THE GOOD RESEARCH GUIDE
for small-scale social research projects

Martyn Denscombe

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Celtic Court
22 Ballmoor
Buckingham
MK18 1XW

email: enquiries@openup.co.uk
world wide web: http://www.openup.co.uk

and
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Checklist for the production of a questionnaire

When producing a questionnaire for research you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:

1. Has the questionnaire been *piloted*? ☐
2. Is the *layout* clear? ☐
3. Has the questionnaire got a suitable *cover page*? ☐
4. Is there an explanation of the *purpose* of the questionnaire? ☐
5. Is there a *return address* on the questionnaire? ☐
6. Have *thanks* been expressed to the respondents? ☐
7. Are there assurances about *confidentiality* of information or anonymity? ☐
8. Have *serial numbers* been given to the questionnaires? ☐
9. Are the *pages numbered*? ☐
10. Are the *coding boxes* neatly placed in an answer column? ☐
11. Are there clear and explicit *instructions* on how the questions are to be completed? ☐
12. Have the questions been *checked* to avoid any duplication? ☐
13. Are the questions *clear* and unambiguous? ☐
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INTERVIEWS

Interviews are an attractive proposition for the project researcher. At first glance, they do not involve much technical paraphernalia in order to collect the information – perhaps a notepad and a portable tape-recorder – and the basic technique draws on a skill that researchers already have – the ability to conduct a conversation. No complex equipment and no need to spend time learning new skills: this is a particularly enticing recipe.

The reality, though, is not quite so simple. Although there are a lot of superficial similarities between a conversation and an interview, interviews are actually something more than just a conversation. Interviews involve a set of assumptions and understandings about the situation which are not normally associated with a casual conversation (Denscombe 1983; Silverman 1985). When someone agrees to take part in a research interview:

- *There is consent to take part.* From the researcher's point of view this is particularly important in relation to research ethics. An agreement to be interviewed generally means that there is *informed consent*. The interview is not done by secret recording of discussions or the use of casual conversations as research data. It is openly a meeting intended to produce material that will be used for research purposes – and the interviewee understands this and agrees to it.
- *The interviewee's words can be treated as 'on the record' and 'for the record'.* In the research interview there is a general understanding (a) that the words can be used by the researcher at some later date and (b) that the talk can be taken as a genuine reflection of the person's thoughts, rather than being a joke or a 'wind up'. It is, of course, possible for the interviewee to stipulate that his or her words are *not* to be attributed to him or her, or *not* to be made publicly available. The point is, though, that unless the interviewee specifies to the contrary, the interview talk is 'on record' and 'for the record'. It is to be taken seriously.

- *The agenda for the discussion is set by the researcher.* There is a tacit agreement built into the notion of being interviewed that the proceedings and the agenda for the discussion will be controlled by the researcher. The degree of control exercised by the researcher will vary according to the style of interviewing, and there are occasions when interviewees might try to take control of proceedings, but there is none the less some implied agreement at the outset of the research interview that the researcher is given the right to control the proceedings and the direction of the discussion.

These assumptions do not apply during the course of a normal conversation. The research interview does not happen by chance; it is arranged. The discussion is not arbitrary or at the whim of one of the parties; it is dedicated to investigating a given topic. The flow of the discussion is rarely free form; it is normally monitored and follows an agenda set by the researcher.

Caution

The superficial similarity between an interview and a conversation can generate an illusion of simplicity. We all have conversations and it is likely that most of us do not have too much difficulty with them. So an interview should be fairly straightforward. As long as we know to whom we are going to talk and what we want to ask, the rest should be plain sailing. Here lies the problem. The researcher can be lulled into a sense of false security. The superficial similarity can encourage a relaxed attitude to the planning, preparation and conduct of the method that would be unlikely were it to involve questionnaires or experiments. In reality, interviewing is no easy option. It is fraught with hidden dangers and can fail miserably unless there is good planning, proper preparation and a sensitivity to the complex nature of interaction during the interview itself.

1 When is it appropriate to use interviews for research?

Whether it is large-scale research or small-scale research, the nature of the data collection depends on the amount of resources available. There are inevitably restrictions on the time and the money that can be used and, for the researcher, this means that choices need to be made – often difficult choices – about how to make the best use of the resources. In practice, the crucial choice as far as whether or not to use interviews is concerned is between, on the one hand, gathering more superficial information from a large number of people and, on the other hand, collecting more detailed information from a smaller number of people. The use of interviews normally means that the researcher has reached the decision that, for the purposes of the particular project in mind, the research would be better served by getting material which provides more of an in-depth insight into the topic, drawing on information provided by fewer informants.

To reach this decision, the social researcher needs to consider the following two questions and be persuaded that, overall, interviews are a reasonable option to pursue in terms of the desirability of the particular type of data they produce.

- Does the research really require the kind of *detailed information* that interviews supply?
- Is it reasonable to rely on information gathered from a small number of informants?

The researcher ought to be able to justify the decision to go for depth rather than breadth in the material as being best suited to the specific needs to the project. Such a justification is likely to incorporate reference to:

- *Data based on emotions, experiences and feelings.* If the researcher wishes to investigate emotions, experiences and feelings rather than more straightforward factual matters, then he or she may be justified in preferring interviews to the use of questionnaires. The nature of emotions, experiences and feelings is such that they need to be explored rather than simply reported in a word or two.
- *Data based on sensitive issues.* When the research covers issues that might be considered sensitive or rather personal, there is a case to be made for using interviews. Such things call for careful handling and perhaps some coaxing in order to get the informant to be open and honest. Any justification along these lines, however, will also need to recognize the problems that might arise from 'the interviewer effect' (see below) and argue that, on balance, the face-to-face approach will produce better data.
- *Data based on privileged information.* Here, the justification for interviews is based on the value of contact with key players in the field who can give privileged information. The depth of information provided by interviews can produce best 'value for money' if the informants are willing and able to give information that others could not – when what they offer is an insight they have as people in a special position 'to know'.

The decision to use interviews also needs to take account of their feasibility. Before embarking on a programme of interviews the researcher needs to feel assured about the following two questions.

- *Is it possible to gain direct access to the prospective interviewees?* There is obviously no point in pursuing the idea of conducting interviews unless there are good grounds for believing that the necessary people can be accessed, and that some agreement can be obtained from all the parties involved in the research.
- *Are the interviews viable in terms of the costs in time and travel involved?* With limited resources, the researcher needs to ensure that the people are not distributed too widely across a large geographical area and that conducting the interviews will not incur prohibitive costs.

