Conducting the interview

In: A Practical Introduction to In-Depth Interviewing
Conducting the interview

A common view is that in-depth interviewing does not require much skill and cannot be taught. What I illustrate in this chapter is that conducting a quality in-depth interview requires a good deal of skill and that if you adopt agreed-upon practices the chances of you conducting an adequate interview are enhanced considerably. Chapter headings include:

- Breaking the ice and developing rapport
- Conducting the interview
- Follow up interviews
- Can you bring in your own observations, understandings and experiences?
- Interviewing at a distance – phone, Skype and email interviews

Breaking the ice and developing rapport

The first few minutes of an interview are crucial. The initial impression created can play a fundamental role in shaping the remainder of the interview. If you make a ‘good impression’ and develop a rapport or what Minichiello et al. (1999: 79) called a ‘productive interpersonal climate’, it is far more likely that the interviewee will feel comfortable and be prepared to open up and answer the questions posed in a comprehensive and frank fashion (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 128). In order to break the ice you need to create a relaxed atmosphere; it is essential that the interviewee trusts you and feels comfortable and at ease in your company (King and Horrocks, 2012: 48). You should clearly convey that you are there to learn about their experiences, interpretations and perceptions and not to judge.

The issue of trust is partially bound up with the topic under consideration. The more sensitive the topic, the more crucial it is that the interviewee has total trust in the interviewer. If you are interviewing somebody about their perceptions and understandings of their organisation’s corporate culture (Taylor and Carroll, 2010) total trust is not likely to be a significant issue. However, if you are interviewing people living with HIV/AIDS, it is imperative that the interviewee has total confidence in the interviewer and is convinced that the information given will be treated respectfully and confidentially (Cutliffe and Zinck, 2011).

In his seminal analysis of human interaction, Erving Goffman (1982: 13) wrote,

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him [sic] or to bring into play information about him already possessed.

He goes on to argue,

Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others
will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him. (Goffman, 1982: 13)

Although Goffman is talking about everyday social interaction, his insights also apply to the interview situation. In everyday interaction if you do not know an individual you will probably be somewhat reserved when you first meet. This is especially so if the person is a total stranger. If they are connected to a friend, family or a colleague you are likely to be less constrained based on the maxim, ‘that a friend of yours is a friend of mine’. Once you get talking to the ‘stranger’ you will arrive at an initial impression that may shape the remainder of your interaction. You could decide that you do not want to pursue the conversation and cut it short or alternatively prolong it and you may even agree to meet again. Of course, this depends on whether you and the ex ‘stranger’ have the desire or, in the hard-pressed contemporary world, the time to pursue social engagement.

The possibility of making a decision as to how the interaction does or does not progress and the openness of the interaction, is a key aspect differentiating everyday interaction from the interview situation. In a research interview situation, both parties have agreed to set aside a period of time to explore a particular topic. The interviewee is the repository of knowledge on the topic under investigation and the brief of the interviewer is to extract as much of this knowledge as possible in the time allocated. Usually you will not know anything about the person you are about to interview other than that they fit into the category of interviewees whose insights and knowledge will help answer the research question/s you have set yourself. Also, the interviewee will generally not know anything about you, besides that you are doing a study that requires interviewing people like themselves and you come from a particular institution. The strangeness of the situation makes it imperative that you create a good impression from the outset. Although you may have already created a favourable impression when you set up the appointment, when you finally meet the interviewee face-to-face or alternatively start conducting a telephone or Skype interview, the interviewee will again be assessing you and concluding whether they can trust you with their personal information and views. The recruiting of the interviewee through a mutual acquaintance can help dissipate initial uneasiness.

An interesting development is that it is becoming more common for interviewees to research interviewers prior to being interviewed. In certain instances, and certainly when you are interviewing an elite interviewee, it is useful to do some research on the person you are going to interview. Knowledge of the interviewee can enhance the interview.

Breaking the ice is something that can be worked on. In the case of face-to-face interviews, before beginning the formal interview you should:

- Introduce yourself again and thank the interviewee for agreeing to be interviewed.
- Give the interviewee your business card if you have one. It helps create trust and gives the impression that you are professional, that this is a serious engagement and you respect the interviewee.
- Explain the purpose of your research and the role of the interview within it. You should use the information sheet for this. Even if the interviewee has already read it or you have gone through it with
them on the phone or in an email, it’s a good idea to go through it briefly again.

