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8 What are the strengths, challenges and future of qualitative interviews?

Introduction

Throughout this book we have emphasized that it is important for the researcher to have an awareness of the philosophical and epistemological position that underlies the qualitative interview and qualitative research in general. In Chapter 2 we briefly considered the history of the qualitative interview, and evaluated assertions that qualitative interviews and research have passed through eight or nine 'moments' since 1900 (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). We saw that there are overlapping and intersecting approaches in the moments of this model, there is no linear progression; we can say then that all of the underpinning philosophical positions upon which qualitative interviews are based that we then described in that chapter are currently in play. We did suggest a progression in the terms used to describe the person interviewed, which was seen to reflect the changing relationship between researcher and researched, interviewer and interviewee, and a growing reflexivity from the researcher, under the influence of some of the philosophies outlined, particularly feminist and postmodern approaches (Chapter 1).

This book is based on an understanding of the value and importance of qualitative interviews and their contribution to a social scientific understanding of social events and interactions in context in the social world. But there are challenges to this position. In this concluding chapter we will discuss the strengths of qualitative interviews and the challenges faced by the qualitative interview method; challenges facing the method in the current context, which might be threats to its continuing use; and what the future might hold, as well as summing up the key message of this book – 'what is qualitative interviewing?'

Strengths

Paul Atkinson and David Silverman (1997) argued that we are in an interview society where interviews have become a fundamental activity, and crucial to people's understanding of themselves (see Chapter 1). Giampietro Gobo sees ethnography as an increasingly popular qualitative method, and suggests:

If the 'interview society' is still the dominant societal model, the recent sudden increase of ethnography can be explained with the hypothesis that we are entering a[n] 'observation society', a society in which observing (as interviewing) has become a fundamental activity, and watching and scrutinizing are becoming important cognitive modes alongside the others, like listening, feeling, hearing and eavesdropping, typical of the 'interview society'. (Gobo 2011: 48)

We could suggest that both exist and interact in the current moment, and it has been argued more generally that we are in a cycle of increased acceptance of qualitative interviews and other qualitative methods (Gobo 2005; Holland et al. 2006). Malcolm Williams and Paul Vogt offer reasons for the increasing popularity of social research methods in general: the end of the paradigm wars; the development of mixed methods approaches (or methodological pluralism); technological developments; statistical and scientific developments; and greater publishing opportunities (2011: 4). Other explanations for the increasing popularity of qualitative interviews offered are recognition of a need for methods that can give insight into the meanings that individuals and groups attach to experiences, social processes, practices and events, for example, by policy decision makers. This has led further to the realization of the value and relevance of qualitative research and findings from interviews for practice in various policy areas, including welfare, health and education, and in some instances for the value of qualitative longitudinal research to be recognized, placing policy changes in the context of people's lived experience (Holland et al. 2006; Molloy et al. 2002; Neale et al. 2012).

Jennifer Mason (2002: 1) lists some of the strengths of qualitative interviews that are sometimes lost from sight, arguing that through them we can explore:

- the texture and weave of everyday life;
- the understandings, experiences and imaginings of research participants;

- how social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work; and
- the significance of the meanings that they generate.

We have seen from the discussion in this book that the qualitative interview method has been evolving, taking on board criticisms to strengthen research interviewing practice, incorporating technological change, using visual and other methods within the interview to enhance the process of knowledge production (see Chapter 5). The method can provide depth and detail to the more general picture/viewpoint offered by quantitative social data, and so qualitative interviews can form a crucial part of complex multi-modal studies, combining multiple qualitative methods, or multiple qualitative and quantitative methods; in the longitudinal context when following participants through time, they can provide a way into uncovering complex processes of causality.

Challenges

Any piece of qualitative research and any qualitative interview can be criticized from a number of perspectives, and just as with any type of research method, not all qualitative interviews constitute good research. What we have pursued in this book is good practice in understanding and undertaking qualitative interviews within the framework of a well-specified philosophical and epistemological position. Qualitative interviews undertaken in this way would escape the more ill-informed criticisms of qualitative research that have been made, for example, that it is anecdotal, illustrative, descriptive, lacks rigour, is unsystematic, biased, impossible to replicate and not generalizable. This string of criticisms often emanates from a position where qualitative interviews and research and what they can accomplish are not well-understood. They are easily countered in the following ways.