2 What kinds of data are collected by interviews?

Interview data can be used in a variety of ways and for a variety of specialist purposes, depending on the background of the researcher and the context in which the interview occurs. For project researchers, by far the most common use will be as *a source of information*. Interviews can be a very effective method used in this way. For this purpose, the contents of the interview are more or less taken at face value for what they have to tell the researcher about the particular topic being discussed. Although the interviewer will want to cross-check for accuracy, the data themselves consist of the information conveyed in the informant's words.

As *an information-gathering tool*, the interview lends itself to being used alongside other methods as a way of supplementing their data – adding detail and depth. It is, indeed, frequently used by way of:

- *Preparation for a questionnaire*. To fine-tune the questions and concepts that will appear in a widely circulated questionnaire, researchers can use interviews to supply the detail and depth needed to ensure that the questionnaire asks valid questions.
- *Follow-up to a questionnaire*. Where the questionnaire might have thrown up some interesting lines of enquiry, researchers can use interviews to pursue these in greater detail and depth. The interview data complement the questionnaire data.
- *Triangulation with other methods*. Rather than interviews being regarded as competing with other methods, they can be combined in order to corroborate facts using a different approach.

3 Types of research interview

Structured interviews

Structured interviews involve tight control over the format of the questions and answers. In essence, the structured interview is like a questionnaire which is administered face to face with a respondent. The researcher has a predetermined list of questions, to which the respondent is invited to offer limited-option responses. The tight control over the wording of the questions, the order in which the questions occur and the range of answers that are on offer have the advantage of 'standardization'. Each respondent is faced with identical questions. And the range of pre-coded answers on offer to respondents ensures that data analysis is relatively easy. The structured interview, in this respect, lends itself to the collection of quantitative data.

Structured interviews are often associated with social surveys where researchers are trying to collect large volumes of data from a wide range of respondents. Here, we are witnessing the replacement of interviewers armed

with clipboards and paper questionnaires with interviewers using laptop computers to input information direct into a suitable software program. Such *computer-assisted personal interviewing* (CAPI) has the advantage of using software with built-in checks to eliminate errors in the collection of data, and it allows quick analysis of the data. However, its relatively large initial costs, caused by the purchase of the laptop computers, the development of suitable software and the training involved, means that CAPI is better suited to large-budget, large-number surveys than to small-scale research.

Link up with **Questionnaires, p. 87**

Whether using a laptop computer, telephone or printed schedule of questions, the structured interview, in spirit, bears more resemblance to questionnaire methods than to the other types of interviews. For this reason, *this chapter focuses on semi-structured and unstructured interviews rather than structured questionnaires*.

Semi-structured interviews

With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer still has a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered. However, with the semi-structured interview the interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher. The answers are open-ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews go further in the extent to which emphasis is placed on the interviewee's thoughts. The researcher's role is to be as unintrusive as possible – to start the ball rolling by introducing a theme or topic and then letting the interviewee develop his or her ideas and pursue his or her train of thought.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are really on a continuum and, in practice, it is likely that any interview will slide back and forth along the scale. What they have in common, and what separates them from structured interviews, is their willingness to allow interviewees to use their own words and develop their own thoughts. Allowing interviewees to 'speak their minds' is a better way of discovering things about complex issues and, generally, semi-structured and unstructured interviews have as their aim 'discovery' rather then 'checking'. They lend themselves to in-depth investigations, particularly those which explore personal accounts of experiences and feelings.

What distinguishes structured from semi-structured and unstructured interviews is the degree of control exercised by the researcher over the nature of the responses and the length of the answers allowed by the respondent.

One-to-one interviews

The most common form of semi-structured or unstructured interview is the one-to-one variety, which involves a meeting between one researcher and one informant. One reason for its popularity is that it is relatively easy to arrange. Only two people's diaries need to coincide. Another advantage is that the opinions and views expressed throughout the interview stem from one source: the interviewee. This makes it fairly straightforward for the researcher to locate specific ideas with specific people. A third advantage is that the one-to-one interview is relatively easy to control. The researcher only has one person's ideas to grasp and interrogate, and one person to guide through the interview agenda.

Group interviews

Sometimes research can involve the use of more than one informant. The numbers involved in such group interviewing, normally about four to six people, really reflect the practical matter of how difficult it is to get people together to discuss matters on one occasion, and how many voices can contribute to the discussion during any one interview. But the crucial thing to bear in mind here is that a group interview is not an opportunity for the researcher to pose questions to a sequence of individuals, taking turns around a table. The term 'group' is crucial here, because it tells us that those present during the interview will interact with one another and that the discussion will operate at the level of the group. As Lewis notes:

> Group interviews have several advantages over individual interviews. In particular, they help to reveal consensus views, may generate richer responses by allowing participants to challenge one another's views, may be used to verify research ideas of data gained through other methods and may enhance the reliability of . . . responses.
>
> (Lewis 1992: 413)

Weighed against this, of course, group interviews hold the prospect of drowning out certain views, especially those of 'quieter' people. Certain members of the group might dominate the talk, while others might struggle to get themselves heard. There is a gender issue here: it is men who tend to hog the centre stage in group discussions, it is women whose opinions might tend to get passed over in terms of data from such interviews.

Another potential disadvantage of group interviews is that the opinions that are expressed are ones that are perceived to be 'acceptable' within the group. Where group members regard their opinions as contrary to prevailing opinion within the group, they might be inclined to keep quiet, or moderate their views somewhat. The privacy of the one-to-one interview does not pose this difficulty.

Focus groups

Focus groups have become an extremely popular form of interview technique. Their extensive use in the worlds of market research and advertising has spread to social research more generally in recent years. Focus groups consist of a small group of people, usually between six and nine in number, who are brought together by a trained 'moderator' (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic. The three distinctive and vital points about focus groups are that:

- the sessions usually revolve around a prompt, a trigger, some stimulus introduced by the moderator in order to 'focus' the discussion;
- there is less emphasis on the need for the moderator to adopt a neutral role in the proceedings than is normally the case with other interview techniques;
- they place particular value on the interaction within the group as a means for eliciting information, rather than just collecting each individual's point of view – there is a special value placed on the collective view, rather than the aggregate view.

Focus groups are generally regarded as a useful way of exploring attitudes on non-sensitive, non-controversial topics. They can excite contributions from interviewees who might otherwise be reluctant to contribute and, through their relatively informal interchanges, focus groups can lead to insights that might not otherwise have come to light through the one-to-one conventional interview. Weighed against this, it is difficult to record the discussion that takes place, as speakers interrupt one another and talk simultaneously. It should be recognized that, as with all group interviews, there is the possibility that people will be reluctant to disclose thoughts on sensitive, personal, political or emotional matters in the company of others, or that extrovert characters can dominate the proceedings and bully more timid members of the focus group into expressing opinions they would not admit to in private. Of course, the moderator ought to manage the event to avoid this happening, but this calls for experience on the part of the moderator and a judicious selection of people to participate in the focus group.

