be both theoretical and purposive, selecting particular exemplary cases for the needs of your study.

One method through which this type of sample can be developed is snowballing, a process in which contact is made with participants appropriate for your research through whatever access route you can find, and through these first participants you are introduced to others of similar/relevant characteristics for your research. This can often be an integral part of ethnography, which involves spending time in the field with the group under study, but is also useful in contacting hard to reach groups and individuals, and perhaps people engaging in criminal or otherwise non-normative or deviant behaviour (Ferrell and Hamm 1998).

In general, academic researchers often favour the convenience sample – available by means of accessibility. Many social science investigations take place on university students, educational practitioners undertake educational research in their own schools and classrooms and people pursue an ethnography on a group of which they are already a part.

The issue of ‘how many’ interviews, people or cases should be in a qualitative sample is a common question among students hoping to undertake research, and will be discussed in Chapter 6. For now, it is interesting to note the issues around samples and sample size raised in qualitative longitudinal research that takes place through time, typically involving repeat interviews at intervals with the same individuals or groups, because in qualitative longitudinal research many of the considerations of qualitative research in general and interviewing in particular are exacerbated. In relation to sample size, for example, the sample might fall in size due to attrition, or it might grow if, for example, you are following mothers before and after the birth of a child, when the child could join the sample as a toddler (Thomson et al. 2012). Clearly the number of interviews is not the same as the number of cases in this instance. For each member of the sample you will have multiple interviews, and considerably more data than you would have from a one-off, snapshot study. Your procedure for generating a sample will similarly be based on the design, aims and philosophy of your research, but you will need to consider the number of participants with whom you embark on the study, so as not to drown in data and be unable to manage or adequately analyse and interpret the material.

From this discussion, it becomes clear that deciding on an interview sample size, the number of cases appropriate for a given qualitative study is not an easy matter dealt with by some formula, but completely dependent on the nature and design of the study, the aims and research questions and the underlying philosophical position adopted. It is also a characteristic of qualitative research that the sample is built as the research progresses.

The broad social context of qualitative interviews

The broad social context of qualitative research, and so interviews, is multifaceted. The regulations and standards laid down for the conduct of research constitute the research governance regime, which has been growing in coverage and intensity in recent years (discussed further in Chapter 2). Thus, the institution in which the researcher is located will require good practice in research, and an appropriate approach to risk and ethical considerations, particularly in relation to institutional liability. In the personal interaction of the qualitative interview, ethical guidelines

(institutional and professional) require no harm to come to participants. The relatively recent emphasis on ethical practice in the social sciences has focused on the researched, with ethical considerations based on protecting them from risk and exploitation and gaining informed consent for the research (see Chapter 6). More recently still there has been concern about the impact of qualitative interviewing on the researcher. Michael Bloor and his colleagues have written extensively about risk and well-being in relation to qualitative researchers drawing out the gendered nature of fieldwork experiences. Women researchers are seen as more vulnerable for example to the emotional demands of fieldwork, and are required to undertake considerable emotional labour and emotion management (Bloor et al. 2007, 2010; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Sampson et al. 2008). We discuss emotional issues in interviewing, as well as power in interviews, in Chapter 7.

For the qualitative researcher seeking to undertake interviews for a particular piece of research an important immediate context relates to the social relations of the specific field into which the researcher is about to plunge, with its multiple and often contradictory demands. The interviewer might need to navigate and negotiate in a school, a factory, a large or small organization, a university, a prison (see the discussion on Chapter 4 about where qualitative interviews may be conducted). Access and negotiation might take place with a small social group or network, a group of members of a political movement, or among members of a particular sporting 'tribe'; the list is endless as is the complexity of the social interactions involved.

Conclusion

We have suggested that interviews are ubiquitous in society today, and this is a broad context within which qualitative research using particular types of interview will be taking place. This can be a help and a hindrance. Prospective participants will have ideas about what is expected and required in an interview, which might be helpful but might also colour their behaviour in ways that can be a hindrance. It is important for qualitative researchers to be able to draw their participants onto the terrain of the research interview, for them to understand what the research is about, and how the interview will differ from others they might have experienced. We discuss these sorts of practicalities in conducting interviews in Chapter 6.

We have introduced you to qualitative interviews and the terms used to describe them, given an indication of the changing understanding of the relationship between researcher and researched over time, and its connection with the philosophical positions that underpin research, and indicated where these issues are recurrent themes, or will be discussed further in individual chapters in the book. In Chapter 2 we move on to the emergence and history of qualitative interviewing.