- Clarify why the study is important and the reason the interviewee has been selected. This should contribute to them feeling that they are part of something meaningful that could make a contribution. You can say how much you value their knowledge and experience. If the study is going to be used to try and influence policy, it is certainly worth making this explicit.

- Make it clear to the interviewee how the interview will work; that you have certain topics you are interested in; that you will ask questions around these topics; they can interrupt at any point and respond to questions in any way they feel is relevant – there is no right or wrong answer (Esterberg, 2002: 102).

- Ask whether it is acceptable to record the interview and explain the purpose of recording the interview. Tell the interviewee that they can stop the recording at any time.

- Collect the signed consent form (you need to do this prior to starting the formal interview) and again stress that the interview material will remain confidential and be deidentified when the interviews are written up.

- Explain that consent can be revoked at any time and no explanation is required.

- Inform the interviewee that if they would like to see the transcribed interview and make changes, they can.

- Where appropriate, it is useful to indicate to the interviewee that you are on their side.

Before starting the formal interview it is often useful to have a conversation about general subjects – the weather, the news of the day, and perhaps, where appropriate, comment on something in the neighbourhood. If you are conducting the interview in an interviewee’s home you could comment on something in the immediate environment. A positive statement like, ‘I love your garden’ or ‘your house is charming’, are likely to elicit a warm response from the interviewee. General conversation prior to the formal interview contributes to creating a relaxed atmosphere (Thomas, 2009: 161). A useful tactic is to establish whether you have any common interests. For example, you may have been born in the same town or support the same sports team (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 178). There is increasing agreement with the argument first voiced by feminist scholars that the notion that qualitative researchers should be restrained and remain ‘neutral’ in the interview situation is misplaced. Engaging in everyday conversation and expressing some feelings and thoughts helps break down the division between the researcher and the researched. Fontana and Frey (1994) conclude:

> As we treat the other as human beings, we can no longer remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings and must disclose ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about the other. (1994: 373–4)

Goffman (1982) makes the important point (he was way ahead of his time), that in initial social interactions, body language is extremely important:

> There is one aspect of the others’ response that bears special comment here. Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favourable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts: a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will,
being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. The others may then use what are considered to be the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behaviour as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects. (1982: 18)

He is arguing that usually it is easier to control verbal language and that our non-verbal language can undermine the good impression we are trying to create. In the case of in-depth interviewing it is fairly straightforward to say all the right things at the outset, but it needs to be reinforced by your body language. You need to appear calm and your countenance needs to be friendly. If it is apparent that you are anxious and/or standoffish, there is a possibility that the interviewee will pick up on this and perhaps feel constrained.

Conducting the interview

The material under this heading is perhaps the most pivotal in this book. Ultimately, you play a major role in shaping the interview. The rapport you create, the questions you ask, the way you ask them and the manner in which you respond to answers and probe will, to a large extent, determine the quality of the interview and the content (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 4). A key feature of the in-depth interview is that you can never predict what will happen. This can be anxiety provoking but it does mean that you have to be prepared and be able to think on your feet. Interviewees and interviews will vary dramatically. Some interviewees will be reticent and perhaps fearful and insecure and have little to say no matter how skilled the interviewer. For these interviewees developing a rapport is crucial. If you can convince the reluctant interviewee that it is not going to be an intimidating experience but interesting and ‘fun’, it may tip the balance. Fortunately, ‘difficult’ interviewees tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Most interviewees want to share their experiences and stories and often are pleased that they have been selected to contribute to the study (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 78).

The order of questions

As discussed in Chapter 6, when you start the interview you should be gentle. There is no point beginning the interview with a complex, confronting or contentious question. It could be unsettling for the participant, their response will probably be guarded and it may have a negative impact on the remainder of the interview (King and Horrocks, 2012: 55). Questions that are sensitive and potentially damaging to the rapport between you and the interviewer should ideally be left to the middle and end of the interview. Of course, you need to ask yourself whether it is really necessary to ask the question concerned. You should only pursue a topic that may cause stress if it is necessary for the study. If not, leave it alone.