4 The interviewer effect

Personal identity

Research on interviewing has demonstrated fairly conclusively that people respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions.

In particular, the *sex*, the *age* and the *ethnic origins* of the interviewer have a bearing on the amount of information people are willing to divulge and their honesty about what they reveal. The data, in other words, are affected by the personal identity of the researcher.

The impact of the researcher's personal identity, of course, will depend on who is being interviewed. It is not, strictly speaking, the identity in its own right that affects the data, but what the researcher's identity means as far as the person being interviewed is concerned. *Interviewees, and interviewers come to that, have their own preferences and prejudices, and these are likely to have some impact on the chances of developing rapport and trust during an interview.*

The effect of the researcher's identity, of course, will also depend on the nature of the topic being discussed. On sensitive issues or on matters regarded as rather personal, the interviewer's identity assumes particular importance. If the research is dealing with religious beliefs, with earnings, with sexual relationships, with personal health or any of a host of similar issues, the sex, age and ethnicity of the interviewer in relation to the sex, age and ethnicity of the interviewee is very likely to influence the nature of the data that emerges – their fullness and their honesty. On some questions people can be embarrassed. They can feel awkward or defensive. Whenever this is the case, there is the possibility that interviewees might supply answers which they feel fit in with what the researcher expects from them – fulfilling the perceived expectations of the researcher. Or the answers might tend to be tailored to match what the interviewee suspects is the researcher's point of view, keeping the researcher happy. Either way, the quality of the data suffers.

From the perspective of the small-scale project researcher, there is a limit to

Questions a researcher should consider

- Is there likely to be an *age gap* between myself and the interviewee(s) and, if so, how will this affect the interview?
- In the light of the topic I propose to research, will interviewing someone of the *opposite sex or a different ethnic origin* have an impact on his or her willingness to respond?
- What are the *social status, educational qualifications and professional expertise* of the people I propose to interview, and how do these compare with my own? Is this likely to affect the interviewer–interviewee relationship in a positive or negative manner?

what can be done about this. There are limits to the extent that researchers can disguise their 'self' during interviews. We bring to interviews certain personal attributes which are 'givens' and which cannot be altered on whim to suit the needs of the research interview. *Our sex, our age, our ethnic origin, our accent, even our occupational status, all are aspects of our 'self' which, for practical purposes, cannot be changed.* We can make efforts to be polite and punctual, receptive and neutral, in order to encourage the right climate for an interviewee to feel comfortable and provide honest answers. What we cannot do is change these personal attributes.

Self-presentation

Conventional advice to researchers has been geared to minimizing the impact of researchers on the outcome of the research by having them adopt a passive and neutral stance. The idea is that the researcher:

- presents himself or herself in a light which is designed not to antagonize or upset the interviewee (conventional clothes, courtesy etc.);
- remains neutral and non-committal on the statements made during the interview by the interviewee.

Passivity and neutrality are the order of the day. The researcher's 'self', adopting this approach, is kept firmly hidden beneath a cloak of cordiality and receptiveness to the words of the interviewee. To a certain degree, this is sound advice. The researcher, after all, is there to listen and learn, not to preach. The point is to get the interviewee to open up, not to provoke hostility or put the interviewee on the defensive.

Questions a researcher should consider

- How should I adjust my appearance so that I best fit in with those being interviewed?
- How can I avoid being dragged into agreeing with views I find distasteful without antagonizing the interviewee or engaging in a debate?

Personal involvement

One line of reasoning argues that a cold and calculating style of interviewing reinforces a gulf between the researcher and the informant, and does little to help or empower the informant. Now, if the aims of the research are specifically to help or empower the people being researched, rather than dispassionately learn from them, then the approach of the interviewer will need to alter accordingly (Oakley 1981). Under these circumstances, the researcher will be

Questions a researcher should consider

- Do I wish to adopt a style of interviewing which empowers or helps the people I hope to interview?
- Will those who read the research recognize and appreciate my involvement with the interviewees as a reasoned departure from the convention, rather than treat it as plain bad practice?

inclined to show emotion, to respond with feeling and to engage in a true dialogue with the interviewee. The researcher will become fully involved as a person with feelings, with experiences and with knowledge which can be shared with the interviewee. A word of warning, though. This style of interviewing remains 'unconventional', and the researcher needs to be confident and committed to make it work. The researcher also needs to feel sure that his or her audience understand and share the underlying logic of the approach rather than expecting the researcher to adopt the cool and dispassionate stance.

5 Planning and preparation for interviews

The topics for discussion

With the use of unstructured interviews, it might be argued that the researcher should not have preconceived ideas about the crucial issues and direction the interview should take. In practice, however, it is not very often that researchers operate at the extreme end of the continuum with unstructured interviews. In the vast majority of cases, researchers approach an interview with some agenda and with some game-plan in mind. In such cases it would be tempting fate to proceed to a research interview without having devoted considerable time to thinking through the key points that warrant attention. This does not necessarily mean that the researcher needs to have a rigid framework of questions and issues in mind – though this will be the case when using structured interviews. It does mean that there is likely to be more benefit from the interview if he or she is well informed about the topic and has done the necessary homework on the issues that are likely to arise during the interview.

Choice of informants

In principle, there is nothing to stop researchers from selecting informants on the basis of random sampling. In practice, though, this is unlikely to happen. Interviews are generally conducted with lower numbers than would be the case with questionnaire surveys, and this means that the selection of people to interview is more likely to be based on non-probability sampling. People

tend to be chosen deliberately because they have some special contribution to make, because they have some unique insight or because of the position they hold. It is worth emphasizing, though, that there is no hard and fast rule on this. It depends on whether the overall aim of the research is to produce results which are generalizable (in which case the emphasis will be on choosing a representative sample of people to interview) or the aim is to delve in depth into a particular situation with a view to exploring the specifics (in which case the emphasis will be on choosing key players in the field).

In the case of group interviews, researchers can decide to select interviewees in order to get a cross-section of opinion within the group, or, perhaps, to ensure that group members hold opposing views on the topic for discussion.

Authorization

In many, if not most, research situations it will be necessary to get approval from relevant 'authorities'. This will be necessary in any instance of research where the people selected to participate in the interviews are either:

- working within an organization where they are *accountable to others* higher up the chain of command;
- or potentially vulnerable, and therefore *protected by responsible others* – the young, the infirm and some other groups are under the protection of others whose permission must be sought (e.g. school children).

Organizations or authorities that grant permission will wish to be persuaded that it is *bona fide* research, and they will also be influenced by the personal/research credentials of the researcher. Letters of contact, therefore, should spell out the range of factors which will *persuade the organization or authority that the researcher is both (a) trustworthy and (b) capable.* Research which can call on suitable referees or which will be conducted under the auspices of a suitable organization (e.g. a university) is at an advantage for these.