A researcher might take material from qualitative interviews to illustrate a particular point, or describe some aspect of the behaviour discussed, but this is not the aim of the game. Examples and illustrations are not anecdotal, but systematically drawn from detailed analysis of the data, using the preferred analytic approach. It is the analysis and the cogency of the theoretical reasoning that underlies it that is the source of the generalizability of qualitative data. Findings from qualitative interviews are, then,

not generalizeable in the way that quantitative research hopes to be, that is, drawing a sample on agreed criteria from a statistically defined population, and then generalizing from the findings from that sample to the broader population. A long debate has traced this meaning of generalization, immersed in the normative quantitative paradigm, with how qualitative findings can be generalized with different formulations, and there have been attempts to change the term to avoid this negative association (Gobo 2008). But it has been suggested that in general '... it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalisation' (Bryman 2001: 283).

Qualitative interviews are inherently impossible to replicate, since as we have seen in these chapters they are a social interaction with many elements coming into play. These include location and context, the physical and social space within which the interview takes place, power relations at the social and individual levels and a wide range of characteristics, predispositions, understandings and emotions of interviewer and interviewee – a complex social relationship with a long and evolving history (Crow and Pope 2008). The qualitative interviewer seeks to make the research process as transparent as possible, being both rigorous and systematic in this regard, and most importantly practises reflexivity in taking into account the potential and actual effects of all of the other factors that are involved (Bourdieu et al. 1999: 607, 608). This in fact is the major challenge for the individual qualitative researcher. A further criticism rooted in the paradigm wars of the 1980s suggests that qualitative interviewing is subjective, which is an irrelevant concern when subjectivity is often the focus and the vehicle for research using qualitative interviewing.

Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner (2008) elaborate this latter point, and provide a fascinating history of feminist critiques of the qualitative interview, which includes critiques of claims for *feminist* interviews, and related to various feminist stances through time. The chapter demonstrates how the interview as undertaken by feminists has changed and adapted in response to some of the criticisms outlined here and to changing theoretical concerns and developments, highlighting the major contributions of feminist research to this process of development and change more generally.

Threats and challenges to qualitative interviewing can include methodological challenges. James Scheurich (1995, 1997), for example, offers a methodological challenge from a postmodern perspective, some elements

of which have been superseded by their adaptation and incorporation into the development and evolution of qualitative interviewing suggested in these pages, and outlined in Doucet and Mauthner (2008) in the context of feminist research and theory. Two important related points made by Scheurich refer to language: first that language itself has inherent instability, with contested meanings, ambiguity and open-endedness, and is subject to endless reinterpretation so that second, what a question or answer means to the interviewer can easily mean something different to the interviewee. These points about language are used in a strong criticism of coding, thematic analysis and systemization of the data, which in his view leads to misrepresentation of the interview and interviewee in favour of the researcher's perspective derived from their (modernist) research training. But devastating as this critique seems to be, it does not mean abandoning interviews for Scheurich; rather he calls for a postmodern approach that re-vision the interview with these criticisms in mind, using reflexivity (researcher and researched), noting social positionality and recognizing the inherent indeterminacy as potential, offering 'new imaginaries of interviewing' (1997: 74–75).

Graham Crow (2012) outlines five further methodological challenges for social science research and so qualitative interviewing that can lead us into the next section, where we consider the future for qualitative interviewing. Crow first highlights the challenge of keeping up with and exploiting technological change, aspects of which were considered briefly in Chapter 4 (see too Hooley et al. 2012). The second challenge is enhancing research capacity in an integrated way, which refers to the way that mixed methods, methodological pluralism and collaboration in interdisciplinary teams are essential for moving such integration forward. The third refers to research ethics, which is a major ongoing issue, particularly important currently in relation to qualitative longitudinal and online methods; the fourth considers the democratization of social research, that is, expanding collaboration more widely to include participants who might be inclined to ask 'What's in it for us?' and feel over-researched (Clark 2008), as well as wider collaborations with partners beyond the academic field, including research centres and commercial organizations. Amid all this change and challenge Crow suggests a fifth challenge: that we need to keep a sense of purpose and of history, and not rush headlong into innovatory methods of research before assuring ourselves that it will result in answers for new research questions that are arising, and generate better quality data and

analyses than our old methods. Reservations about the rush to innovation include questions about what innovation is and whether the rush is being fuelled by publishers and social media and by funders' requirements for social research to demonstrate impact, all influencing researchers to feel that they should be using new and exciting methods (Bengry-Howell et al. 2011).