At times it is difficult to avoid confronting questions early on. For example, if I am interviewing an older private renter I usually start the interview by asking how long they have lived in their present accommodation. I may then ask where they were living before and follow up by asking what made them move. This question is potentially fraught as the move may have been due to a difficult landlord or them losing their spouse or a
financial disaster or a combination of these factors. In the case of Geraldine (pseudonym) she was forced to leave the house she shared with her daughter and son-in-law and their two children. The interview very quickly moved into a highly sensitive area.

Interviewer: Maybe we can start, so can you tell me how long you’ve been a private renter for?

Geraldine: Well, I’ve been only for a while, 10 September, last year.

Interviewer: Right, so where were you before?

Geraldine: I was living with my daughter in a house. We bought a house together and she kicked me out.

Interviewer: Goodness. I’m sorry to hear that.

Geraldine: Well that’s life isn’t it?

Interviewer: Right. So how did you find the place that you are in now?

Her response to my question, ‘Where were you before?’ certainly took me by surprise. I empathised with her situation and decided that I would delay asking her to elaborate on her daughter’s actions. About midway through the interview she explained why her daughter wanted her to move out.

Once the interview progresses the order of the questions largely depends on the responses of the interviewee. Every interview will be different and it is impossible to predict how an interview will unfold. You should follow up the answers the interviewee has given. This may mean that there are significant digressions. The order of questions is not predictable and in a semi-structured interview you should not feel that you have to ask questions in any particular order. The key issue is that by the end of the interview you should have covered all of the themes in your interview guide.

Do not interrupt before it is necessary

When I read transcripts of in-depth interviews I have done, I often get annoyed with myself as I note instances where I have clearly interrupted and stopped the flow of the interviewee. When you examine transcripts of in-depth interviews it is evident that premature interruptions are a common occurrence. You need to be patient and let the interviewee finish their point even if they are meandering. Let them take their time. If you cut them off you may miss important information. It can also be interpreted as rude.

An example of a premature interruption

The interviewee is an older private renter. I was discussing how he copes on his income.

Interviewee: I buy according to price and not according to quality or quantity … I suppose not being able to go and have a coffee or something, so some of the things go in the mouth as a kind of compensation or
something to make you feel good. So, again it’s,

Interviewer: It sounds like it’s been a pretty rough experience.

Clearly, I should have let him finish his sentence. We will never know what he was about to say.

**What questions to ask**

The interview guide and the responses of the interviewee will fundamentally shape the questions you ask. You should cover all of the topics in your interview guide. However, you need to be open to all possibilities. Other than starting gently and making sure that by the end of the interview you have covered all your topics, there is no standard approach to a semi-structured in-depth interview. How you conduct the interview and the level of intervention will vary substantially and to some degree is ad hoc (Flick, 2009: 171). Certain interviewees will be forthcoming and have a great deal to say. With these participants it is more a case of reining them in every now and then and steering the conversation so that you cover all the topics. The ‘steering’ has to be done delicately so as to not cut the interviewee off prematurely.

In the case of reticent and restrained interviewees you will have to work a lot harder and think on your feet as to how to get them to elaborate. An interview constituted by very short answers is rarely of any value when you analyse and write up the interview data. One technique is to ask the interviewee to describe a scenario or situation – the grand tour question. For example, if you are interviewing a homeless person about their situation you could ask them to describe a typical day and night (Boydell et al., 2000). If you are exploring academic writing you can ask a student to describe how they go about writing an essay (Starfield, 2002).

The key thing is that you need to concentrate and be flexible. If you stick to the interview guide too rigidly, it is likely that you will interrupt inappropriately and undermine the quality of the interview. You need to ask questions that generate responses that will contribute to the answering of your research questions. Often you do not have to pose many questions and all that is required is an indication that you are listening and the interviewee will keep going. Interviewees usually cover more than one theme in their answers. For example, if you are interviewing ex-prisoners about life in prison and ask, ‘Could you describe a typical day in prison’, the question is likely to generate a substantial answer which could potentially underpin the entire interview and cover a range of themes. This is an example of a wise interview question. It is drawing on the interviewee’s own experience; there is no ambiguity and the interviewee does not have to do any analysis. They merely have to describe their experiences.
If you think of questions you should have asked but did not or if you need more information or clarity on a particular topic, it is reasonable to phone or email the interviewee and ask if they could clarify a particular point or if they could answer a question you did not ask.