To emphasize what ought to be obvious, such authorization to conduct the interviews must be gained *before* the interviews take place.

Arranging the venue

Securing an agreement to be interviewed is often easier if the prospective interviewee is *contacted in advance*. This also allows both parties to arrange a mutually convenient time for the interview. At this point, of course, the researcher will probably be asked how long the interview will take, and should therefore be in a position to respond. It is most unlikely that busy people will feel comfortable with a suggestion that the interview will 'take as long as it takes'. The researcher needs to make a bid for an *agreed length of time* whether it be 15 minutes, half an hour, 45 minutes or an hour.

Where the interview is to take place in the field, the researcher loses much control over the arrangement. This means there is an added danger that things can go wrong. Through whatever means, though, the researcher needs to try to get a *location for the interview* in which they will not be disturbed, which offers privacy, which has fairly good acoustics and which is reasonably quiet. This can prove to be a pretty tall order in places like busy organizations, schools, hospitals and so on. But at least the desirability of such a venue should be conveyed to the person arranging the interview room.

Within the interview room, it is important to be able to set up the *seating arrangements* in a way that allows comfortable interaction between the researcher and the interviewee(s). In a one-to-one interview the researcher should try to arrange seating so that the two parties are at a 90 degree angle to each other. This allows for eye contact without the confrontational feeling arising from sitting directly opposite the other person. With group interviews, it is important to arrange the seating to allow contact between all parties without putting the researcher in a focal position and without hiding individuals at the back of the group or outside the group.

6 Recording the interview

The researcher wishing to capture the discussion that happened during the interview can rely on memory. However, the human memory is rather unreliable as a research instrument. It is prone to partial recall, bias and error, as any psychologist will testify. Interviewers, instead, can call on other more permanent records of what was said.

Field notes

Under certain circumstances researchers will need to rely on field notes written soon after the interview or actually during the interview. Sometimes interviewees will decline to be tape-recorded. This means that what was actually said will always remain a matter of recollection and interpretation. There will never be an objective record of the discussion. This suits the needs of certain interviewees, particularly where the discussion touches on sensitive issues, commercially, politically or even personally. Notes taken during the interview, however, offer a compromise in such situations. The interviewer is left with some permanent record of his or her interpretation of what was said, and can refer back to this at various later stages to refresh the memory. The notes also

Field notes
These can be made during the interview itself or, if the situation demands, immediately afterwards.

Checklist: preparation for interviews

When preparing to conduct interviews you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:

1. Is the interview method appropriate in terms of:
   - the *topic* of the research? ☐
   - the need for detailed information? ☐
   - access to informants? ☐
   - necessary time and funding for the interviews? ☐
2. Do I have a clear vision of the *issues to be discussed* during the interview? ☐
3. Can the interviews be *scheduled in good time* to allow for the subsequent transcription and analysis of the data? ☐
4. Am I confident that 'self' and *personal identity* (age, sex etc.) will not prove a major obstacle to getting informants to respond openly and honestly during interviews? ☐
5. Have I obtained *authorization* from the appropriate authorities to conduct the interviews? ☐
6. Am I clear about what criterion has been used for *the selection of informants* (random selection, key informants)? ☐
7. Has a suitable *time and place for the interview* been arranged (privacy, acoustics etc.)? ☐
8. Is there a definite *time limit* for the interviews and are all parties to the interview aware of this limit? ☐
9. Has consideration been given to the most suitable mode of *self-presentation* (style of clothes, degree of formality etc.)? ☐

act as some form of permanent record. However, from the interviewee's point of view, it is always possible to deny that certain things were said and to argue that the researcher might have 'misinterpreted' a point should the interviewee wish to dissociate himself or herself from the point as some later date. A crucial advantage of taking field notes at an interview, however, is that they can fill in some of the relevant information that the audio tape-recording alone might miss. Field notes can cover information relating to the context of the location, the climate and atmosphere under which the interview was conducted, clues about the intent behind the statements and comments on aspects of non-verbal communication as they were deemed relevant to the interview.

Tape-recording

Audio tape-recording offers a permanent record and one that is complete in terms of the speech that occurs. It lends itself to being checked by other researchers. However, it captures only speech, and misses non-verbal communication and other contextual factors.

Audio tape-recording
This is the standard method of capturing interview data.

Video tape-recording requires more bulky equipment and tends to be more intrusive in terms of the interview setting. It captures many non-verbal as well as verbal communications, and offers the most complete record of events during the interview. As with audio recording, it provides a permanent record which can be checked by other researchers.

In practice, most research interviewers rely on *audio tape-recording backed up by written field notes*. While some researchers can muster the resources and the enthusiasm to make video recordings, their use still tends to be the exception rather than the rule. It is not the cost factor which explains this, because video cameras are not prohibitively expensive. Generally, it is the intrusiveness of video recording on the setting. Audio tape-recording can be disconcerting enough for informants, and the researcher needs to proceed with caution when broaching the issue of using the tape-recorder during the interview. At first people can feel rather threatened by it. Most people ease up after an initial period of hesitancy and, when used sensitively, the audio tape does not pose too much of a disturbance to most interview situations. It is worth stressing, though, that the disturbance will depend on each distinct situation and the researcher needs to make an assessment of its feasibility before embarking on its use. Video recording has all the more potential to disturb the setting – especially where the interviews take place 'in the field'.

Equipment

It is a cardinal sin to start an interview without having thoroughly checked out the equipment. This sounds obvious, but in the run-up to an interview it is all too easy to overlook such a basic chore. Remember, an interview is a one-off situation. If the equipment fails you can hardly expect the interviewee to run through the whole discussion again!

If the equipment fails, the interview fails.

Audio tape-recorders and video cameras need a dependable power source. In most cases of conducting interviews, particularly in the field, it is not possible to rely on a mains supply. Unless you can be positive that there is a suitable mains socket close by, it is best to plan on using batteries. The researcher should have a good supply of batteries and, most importantly, be sure that the batteries are fully charged for each new interview.

The equipment itself needs to be of a good enough quality to give the best possible reproduction of sound (and picture). Efforts to transcribe a tape will be confounded where the recording is faint, fuzzy and full of hisses.

Audio tapes should be chosen so that they do not come to the end of a side in the middle of an interview. It is disconcerting and disruptive for the researcher to stop the interview so that he or she can change the tape. To do this also serves to remind the interviewee about the presence of the tape-recorder just at a stage when he or she might be relaxing and opening up. The advice here is to use tapes that are long enough *on each side* to cope with the planned duration of the interview. Dictaphone (miniature) tapes can pose a problem here. There is a case to be made for using equipment which uses the larger standard audio tapes that cover 45 minutes a side (i.e. 90-minute tapes).