One very general methodological challenge to social research was put forward by sociologists Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007). They suggested that the in-depth interview and the other basic method of sociological research, the survey, which had provided innovative and robust service in giving access to the 'social' for much of the twentieth century, are increasingly dated research methods that are unlikely to serve sociology well in the future. They point to the challenge to social researchers' expertise posed 'by the proliferation of 'social' transactional data which are now routinely collected, processed and analysed by a wide variety of private and public institutions' (885). In Savage and Burrows' responses to criticisms of that argument, they repeat and elaborate their message about 'knowing capitalism' by outlining some of its activities:

Welcome to the world of 'knowing capitalism' (Thrift 2005): a world inundated with complex processes of social and cultural digitisation; a world in which commercial forces predominate; and a world in which we, as sociologists, are losing whatever jurisdiction we once had over the study of the 'social' as the generation, mobilization and analysis of social data become ubiquitous. (Savage and Burrows 2009: 763)

Their intention was not to generate despair but to urge sociologists and other social scientists to recognize the gravity of the challenge, to engage with and contribute to political debates over method and data and to get our hands dirty, to apply social theory to these steadily accumulating data acquired through surveillance and monitoring in pursuit of sociological knowledge, a position with which many contributors to the ensuing debate concurred (McKie and Ryan 2012; Murthy 2008; Webber 2009).

Future

An optimistic take on the future for qualitative interviewing picks up on elements in the 'strengths' and 'challenges' outlined here. Qualitative

research is vibrant, alive and in demand in the interview and observation society (Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Gobo 2011; Mason 2002). It has survived massive cuts in public expenditure in the United Kingdom where research budgets have been reduced, or have disappeared entirely, without itself being disproportionately affected. This effect might have been expected if the normative quantitative paradigm had reasserted its power over the policy and public imaginary. Qualitative interviewing and research has a strong presence in research programmes, is seen as important in its own right, and is a key component of mixed method and evaluation studies. A stronger role is envisaged in the context of the current UK government localism agenda, where the emphasis is placed on communities generating resources and providing services (O'Connor 2011).

But all of this is not a cause for complacency, there have been dramatic changes in communication technology and qualitative interviewing must adapt if it is to survive. This does not mean pitting old methods against new, but it calls for constant renewal and making sure that we have the right tools for the job while also recognizing and supporting an enduring role for classic approaches, as argued by Crow quoted earlier in this chapter. A further issue in the rush to innovation is the claim by researchers that the method they use is democratic and new, when it in fact has a long history. One or two examples appear in Chapter 4, and a further example is the use of peer researchers, where an academic conducts research with people who live within, and are members of, a community. These peer/community researchers use their contacts and detailed knowledge of the community to help gather and understand information from and about their peers for the purposes of the research (see Chapter 2). But as one of us along with a colleague has pointed out (Edwards and Alexander 2011), working with peer and community researchers and regarding this as an alternative and empowering research paradigm is not new at all. It can be traced back to the influential thinker and town planner Patrick Geddes at the beginning of the twentieth century. His ideas for engaging local people in studying their own communities and the creation and ownership of data vested in local people inspired the community self-survey movement in the United Kingdom and United States during the interwar years (Bulmer 1984). The method also has potential for use in the changing research context of the future; we could think of the study of online communities in this respect.

There is a clear need to keep up with and exploit technological change which is currently being realized in a flourishing environment of innovation with a growing field of online research, including interviews, ethnography, focus groups and online analysis and reporting (Seale et al. 2010). Dhiraj Murthy (2008) builds on pioneering work in digital ethnography to critically examine the possibilities and problems of four technologies – online questionnaires, digital video (not new but being used in new ways, e.g. Senft 2008), social networking sites and blogs and their impacts on the research relationship. He concludes his analysis by arguing that new media and digital forms of ‘old media’ are additional, valuable methods in the social researcher’s toolkit for qualitative interviewing.

Much of the debate about the perils and possibilities of the internet and the information revolution for social researchers centre around the future obsolescence of current offline methodological approaches such as the face-to-face qualitative interview (Savage and Burrows 2007, 2009), and the need to be aware of, familiar with and ready to exploit the possibilities that the internet offers in terms of potential for research and methodological development (Robinson and Schulz 2009).

Conclusion

Throughout this book we have provided information, suggestions and advice about qualitative interviews. Our basic approach can be summarized in a few points.

- The philosophical approach of a piece of research underpins understandings and leads to choices about:
  - what interviews are and how they can be used,
  - how the person being interviewed is positioned,
  - the types of interview to use,
  - the tools to use in the interview,
  - how many people to interview.
- Attention must be paid to the social context of the interview and concomitant:
  - meanings and social and power relations intersecting in socio-spatial and time/place dimensions of interviews,
  - power and emotional dynamics that shape interviews.

In the final chapter we hope to have brought encouragement to the aspiring qualitative interviewer that the method still has considerable mileage and much to offer social research, but that we must, as in our interviews, be flexible and responsive in order to meet the increasing challenges that confront us in the changing social and research environment.