Edwards, Rosalind, and Janet Holland. "What sort of research tools can be used in conducting qualitative interviews?." *What is Qualitative Interviewing?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 53–64. The 'What is?' Research Methods Series. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472545244.ch-005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:18 UTC.

Copyright © Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

5 What sort of research tools can be used in conducting qualitative interviews?

Introduction

As we have stressed in this book so far, a key purpose of a qualitative interview broadly is to elicit the experiences, perceptions and feelings of the research participant/s – a sort of conversation or dialogue. It is an asymmetrical rather than an equal exchange, however. The interviewer largely delineates and controls the topic of discussion in an effort to, depending on your epistemological approach, gain access to essential meaning from, or co-generate it with, the interviewee or interviewees. Questions are the most commonly used interview tool in this endeavour, but researchers can utilize a range of other textual, visual and creative tools to engage interviewees and stimulate discussion as part of qualitative interviews, and thereby reveal aspects of participants' sense-making processes. Some argue that interviewees respond in a different way to these sorts of tools – that they access parts of personhood that interviews using words alone cannot reach.

Indeed, in addition to the relatively straightforward process of asking questions, there has been a proliferation of tools that researchers have developed to stimulate and facilitate interaction, enhance or contribute to communication and draw out (as desired) stories, accounts or responses. An interviewer can use many different techniques and tools as appropriate to the particular topic and questions of their research, the setting in which they are carrying out the interview as well as the form of the interview, and the characteristics of interviewees taking part in their research. In this chapter we begin by addressing the basic currency of qualitative interviews – talking – before moving on to address the sorts of techniques that researchers can use to augment and extend the process of asking questions: writing, seeing and creating. Under each of these broad headings we provide illustrations of work using these tools, albeit we can only discuss a few of the available techniques to illustrate their potential.

Talking

A basic tool for researchers in asking questions in qualitative interviews is an interview or topic guide. This guide is a list of questions or subjects that need to be covered during the interview, sometimes in a particular order and way (semi-structured), sometimes not (in-depth). The interviewer follows the guide, but as part of the exchange of talk during the interview is able to pursue topical trajectories that may stray from the guide when she or he feels this is fruitful and appropriate. Whether conducting a semi-structured or unstructured qualitative interview, in developing their question or topic guides researchers take into consideration: the focus of inquiry; what they want to learn from the person they are speaking with; how much time they have available and the kind of access they have; and how much they already know about their research topic.

The process of producing interview topics and questions for the guide, however, can seem mysterious. How does it occur? Where do you start? Kirstin Luker (2008: 168–171) provides an engaging and detailed description of how she generates interview questions and a guide:

[I] take a pack of 3 by 5 index cards and write down every single question I want to know the answer to . . . I write one question per card, and I try to use the kind of easygoing, accessible language that I would use during an actual interview . . . So instead of writing ‘What motivated you to get involved in this issue?’ which is the real question I’m interested in, I would get at this with a number of questions, on the assumption that few of us know our own motivations, and even when we do, we rarely think of them as ‘motivations’ per se. So I would jot down a series of specific, concrete questions to get to this point: ‘When did you decide to get involved? What was going on in your life? Why then, and not earlier or later? Why this issue and not a closely related one? . . .

Then I take this stack of index cards . . . and I arrange them . . . I sit down near a flat surface – for me, the living room floor has always worked just fine – and I lay out these cards in different orders. If you play around with your cards long enough, you will see that they start to ‘clump’. By this I mean that there will be a sort of topic outline of the areas you’re interested in, and a series of questions

will fall into each topic area. Then, within each topic area, I try to arrange the questions as closely as possible to an approximation of natural language . . . how would a natural conversation about your topic go? Obviously it would move from the more general to the more specific, and from the less emotionally threatening to the more emotionally threatening . . . [and at the end] you would want to 'cool down' the interview, setting the stage for a friendly departure.

Interview guides can be quite specific, covering types of questions and how they should be asked. A number of qualitative research texts provides typologies or categories of questions and their ordering, all of which can be useful in thinking about how to ask questions. James P. Spradley, in his classic text *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979), for example, identifies and describes a number of types of questions. These include descriptive-type questions such as broad, open 'grand tours' in the tone of 'tell me about your experience of . . .', 'what was it like being . . .', or questions where the interviewee is asked to talk through a specific concrete example of a situation, and so on. Another type of question is those that fall in the structural mode, for example, 'verification' sorts of questions about when, where and in what order something happened, or 'what do you mean by . . .' as well clarifications, etc. And contrast-type questions include the interviewer asking the interviewee to compare their experience of one issue or person with another, such as 'what's the difference between . . .', or rank or rate a range of experiences. We discuss more targeted types of interview questions and talking techniques, such as follow-ups and probes, further in Chapter 6 when we look at the practicalities involved in qualitative interviews.