Hard and fast advice on tapes and equipment is difficult to give, because technological advances can make such advice quickly out of date. What can be said at a general level is that the researcher should:

- use equipment which is good enough to supply adequate sound (and visual) reproduction;
- be certain that their equipment is functioning well before the interview;
- have a reliable power source plus back-up in case of emergency;
- choose tapes which are long enough on each side to cover the planned duration of the interview without the need to 'reload' the recorder.

The process of recording

At one level, the audio tape-recorder and the video camera are reliable research instruments. They capture the proceedings on a permanent record, and they provide an objective record of the proceedings in the sense that, in themselves, they have no values and no vested interest in the outcome of the interview. *These research instruments do not interpret the events, they simply store them.*

However, it would be naive to assume that they therefore have no impact on the nature of what emerges as the 'interview data'. They *do* have an impact, in two ways. First, they are selective in terms of what they capture. Audio tapes only capture the verbal utterances and necessarily miss any non-verbal communication and visual signals which occur during the interview. That is why researchers are encouraged to make field notes to fill in the missing bits as far as possible. Video-recording manages to capture more of the totality of the interview. Yet, even here, the camera cannot capture all the action. The position of the camera, its breadth of focus etc. will still impose limitations on how far this method can store a complete record of events.

Second, the very presence of the recording equipment can have an impact on the interview situation. Informants will vary in the extent to which they are affected by the tape-recorder or camera. Some will be shy and nervous, others less so. It is generally the case that people become less conscious of the recording equipment the longer the interview lasts. None the less, *the process of recording has a bearing on the freedom with which people speak, and the visual appearance of the equipment serves to remind informants of the fact that they are being recorded.*

7 Interview skills

The good interviewer needs to be attentive. This may sound obvious, but it is all too easy to lose the thread of the discussion because the researcher needs to be monitoring a few other things while listening closely to what the informant has to say: writing the field notes, looking for relevant non-verbal communication, checking that the tape-recorder is working.

The good interviewer is sensitive to the feelings of the informant. This is not just a matter of social courtesy, though that is certainly a worthy aspect of it. It is also a skill which is necessary for getting the best out of an interview. Where the interviewer is able to empathize with the informant and to gauge the feelings of the informant, he or she will be in a better position to coax out the most relevant information.

The good interviewer is able to tolerate silences during the talk, and knows when to shut up and say nothing. Anxiety is the main danger. Fearing that the interview might be on the verge of breaking down, the researcher can feel the need to say something quickly to kick-start the discussion. Worrying about cramming in every possible gem of wisdom in the allotted time, the interviewer can be inclined to rush the informant on quickly to the next point. But, most of all, feeling uncomfortable when the conversation lapses into silence, the interviewer can be all too quick to say something when a more experienced interviewer would know that the silence can be used as a wonderful resource during interviews (see below).

The good interviewer is adept at using prompts. Although silences can be productive, the interviewer needs to exercise judgement on this. There are times

during an interview when the researcher may feel that it is necessary to spur the informant to speak. Listed below are some examples of how this can be done. What the examples share is a degree of subtlety. It is not normally acceptable for research interviewers to *demand* that the informant answers the questions. Research interviews are not police interviews. The idea is to nudge the informant gently into revealing their knowledge or thoughts on a specific point.

The good interviewer is adept at using probes. There are occasions during interview when the researcher might want to delve deeper into a topic rather than let the discussion flow on to the next point. An informant might make a point in passing which the researcher thinks should be explored in more detail. Some explanation might be called for, or some justification for a comment. Some apparent inconsistency in the informant's line of reasoning might be detected, an inconsistency which needs unravelling. Examples of how this can be done are listed below. Again, they attempt to be subtle and avoid an aggressive stance.

The good interviewer is adept at using checks. One of the major advantages of interviews is that they offer the researcher the opportunity to check that he or she has understood the informant correctly. As an ongoing part of the normal talk during interviews, the researcher can present a summary of what he or she thinks the informant has said, which the informant can then confirm as an accurate understanding, or can correct it if it is felt to be a misunderstanding of what has been said. Such checks can be used at strategic points during the interview as a way of concluding discussion on one aspect of the topic.

With group interviews, the good researcher manages to let everyone have a say. It is vital to avoid the situation where a dominant personality hogs the discussion and bullies others in the group to agree with his (less often her) opinion.

Tactics for interviews: prompts, probes and checks

Remain silent	(prompt)
Repeat the question	(prompt)
Repeat the last few words spoken by the informant	(prompt)
Offer some examples	(prompt)
Ask for an example	(probe)
Ask for clarification	(probe)
Ask for more details	(probe)
Summarize their thoughts ('So, if I understand you correctly . . . What this means, then, is that . . .')	(check)

The good interviewer is non-judgemental. As the researcher enters the interview situation he or she should, as far as is possible, suspend personal values and *adopt a non-judgemental stance* in relation to the topics covered during the interview. This means not only biting your lip on occasion, but also taking care not to reveal disgust, surprise or pleasure through facial gestures. The good researcher must also *respect the rights of the interviewee.* This means accepting if a person simply does not wish to tell you something and knowing when to back off if the discussion is beginning to cause the interviewee particular embarrassment or stress. This is a point of personal sensitivity and research ethics.

8 Conducting the interview

In the intensity of a research interview it is not easy to attend to all the points that should be remembered and, in any case, interviews are 'live' events which require the interviewer to adjust plans as things progress. Nevertheless, there are some pretty basic formalities which need to be observed. There are also a number of skills the researcher should exercise and, despite the fluid nature of interviews, it is worth spelling out a list of things that go towards a good interview.

Introduction and formalities

At the beginning there should be the opportunity to say 'Hello', to do some introductions, to talk about the aims of the research and to say something about the origins of the researcher's own interest in the topic. During the initial phase, there should also be confirmation that you have permission to tape-record the discussion and reassurances about the confidentiality of comments made during the interview. The aim is to set the tone for the rest of the interview – normally a relaxed atmosphere in which the interviewee feels free to open up on the topic under consideration. *Trust* and *rapport* are the keywords.

During the pre-interview phase, the interviewer should do two other things:

- prepare the recording equipment;
- as far as possible, arrange the seating positions to best advantage.

Starting the interview

The first question takes on a particular significance for the interview. It should offer the interviewee the chance to settle down and relax. For this reason it is normally good practice to *kick off with an 'easy' question:* something on which the interviewee might be expected to have well formulated views and something that is quite near the forefront of their mind. Two tactics might help here.

- Ask respondents, in a general way, about themselves and their role as it relates to the overall area of the interview. This allows the researcher to collect valuable *background information about informants* while, at the same time, letting informants start off by covering familiar territory.
- *Use some 'trigger' or 'stimulus' material*, so that the discussion can relate to something concrete, rather than launch straight into abstract ideas.