**Probing**

As the researcher you want to obtain as much information as possible in the short amount of time allocated. Inexperienced interviewers often emerge from an interview with minimal quotable material. This is usually due to them not following up adequately or appropriately to answers given. Also, they may not give the interviewee an indication of what is expected from the interview. Interviewees need to know that you want as much detail
as possible. Probing involves endeavouring to get the interviewee to clarify, expand or reflect on an answer given (May, 2011). You can also probe by asking for examples. The interviewee’s ‘interpretative capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003: 74). Appropriate probing requires listening attentively. You need to be able to improvise and think of ways of drawing out the interviewee so that they impart useful and rich material.

Table 6.1 provides an example of a missed opportunity due to a failure to probe. It is an extract from an interview with an older private renter. She had been living in a caravan about an hour’s drive from Sydney (Australia) but had recently moved back to Sydney and was renting a cottage. In some ways the move had been positive.

**Table 6.1 Example of a failure to adequately probe**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Answer</th>
<th>Type of question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s been great. It’s been very therapeutic for me to be with them [her daughter, son-in-law and grand-daughter] and to be useful. And not to be in a caravan.</td>
<td>Basic information-seeking question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So how long were you in a caravan for?</td>
<td>Basic information-seeking question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About four years.</td>
<td>Probing question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So what was that like?</td>
<td>Probing question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was awful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where was it?</td>
<td>Basic information-seeking question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the South Coast.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So was it basically an affordability issue?</td>
<td>Probing question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, no question. I literally had no money. I had a small amount which I had saved and could afford, like $40,000 for a caravan or some such thing, but of course that wouldn’t have got me anywhere you know to buy a house.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Can you see where I failed to probe? I initially probed by asking, ‘What was that like [living in a caravan]?’ The very brief answer, ‘It was awful’, should have been followed up. I should have asked, ‘In what ways was it awful?’ Fortunately, later in the interview the issue of living in a caravan came up and I was able to get an insight into why it was so ‘awful’. For the interviewee it was not so much the actual caravan that she found ‘awful’, but her fellow residents and the ensuing isolation:
Interviewee: It was just that it was just horrid for me … I don’t smoke or drink or any of that stuff, which sounds boring, but that’s my lifestyle. And I found there was quite a lot of drunks and things like that and kids screaming and yelling. For my psyche it was awful… When I went to the caravan park, I thought well it’s only an hour away from Sydney, but you’re getting into a group of people that are not like-minded, … and that adds to the isolation rather than helps to build sort of a community.

A great advantage of in-depth interviewing is that it gives you the capacity to go back to answers that were limited and ask follow-up questions. This does require a substantial amount of concentration during the interview. If possible, you should note points that you want to return to. Below are examples of appropriate probing producing a rich answer. The interviewee had been a homeowner. However, a business failure meant that she had to sell her home and rely on the private rental sector. At the time of the interview she had recently moved into heavily subsidised social housing after an extended period in the private rental sector.

Interviewee: Well I think I was lucky because it was a friend’s home, well a unit in a friend’s home, and I did get it cheaper than most. I got it for $250 [a week] and I think it was probably worth $350. I still had a lot of trouble paying $250 … in my case I had to go out and baby-sit and that was all I could do. My husband had kept me very well for many years and I was too old to really get into the workforce so that was the best thing to do. So I looked after children as many days as I could and of a night and but as I’m now 69 it just got too much for me and I was too tired especially with the children, so I cut it down to a couple of days and just a few hours and I’m coping with that, but other than that I wouldn’t be making ends meet at all. I really have to earn that extra money to live …

Interviewer: So it was very stressful I should imagine. [Probe]

Interviewee: It is stressful to me because I’ve always been used to a home and that was the worst part. Yeah, that’s the worst part. You haven’t got a [secure] roof over your head. I feel very differently now because I’m now in a place that they let me in here without a deposit which was marvellous. I only pay $100 a week and that stress is gone. I feel a different person I really do and I’ve still got the Housing Commission going to offer me another house but I am so happy here. It’s quiet.