In contrast to a detailed sequence of carefully thought-through questions, topic guides can be quite sketchy; more by way of a reminder of subjects to cover in the interview. The interviewer relies on the flow of interaction with the interviewee to steer the interview process, constructing questions about the issues to be covered as the interview progresses, rather than asking any predetermined specific types of questions. In Figure 5.1 we have reproduced a guide from a project that set out to understand the ways in which lone mothers might envisage the relationship between motherhood and paid work, which one of us carried out with a colleague, to show you what a topic guide of this sort might look like.

EXTRACT FROM: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR LONE MOTHERS:
PATTERNS AND PROCESSES IN UPTAKE OF PAID WORK

Household/Family Details:

Household composition – sex, age, ethnicity, relationship

Significant others – daily/intermittent

Education level

Route to/length of lone motherhood

Housing type and tenure

Paid Work:

Knowledge of local (area/neighbourhood) job availability

- how knows about them

Employment now and in past (why/why not)

- type/mode/length

Preference (why/why not)

Role of networks (opinion/decisionmaking)

Childcare:

Knowledge of local (area/neighbourhood) childcare availability
(all types) – how knows about them

Use now and in past (why: use(d)/no longer/not using)

- type(s) (public/private/informal/father)
- mode(s) (days/hours/regularity)
- length(s) of use

Preference (why/why not)

Role of networks (opinion/decisionmaking)

If local informal childcare – similar/different
(attitude/resources/household)

Networks: (network mapping)

Help – who/location/what/usefulness

Social life – group/individual

- adult/child orientation
- regularity/location

Figure 5.1 Topic guide used for Duncan and Edwards (1999).

Identity/Life Perceptions:

Self – as lone mother (same/different)

– as paid worker

Problems/strengths of – lone motherhood

– combining with paid work (if do)

How lone mothers viewed – society as a whole

– locally

The key issue in thinking about talking techniques in interviews, though, is to come back to the fundamental issue of what the research is about. Certain types of questions will be better suited to promote interview interaction and discussion that provides answers relevant to the overarching subject of investigation, stimulating knowledge about the particular research issues as well as in keeping with the epistemological approach adopted (see Chapter 2). For example, descriptive ‘grand tour’ questions are an excellent fit with narrative research that seeks to elicit stories from interviewees and understand these within a broadly interpretive approach. The same issue of ‘fit for purpose and approach’ is true of the various types of research techniques and tools to augment and enhance interviews that we now discuss.

Writing

Written texts to stimulate talk in qualitative interviews can be produced either by the researcher or the interviewee before the interview for use during it.

A good example of researcher-generated writing to extend and enhance talk during an interview is vignettes. These are short stories or comic strips with a purpose; about characters in particular hypothetical but realistic circumstances or dilemmas that are relevant to the research enquiry. Interviewers ask interviewees to read them or read them to interviewees at a particular point in the interview and then ask them to comment on the situation. They are especially useful in research concerned with people’s attitudes, beliefs and values. For example, along with colleagues one of us used vignettes in interviews with parents and step-parents, in a study of their understandings and experiences of parenting within and across households. We reproduce a vignette from this research as an illustration

Ann has lived with Tony for the past two years, with her two daughters aged nine and seven from a previous relationship. Tony has recently been made redundant and, although Ann has a part-time job, money is tight. The children's father, Mark, has regular contact with them, and often takes them out and buys them expensive toys and clothes. Tony feels that Mark is splashing money around to show him up as not such a good father, while Ann feels that the girls are getting spoilt and are becoming too demanding at home. Ann briefly mentioned to Mark that he was spending too much on them, but he says they are his daughters and he should be able to provide them with the extra treats he'd buy them if they lived with him anyway.

- What should they do? Why?
- Have you ever been in a situation like this one? What happened?

Figure 5.2 Example of a vignette used in Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003).

in Figure 5.2. This particular vignette set out to explore the people's understandings of the relationship between material resources, household boundaries and parenting.

Vignettes are said to be especially useful in aiding interview discussion where topics are sensitive and interviewees may feel awkward talking about particular issues. Responding to vignettes can be an acceptable way of talking about private matters in the 'public' setting of an interview (Finch 1987).

Figure 5.2 is a relatively short and simple vignette. Janet Finch, however, developed the potential of the vignette technique further. She created a series of linked stories that she calls a 'soap opera style' of vignette that can be used in in-depth interview research as well as surveys. Discussion of the characters, dilemmas faced and options available to them in one vignette leads into another vignette in which the characters have moved on in their situation and thus face further dilemmas and options. Finch warns that three or four complex vignettes is the limit, otherwise the thread of stories and details can be difficult for interviewees to follow.