Monitoring progress

During the interview, the researcher should keep a discreet eye on the time. The good researcher needs to wind things up within the allotted time and will have covered most of the key issues during that time. While doing this, the good interviewer also needs to attend to the following things during the progress of the interview itself.

- *Identify the main points being stated by the interviewee* and the priorities as expressed by the interviewee. With group interviewers, what consensus is emerging about the key points?
- Look for the underlying logic of what is being said by the informant. *The interviewer needs to 'read between the lines'* to decipher the rationale lying beneath the surface of what is being said. The interviewer should ask 'What are they really telling me here?' and, perhaps more significantly, 'What are they *not* mentioning?'
- *Look for inconsistencies* in the position being outlined by the respondent. If such inconsistencies exist, this does not invalidate the position. Most people have inconsistencies in their opinions and feelings on many topics. However, such inconsistencies will be worth probing as the interview progresses to see what they reveal.
- Pick up clues about whether the informant's answers involve an element of *boasting* or are answers intended to *please the interviewer.*
- *Be constantly on the look out for the kind of answer which is a fob-off.*
- *Get a feel for the context* in which the discussion is taking place. The priorities expressed by the interviewee might reflect events immediately prior to the interview, or things about to happen in the near future. They might be 'issues of the moment', which would not assume such importance were the interview to be conducted a few weeks later. The researcher needs to be sensitive to this possibility and find out from the interviewee if there are events which are influencing priorities in this way.
- Keep a suitable level of eye contact throughout the interview and *make a note of non-verbal communication* which might help a later interpretation of the interview talk.

Finishing the interview

Interviews can come to an end because the interviewee has run out of things to say and the interviewer cannot goad any more information from the person. This is not a good state of affairs unless the interview has no outside time limit. It is better for the interview to come to a close in some orderly fashion guided by the interviewer. Having kept an eye on the time, and having ensured that most of the required areas for discussion have been covered, the interviewer should draw events to a close making sure that:

- the interviewee is invited to raise any points that they think still need to be covered and have not been covered so far;
- normal courtesies are extended to the interviewee for having given up the time to participate in the interview.

Notes on the interview

Researchers should make notes on an interview as a complement to a tape-recording. During the interview itself, if it is possible, the researcher should write down as field notes any impressions he or she might have about the situation. The ambience, significant bits of non-verbal communication, the things the tape-recorder cannot capture: these are the things that need to be noted by the researcher and kept alongside the tape when it comes to using that tape for analysis. As soon as possible after the interview, notes should be written up covering the physical context of the interview and any other impressions the researcher might have about the interview and the situation.

9 Transcribing the interview

Audio tapes

There might be a temptation to regard transcribing audio tapes as a straightforward process. In practice, researchers soon find that it is not. First of all, it is very time-consuming. For every hour of talk on a tape it will take several more to transcribe it. The actual time will depend on the clarity of the tape-recording itself, the availability of transcription equipment and the typing speed of the researcher. When you are planning interview research, it is important to bear this in mind. From the point of view of the project researcher, the process of *transcribing needs to be recognized as a substantial part of the method*

> Transcription of the tapes is generally far more time-consuming than the actual collection of the data.

Checklist for evaluating an interview

When evaluating an interview you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:

1. Were the necessary *formalities observed at the start* (introductions, confidentiality etc.)? ☐
2. Were the *rights of the informant* respected (consent, sensitivity)? ☐
3. Were *relevant details* about the informant collected? ☐
4. Did I exercise a suitable level of *control* over the progress of the interview (time, agenda)? ☐
5. Was a *non-judgemental stance* maintained towards the informant's answers? ☐
6. Was the discussion monitored appropriately in terms of:
   - informant's *key points*? ☐
   - reading between the lines? ☐
   - trying to identify any inconsistencies? ☐
   - being aware of the 'fob-off' answer? ☐
   - looking for boastful or exaggerated answers? ☐
   - looking for the answer simply aimed to please the interviewer? ☐
7. Were field notes taken about:
   - the impact of the *context*? ☐
   - relevant *non-verbal communication* (gestures etc.)? ☐
8. Were *prompts, probes and checks* used to good effect where appropriate? ☐
9. Were the appropriate *courtesies* given at the end (thanks, reassurances)? ☐

of interviewing and not to be treated as some trivial chore to be tagged on once the real business of interviewing has been completed.

The value of transcription

The process of transcription is certainly laborious. However, it is also a very valuable part of the research, because it brings the researcher 'close to the data'. The process brings the talk to life again, and is a real asset when it comes to using interviews for qualitative data. Added to this, the end-product of the process provides the researcher with a form of data that is far easier to analyse than an audio tape. It is easier to flick through pages of text to pick out the interesting sections than it is to move back and forth through a tape-recording. When the tape has been transcribed into a text file, there are a growing number of computer packages specifically designed to help the researcher to analyse the data.

Link up with **Computer-aided analysis of qualitative data, p. 218**

Annotations

When transcribing a tape, the researcher should put informal notes and comments alongside the interviewee's words. These annotations can be based on the memories that come flooding back during the process of transcribing. They should also draw on field notes taken during the interview or notes made soon afterwards about the interview. They should include observations about the ambience of the interview and things like gestures, outside interferences, uncomfortable silences or other feelings that give a richer meaning to the words that were spoken. These annotations should be placed in a special column on the page.

Line numbering and coding

Each line in the transcript is given a unique line number, so that parts of the data can be identified and located precisely and quickly. The researcher codes the material, and it is useful to leave a column on the sheet of paper to allow for this. There can be more than one code placed against a piece of speech if the words cover more than one area which the researcher has identified as 'of interest' and which has been allocated a unique code to represent an issue, a topic or a meaning.

Problems of transcription

The difficulty of transcribing a taped interview stems principally from three things.

Interview transcripts: an example

Line of the transcript		Code for the content	Notes
46	*Interviewer:* Do you feel under pressure to drink		
47	when you go out with your mates because they		
48	are drinking?		
49			*James looked*
50	*James:* Yeh, but it's not always . . . (*untranscribable*)		*annoyed as Elise*
51			*and Gordon*
52	*Elise:* . . . it's worse with the lads, I think, because...		*talked over him.*
53			
54	*Gordon:* . . . I was on holiday , and I don't like beer,		
55	and all my friends were drinking. I was drinking		
56	half a glass and I thought I can stick that out	08	
57	because I don't like it at all. I was drinking it and		
58	thinking this is horrible, just to look like one of		*Gordon says*
59	the crowd, because I felt a bit left out. My		*later that he*
60	brother came up to me in front of the crowd		*drinks beer*
61	and said 'Gordon you don't like lager!' So all my	15	*regularly now.*
62	friends found out, and they said 'Look, we		
63	understand if you don't like it' – and some of		
64	the people there were just like me, they didn't		
65	like it.		