Interviewer: It’s very nice. [Facilitating, keeping the interview going]

Interviewee: And I’ve really only got myself so although it’s cramped you know you manage. Much better than being out there in that private market. I was stressed when the people told me I had to go because they were putting the rent up, I couldn’t afford it. Very stressful, didn’t know where to turn but luckily through community [housing] I just got on to this and I’ve been very lucky. I look upon myself as very lucky

Interviewer: So what would you have done if you’d not got into this? [Probe]

Interviewee: I would have had to be still waiting for Housing Commission [public housing] and living in a bed-sitter somewhere and would have to get rid of all my possessions which would be the worst part. Even here because I started off in a big home I had a lot and over the years I’ve just had to get rid of everything which is
Interviewer: So you feel that that part of your identity was being disposed of so to speak? [Probe, but question is too complex]

Interviewee: Yeah. I had to get rid of all the things that I liked. So even the last move to here, I had to get rid of such a lot.

**Facilitating the discussion/keeping the interview going**

Besides asking questions it is imperative that you display interest and indicate that you are actively listening. You need to make eye contact and give a clear indication that you are interested in what the interviewee is saying. This can be done non-verbally – nodding your head, looking interested, smiling and grimacing perhaps. Body language is very important (May, 2011: 142). Verbally, it requires that you use words like 'right', 'uh huh', 'really' and show enthusiasm. Following up on questions appropriately is a key way to keep the conversation moving along. There are times when the interviewee’s answer is so rich that it lays the basis for a number of possible follow up questions. You need to keep all of these in mind. There will also be moments where you can share your knowledge with an interviewee and thereby display interest and understanding. When you transition to another topic you should try and do it as smoothly as possible so as to keep up the conversational flow (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 124). In the course of a long interview it is easy to lose concentration and miss the significance of an interviewee’s response and respond inappropriately. Interviewing is demanding and if you want to be on top of your game it is usually not a good idea to do more than two interviews a day.

**Concluding the interview**

At the end of the interview you should always ask if there is anything the interviewee would like to add. I usually ask interviewees, ‘How do they see the future?’ If the interview has been difficult for the interviewee you should not leave until they have recovered their composure and you could mention, if you feel it is appropriate, that counselling is available. The consent form should have the telephone numbers of organisations that offer counselling. If you are paying interviewees for their time remember to hand over the cash payment or voucher. You should ask if it is okay to contact them if there is anything you want to explore further; encourage them to contact you if there is anything they would like to add at a later stage and, of course, thank them for the interview.

The conclusion to Cecil’s (pseudonym) interview suggests that the interview went well and he was open to further contact.

Interviewer: And if I have any questions I can always give you a call.

Cecil: Yes. Sure. Don’t hesitate.
Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Cecil: And if I move, I’ll let you know.

Interviewer: Okay, good. Keep in touch. If you think there’s something that we left out that you want to chat about, just give me a call. You’ve got my mobile number and it was very nice to meet you.

Cecil: Likewise.

Interviewer: And very good luck for the future.

Cecil: Thank you and I appreciate what you’re doing.

Interviewer: I think it’s important research and thanks Cecil for coming out here [to my office].

Cecil: I enjoyed it. I actually did a course here some years ago. And found it very good.

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Follow up interviews

Follow up interviewing can be useful, especially if you are dealing with a complex and/or sensitive topic. A second interview gives you the opportunity to clarify parts of the first interview that were not clear and encourage the interviewee to expand on answers given that were perhaps a bit too brief (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Prior to the second interview you should give the transcript from the first interview a close read to see if there are gaps and what needs clarification or elaboration. A second interview is also useful when you want to investigate a before and after situation. For his PhD, Benjamin Hanckel interviewed filmmakers who participated in a project on the making of short films for the LGBTIQ community entitled Stories of Being Me. He interviewed the filmmakers prior to the public release of the film and then again a few months later. He was interested in whether the filmmakers altered the way they understood and conceptualised their film after the films were publicly released and the impact the making and distribution of the film had had on their lives. A couple of the filmmakers had used the film as an opportunity to tell their family about their sexual orientation and most of them lived in countries where same sex intimacy was illegal and/or highly stigmatised.

Often an interviewee may not be prepared to be interviewed again. They might not have the desire or the time. I generally try and ensure that the first interview ties up all the loose ends. If I need clarification or want to ask a question I failed to ask in the initial interview, I will phone or email the interviewee.

Can you bring in your own observations, understandings and experiences?