Written texts generated by an interviewee can be unsolicited or solicited. They can stand alone as research data but here we are concerned with their use as an aid in interviews. Where materials are unsolicited, they already exist prior to the research, say in the form of daily blog that can be

followed up and discussed in an interview with the blogger. Solicited writing is produced specifically for the research. Researchers ask participants if they would undertake to produce the documents prior to the interview and give them instructions about how to do this. The texts are then used as the basis for discussion during a later face-to-face interview. Here we focus on solicited diary material as illustration of the potential of this technique.

Charlotte Kenten used solicited diaries coupled with diary interviews as a means of exploring the everyday positive and negative ways in which lesbians and gay men are made aware of their sexuality (2010). She asked her research participants to record daily, over a two-week period, whenever they became aware of their sexuality. She used this written method because she felt that such taken-for-granted experiences would be hard to capture in interviews alone. The A4 paper diary included a brief summary of the research on its first inside page, guidelines about completing the diary for the diary-keepers and the researcher's contact details. At the top of each of the 14 pages (one per day) there was a space for the date and several orientating prompt questions (see appendices in Kenten 2010). In the interviews subsequent to the two-week diary-keeping, the participants in Kenten's research reflected on the process of keeping a diary as well as explaining not only the contents that they might otherwise have not registered overtly but also their deliberate silences: what went unwritten, unrecorded and why. Kenton strongly argues that while diaries can be used as a stand alone method, where the diary keeping period is followed by an interview, entries made at particular points in time can be explored with their author (the interviewee) who can then explain and reflect upon their content. In this way, researchers can gain greater depth of understanding and insight on their topic of enquiry.

Seeing

As well as text, researchers can use images in interviews to facilitate talk – often referred to as elicitation. In this section we look at two elicitation techniques in particular: photos and graphics. Some argue that such visual images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words and provide interviewers with a different order of participant responses, drawing out tacit knowledge, and latent memories and emotions (Harper 2002), which makes it attractive for researchers taking a psychoanalytic

philosophical approach (see Chapter 2). There are also arguments that these visual elicitation techniques privilege the authority of the interviewee rather than the interviewer, fitting with an emancipatory approach (Harper 2002).

Photo elicitation

Photo elicitation is often thought of as a novel research tool, but in fact has a history stretching back into the mid-twentieth century as a technique used in anthropological studies. The use of photographs, or indeed other visual images (such as paintings, graffiti, advertisements, film clips), as a stimulus during qualitative interviews can draw on materials that are in existence prior to the research process and are brought to the interview either by interviewer or interviewee, or they can be generated specifically as part of the research process by the interviewee solely or in collaboration with the researcher. The photos may be general, collective or specific to the interviewee, and may be institutional (class of '79), of an era (farmers making hay in the 1930s), or intimate (family birthday party) (Harper 2002).

For example, drawing on participatory ideas, Jane Jorgenson and Tracy Sullivan (2010) asked children to take photographs of themselves or family members at home, working or playing with technology. They then explored what these images meant to the children through discussion in interviews, drawing out tacit qualities of family–technology relationships from children's perspectives that they argue would not otherwise be apparent. In contrast, Karen Henwood and colleagues (2011) used researcher-selected photo images of fatherhood from different eras (Victorian through to contemporary) in their longitudinal psychosocial study of men's accounts of first-time fatherhood. They asked their interviewees to comment upon these photos in interviews in an effort to understand the way in which the men formulated and made sense of their aspirations for modern fatherhood within and against dominant socio-historical representations of fathers.

Graphic elicitation

Graphic elicitation techniques cover a wide range of interview tools produced as part of qualitative interviews, to capture and represent relationships, feelings and so on. Timelines, for example, consist of a drawn line, straight or winding, representing time passing, along which interviewees mark significant events and aspects of personal experience over the course

of their life as a whole or specific parts of it. Francis Guenette and Anne Marshall (2009) describe the use of interviewee-generated timelines in a narrative-based research project on the sensitive topic of the effects of domestic abuse on women's work lives. The authors argue that timelines enhance the narrative interview process, enabling interviewees to express themselves non-verbally, as well as providing a tool for interviewer and interviewee to aid reflection during the interview.

Graphic tools can also attempt to represent affect, using actual or metaphorical maps. Maps of a geographical area or location can be used in qualitative interviews to capture and talk about the emotions associated with different places and spaces. For example, researchers have asked children and young people to mark the spaces of safety and danger on a map of their local neighbourhood (Reay and Lucey 2002), or family members to place different coloured emoticon stickers on a floor plan of their home to indicate the spaces of family dynamics (Gabb 2008), such as ☺ to indicate happiness and laughter in the kitchen, and ♥ to indicate loving feelings in the hallway.