Part of the transcript of a group interview conducted with 15–16-year-olds about peer pressure and alcohol consumption. The names have been changed.

Notice how, typical of a group interview, more than one person is trying to talk at once. Elise cuts across James, and then gets interrupted in turn by Gordon, who manages to hold the spotlight for a moment or two. When more than one person is talking at a time it makes transcription difficult, because it is hard to capture on tape what is being said. It tends to become something of a cacophony.

The recorded talk is not always easy to hear

Especially with group interviews, but also with one-to-one versions, there can be occasions when more than one person speaks at the same time, where outside noises interfere or where poor audio quality itself makes transcribing the words very difficult. There is a fine dividing line here between the need to ditch these parts of the interview records and disregard them as worthwhile data, and the need to exercise some reasonable interpretation about what was actually said.

Transcription is not a mechanical process of putting tape-recorded talk into written sentences. The talk needs to be 'tidied up' and edited a little to put it in a format on the written page that is understandable to the reader. Inevitably, it loses some authenticity through this process.

People do not always speak in nice finite sentences

Normally, the researcher needs to add punctuation and a sentence structure to the talk, so that a reader can understand the sequence of words. The talk, in a sense, needs to be reconstructed so that it makes sense in a written form. This process takes time – and it also means that the crude data get cleaned up a little by the researcher so that they can be intelligible to a readership who were not present at the time of the recording.

Intonation, emphasis and accents used in speech are hard to depict on a transcript

There are established conventions which allow these to be added to a written transcript, but the project researcher is unlikely to be able to devote the necessary time to learning these conventions. The result is that interview transcripts in small-scale research are generally based on the words and the words alone, with little attempt to show intonation, emphasis and accents. This consequence is that, in practice, the data are stripped of some of their meaning in transcription.

10 How do you know if the informant is telling the truth?

This is a crucial question facing the researcher who uses interview data. When the interview is concerned with gathering information of a factual nature, the researcher can make some checks to see if the information is broadly corroborated by other people and other sources. When the interview concerns matters such as the emotions, feelings and experiences of the interviewee, it is a lot more difficult to make such checks. Ultimately, there is no absolute way of verifying what someone tells you about their thoughts and feelings. Researchers are not 'mind readers'. But there are still some practical checks researchers can make to gauge the credibility of what they have been told. It should be stressed, though, that these are not watertight methods of detecting false statements given during interviews. They are practical ways of helping the researcher to avoid being a gullible dupe who accepts all that he or she is told at face value. They help the researcher to 'smell a rat'. By the same token, if the following checks are used, the researcher can have greater confidence in the interview data, knowing that some effort has been made to ensure the validity of the data.

Checking the transcript with the informant

Where possible, the researcher should go back to the interviewee with the transcript to check with that person that it is an accurate statement. Now, of course, checking for accuracy is not strictly what is going on here. Unless the interviewer also sends a copy of the tape, the interviewee has no way of knowing if what appears on the transcript is actually what was said. The point of the exercise is more to do with 'putting the record straight'. If the researcher is solely concerned with gathering facts from the interview, this is an opportunity to ensure that the facts are correct and that the interviewer has got the correct information. That is a nice safeguard. If, alternatively, the interview is concerned with a person's emotions, opinions and experiences, the exercise invites the interviewee to confirm that what was said at the time of the interview was what was really meant, and not said 'in the heat of the moment'. Either way, there is an initial check on the accuracy of the data.

Check the data with other sources

The researcher should make efforts to corroborate the interview data with other sources of information on the topic. *Triangulation* should be used. Documents and observations can provide some back-up for the content of the interview, or can cast some doubt on how seriously the interview data should be taken. Interview content can even be checked against other interviews to see if there is some level of consistency. The point is that interview data should not be taken at face value if it is at all possible to confirm or dispute the statements using alternative sources.

Link up with **Triangulation, p. 83**

Check the plausibility of the data

Some people are interviewed specifically because they are in a position to know about the things that interest the researcher. The 'key players' are picked out precisely because they are specialists, experts, highly experienced – and their testimony carries with it a high degree of credibility. This is not necessarily the case with those chosen for interview on some other grounds. When assessing the credibility of information contained in an interview, the researcher needs to gauge how far an informant might be expected to be in possession of the facts and to know about the topic being discussed. The researcher should ask if it is reasonable to suppose that such a person would be in a position to comment authoritatively on the topic – or is there a chance that they are talking about something of which they have little knowledge?

Look for themes in the transcript(s)

Where possible, avoid basing findings on one interview – look for themes emerging from a number of interviews. Where themes emerge across a number of interviews, the researcher does not have to rely on any one transcript as the sole source of what is 'real' or 'correct'. A recurrent theme in interviews indicates that the idea/issue is something which is shared among a wider group, and therefore the researcher can refer to it with rather more confidence than any idea/issue which stems from the words of one individual.

11 The analysis of interview data

After having transcribed the audio-recording and made some checks on the validity of the data, the researcher is faced with the task of analysing the material. This means deciding what meaning can be attributed to the words and what implications the words have in relation to the topic that is being investigated. If the researcher prefers to use a quantitative approach to the analysis of the transcript, he or she will use *content analysis*.

If, on the other hand, the researcher prefers to use a qualitative approach, he or she can use the procedures outlined in Chapter 11.

Link up with **Content analysis, p. 167**

When analysing the data, the researcher should be aware of the role of the 'self' in the interview process. The researcher inevitably uses some amount of judgement and interpretive skills throughout the whole process of interviewing: in the conduct of the interview itself, in the transformation of the discussion into transcript data and in the analysis of the data. This is why *it is good research practice to acknowledge the impact of the researcher's own identity and values in the analysis of interview data.*

12 The use of interview extracts in research reports

Extracts from transcripts can be used to good effect in social research. For one thing, they can be interesting in their own right, giving the reader a flavour of the data and letting the reader 'hear' *the points as stated by the informants.* For another, they can be used as a *piece of evidence* supporting the argument

that is being constructed in the report by the researcher. It is very unlikely, however, that an extract from an interview transcript can be presented as proof of a point. There are two reasons for this.

- *The significance of extracts from transcripts is always limited by the fact that they are, to some extent, presented out of context.* Extracts, as the very word itself suggests, are pieces of the data that are plucked from their context within the rest of the taped interview. This opens up the possibility that the quote could be taken 'out of context'. Everyone knows the danger of being quoted out of context. The meaning of the words is changed by the fact that they are not linked to what came before and what was said after. The shrewd researcher will try to explain to the reader the context within which the extract arose but, inevitably, there is limited opportunity to do this in research reports.
- *The process of selecting extracts involves a level of judgement and discretion on the part of the researcher.* The selection of which parts of the transcript to include is entirely at the discretion of the researcher, and this inevitably limits the significance which can be attached to any one extract. It is an editorial decision which reflects the needs of the particular research report. How does the reader know that it was a fair selection, representative of the overall picture?