Metaphorically, as part of her groundbreaking anthropological study of households as resource systems, Sandra Wallman (1984) developed two linked network maps to use with interviewees. Each map consisted of concentric rings around the household unit with different segments or slices of the pie for kin, non-kin and difficult relationships respectively. Both maps recorded closeness of different kinds: one allowed the interviewee to record significant others in terms of geographical distance; the other recorded the same people in terms of their emotional closeness in the interviewee's view. Along with colleagues, one of us adapted a version of the emotional closeness and distance circle map to look at children and young people's understandings of biological and social ties (Edwards et al. 2006), using the template in Figure 5.3. The nearer to themselves at the centre of the circle that the interviewee places a named person, the closer emotionally they feel them to be. The interviewer can then discuss with interviewees why particular people are in particular positions on the map.

Most of these tools have been used with individual interviewees, but a graphic elicitation technique designed explicitly to capture interaction between research participants is Andrea Doucet's household portrait (2001). Doucet used this innovative tool to study gendered divisions of labour among heterosexual couples, enabling her interviewees to reflect on taken-for-granted routine and normally invisible patterns of behaviour.

Figure 5.3 Template for an emotional closeness circle map used in Edwards et al. (2006).

The couple were asked to work together to place stickers with colour-coded household tasks and responsibilities onto a grid indicating whether and to what extent the activity was undertaken by the man or woman. The interviewer is present during this activity and can ask for, or be subject to, clarification or explanation as it happens. The graphic ‘portrait’ that results from the collaborative sorting of household tasks and responsibilities forms data in itself, but the couple’s discussion together and with the researcher during the co-production is further, richer data.

Creating

All the interview tools discussed so far – talking, writing and seeing – are creative, but some tools can involve research participants in more extended and extensive projects that can be talked about in qualitative interviews in order to explore perceptions, emotions, memories, identities and so on. Here we provide three interesting examples to show the potential of creating techniques.

In a collaborative research team project, one of us has developed memory books as a method to be used alongside interviews in a qualitative longitudinal study of young people’s transitions to adulthood (Thomson and Holland 2005). Such books go beyond the writing-a-diary tool described earlier. The research team provided their interviewees with a package

containing a small book that could be used as a scrapbook as well as a diary, blank and trigger-word stickers ('love', 'myself', 'career', etc.), a folder for collecting paraphernalia, glue, a disposable camera, a leaflet explaining the purpose of the memory books and commenting on issues of ownership and confidentiality and so on. The memory books can stand alone as data, but they also served as a resource to facilitate another interview based on the material in the books stimulating discussion of the cultural resources and technologies that underpin young people's constructions of their selves.

Reality boxes for use in research with children is a tool conceived by Karen Winter as part of her research on children subject to local authority care orders (2012). She helped the young interviewees to decorate a shoe box using sparkling decorations, wool, pipe cleaners, lollipop sticks, pens, labels, pom poms and so on. The decoration on the outside of the box was a reflection of how they thought they came across to the outside world, while the inside contained constructions of their feelings and perspectives about their lives at home and in care. The boxes thus are metaphors for and by the child concerned.

The idea of 'metaphorical models', where interviewees are asked to make visual objects (video, collage, drawing, moulding, etc.) and then interpret them in interviews, has been propounded by David Gauntlett (2007), who has pioneered the use of lock-together plastic building bricks (part of LEGO™'s 'Serious Play' initiative) in this respect. People may, for example, be asked to create a model of how they feel on a Friday afternoon, or to build a model that overviews the different aspects of their identity. The research data are not only the creative product but also the discussion of the production process and choices made, and crucially the interviewees' interpretation of what they have produced. Gauntlett argues that metaphorical model creation is both embodied, in bringing mind and body together in order to explore experience, and empowering, in enabling people's creativity and trusting their ability to theorize themselves.

Conclusion

The research techniques for use in and with qualitative interviews that we have discussed in this chapter are not exhaustive. What we have done though, we hope, is to open the qualitative interviewer's mind to, and whet their appetite for, the possibilities and potential of a range of

writing, seeing and creating tools to aid, stimulate, facilitate, enhance, draw out, augment, extend and contribute to talking. As well as not being exhaustive, the tools to use alongside talking are not exclusive. We have discussed writing, seeing and creating under separate headings, illustrated by their distinct use in particular studies, but they can be used in various combinations in a single project, depending on the research aims and the data needed to meet them. Whatever the techniques and tools used in qualitative interviews, however, careful questioning, listening and responding remains important – part of our concern in the next chapter.