As a result, in the vast majority of reports produced by project researchers extracts will serve as illustrations of a point and supporting evidence for an argument – nothing more and nothing less. It is important that the project researcher is aware of this when using extracts, and avoids the temptation to present quotes from interviewees as though they stand in their own right as unequivocal proof of the point being discussed.

Having made this point, there are some things the researcher can do to get the best out of the extracts that are selected.

- Use quotes and extracts verbatim. Despite the points above about the difficulty of transcribing tapes, the researcher should be as literal as possible when quoting people. Use the exact words.
- Change the names to ensure anonymity (unless you have their explicit permission to reveal the person's identity).
- Provide some details about the person you are quoting, without endangering their anonymity. The general best advice here is to provide sufficient detail to distinguish informants from one another and to provide the reader with some idea of relevant background factors associated with the person, but to protect the identity of the person you quote by restricting how much information is given (e.g. teacher A, female, school 4, geography, mid-career).

▶ Try to give some indication of the context in which the quotation arose. Within the confines of a research report, try to provide some indication of the context of the extract so that the meaning *as intended* comes through. As far as it is feasible, the researcher should address the inevitable problem of taking the extract 'out of context' by giving the reader some guidance on the background within which the statement arose.

13 Advantages of interviews

▶ *Depth of information*. Interviews are particularly good at producing data which deal with topics in depth and in detail. Subjects can be probed, issues pursued and lines of investigation followed over a relatively lengthy period.

▶ *Insights*. The researcher is likely to gain valuable insights based on the depth of the information gathered and the wisdom of 'key informants'.

▶ *Equipment*. Interviews require only simple equipment and build on conversation skills which researchers already have.

▶ *Informants' priorities*. Interviews are a good method for producing data based on informants' priorities, opinions and ideas. Informants have the opportunity to expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what *they* regard as the crucial factors.

▶ *Flexibility*. As a method for data collection, interviews are probably the most flexible. Adjustments to the lines of enquiry can be made during the interview itself. Interviewing allows for a developing line of enquiry.

▶ *Validity*. Direct contact at the point of the interview means that data can be checked for accuracy and relevance as they are collected.

▶ *High response rate*. Interviews are generally prearranged and scheduled for a convenient time and location. This ensures a relatively high response rate.

▶ *Therapeutic*. Interviews can be a rewarding experience for the informant. Compared with questionnaires, observation and experiments, there is a more personal element to the method, and people tend to enjoy the rather rare chance to talk about their ideas at length to a person whose purpose is to listen and note the ideas without being critical.

14 Disadvantages of interviews

▶ *Time-consuming*. Analysis of data can be difficult and time-consuming. Data preparation and analysis is 'end-loaded' compared with, for instance, questionnaires which are pre-coded and where data are ready for analysis once they have been collected. The transcribing and coding of interview data is a major task for the researcher which occurs after the data have been collected.

▶ *Data analysis*. The interview method tends to produce *non-standard responses*. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews produce data that are not pre-coded and have a relatively open format.

▶ *Reliability*. The impact of the interviewer and of the context means that consistency and objectivity are hard to achieve. The data collected are, to an extent, unique owing to the specific context and the specific individuals involved. This has an adverse effect on *reliability*.

▶ *Interviewer effect*. The data from interviews are based on what people say rather than what they do. The two may not tally. What people say they do, what they say they prefer and what they say they think cannot automatically be assumed to reflect the truth. In particular, interviewee statements can be affected by the identity of the researcher.

▶ *Inhibitions*. The tape-recorder (or video-recorder) can inhibit the informant. Although the impact of the recording device tends to wear off quite quickly, this is not always the case. The interview is an artificial situation (as, of course, are experiments) where people are speaking for the record and on the record, and this can be daunting for certain kinds of people.

▶ *Invasion of privacy*. Tactless interviewing can be an invasion of privacy and/or upsetting for the informant. While interviews can be enjoyable, the other side of the coin is that the personal element of being interviewed carries its own kinds of dangers as well.

▶ *Resources*. The *costs* of interviewer's time, of travel and of transcription can be relatively high if the informants are geographically widespread.

Checklist for the use of interview data

When using interview data for your research you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:

1. Have relevant details been given about the *context* of the interviews (location, prior events, ambience etc.)? ☐
2. Has consideration been given to the effect of the recording equipment on the *openness* with which informants replied? ☐
3. Was it possible to *transcribe* the interview talk without too many gaps and without too much 'tidying up' of the talk to make it intelligible? ☐
4. Has the transcription of the interview been checked for accuracy and meaning with the interviewee? ☐
5. Is the analysis based on 'themes' running through a number of interviews? ☐
6. Are the quotations used in the report of the research attributed to a category of person without revealing specific identities of the informants? ☐
7. Are the quotations that are used in the report of the research presented in the *context*:
   - of the surrounding talk? ☐
   - of the social situation of the interview itself? ☐
8. Has an account of the researcher's *self* been provided with a consideration of how it might have affected the:
   - interaction during the interview? ☐
   - interpretation of the data? ☐

8

OBSERVATION

Observation offers the social researcher a distinct way of collecting data. It does not rely on what people *say* they do, or what they *say* they think. It is more direct than that. Instead, it draws on the direct evidence of the eye to witness events first hand. It is based on the premise that, for certain purposes, it is best to observe what actually happens.

There are essentially two kinds of observation research used in the social sciences. The first of these is *systematic* observation. Systematic observation has its origins in social psychology – in particular the study of interaction in settings such as school classrooms (Flanders 1970; Simon and Boyer 1970; Croll 1986). It is normally linked with the production of quantitative data and the use of statistical analysis. The second is *participant* observation. This is mainly associated with sociology and anthropology, and is used by researchers to infiltrate situations, sometimes as an undercover operation, to understand the culture and processes of the groups being investigated. It usually produces qualitative data.

These two methods might seem poles apart in terms of their origins and their use in current social research, but they share some vital characteristics.

- *Direct observation*. The obvious connection is that they both rely on direct observation. In this respect they stand together, in contrast to methods such as questionnaires and interviews, which base their data on what informants tell the researcher, and in contrast to documents where the researcher tends to be one step removed from the action.
- *Fieldwork*. The second common factor is their dedication to collecting data in real life situations – out there in the field. In their distinct ways, they both involve fieldwork. The dedication to fieldwork immediately identifies observation as an *empirical* method for data collection. As a method, it requires the researcher to go in search of information, first hand, rather than relying on secondary sources.