Historically, it has been argued that the interviewer should remain as neutral as possible. However, interviewers are no longer expected to ‘withhold their experiences, ideas and thoughts’ (Rapley, 2007: 2015 SAGE Publications, Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Conducting the interview
22). The dominant contemporary view is that the in-depth interview is a conversation where both parties give information about their views and feelings. As Oakley (1981:49) noted, there is ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’. Fontana and Frey (2008) use the term ‘empathetic interviewing’ to refer to the interviewer ‘taking a stance’ and argue that the notion that the interviewer can or should be neutral is ‘largely mythical’.

There is some debate as to the degree to which the interviewer should self-disclose (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). I do not think it is possible to have a hard and fast rule. Each interview is different and you need to assess each situation. There are times when self-disclosure is appropriate and constructive, but there are also interview situations where it is perhaps not necessary or appropriate to discuss your own thoughts and feelings. You need to approach self-disclosure reflexively. There are interview situations where there is a possibility that too much self-disclosure could alienate the interviewee. For example, if you are interviewing a conservative school principal who is a firm believer in tradition, there is little point expressing the view that schools are oppressive institutions whose primary role is to prepare compliant workers for the labour market. They are likely to take umbrage and not be terribly forthcoming for the remainder of the interviewer. If you are interviewing a trade unionist it would be useful to indicate that you are supportive of trade unions, and if you are a trade union member, mentioning this may help build trust and rapport.

Interviewing at a distance – phone, Skype and email interviews

There has been a strong view that in-depth interviews should be face-to-face (FTF). There is no doubt that conducting an interview FTF has a number of advantages. It facilitates the development of rapport and allows you to get a sense of the interviewee. If you interview a person in their home or workplace you can obtain an idea of the person’s living or work context. This can be important with certain topics. For example, if you are looking at the impact of long-term unemployment, conducting the interview in the interviewee’s home can give you an insight into their situation and how they are coping. If you are investigating decision-making by senior executives, interviewing interviewees in their office will give you an idea of how their status is concretised in the organisation by symbolic markers such as the size of the office, décor, etc. A FTF interview also allows you to witness and respond to non-verbal cues. As mentioned, this can be important both in terms of revealing the interviewee’s feelings and giving you clues as to how to manage the interview.

Although interviewing FTF is usually preferable, it is now accepted that using other means to conduct interviews can be as powerful and there are instances when FTF interviewing is not possible or necessarily the best approach. An interesting development is that researchers using in-depth interviews now often ask interviewees what mode of interviewing they would prefer. Hanna (2012) tells of how, in his doctoral research on sustainable tourism, he gave all of his interviewees the choice of FTF, phone or Skype interviews. The most common reason for using phone, Skype or email interviews is distance. If you are drawing on interviewees from a large geographical area, cost, time and, increasingly, considerations of the environmental impacts, mean that it is not practical to interview participants who are located a considerable distance from your home or office. In Hanna’s (2012: 240) study, the six interviewees outside of his geographical area said
that they ‘preferred telephone or Skype interviews as they did not want unnecessary travel to impact on the environment’.

**Phone interviews**

In-depth interviewing via the phone is becoming common. Certainly, in my own research, the number of people I have interviewed on the phone is similar to the number I have interviewed FTF. Like FTF interviews, what is crucial is that the interviewee feels comfortable talking to you. The establishment of the trust required for a quality interview can be more difficult with phone interviews. After making the initial contact, I email or post the interviewee the information sheet and consent form. I wait for the form to be emailed/posted back before arranging a definite time for the interview. The return of the form usually indicates a desire to take part in the research.

Interviewing over the phone has drawbacks but also has advantages. The researcher and the interviewee do not have to expend time or energy travelling to a venue. For the researcher, the time saved can translate into an ability to increase the number of people they are able to interview. In my own research, especially with older people, interviewees are often not enthusiastic about being interviewed at home and often they do not have the physical capacity or desire to travel to my office. An interview in a coffee shop is potentially difficult because of the possibility that it could be noisy. These interviewees feel comfortable and safe having a phone interview. I always tell my phone interviewees that they can take a break at any time. If I had insisted that the interview be FTF it is likely that a number would not have been prepared to be interviewed (see Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Tausig and Freeman, 1988).

An interesting argument is that interviewing marginalised people in their home can be interpreted as yet another example of the ‘professional gaze’ (Holt, 2010: 115). Often poorer households are subject to scrutiny and questioning within the home by social workers and other professionals and they feel judged. The use of the phone avoids yet another professional intrusion. Interviewees whose homes are a bit chaotic can feel a great deal of pressure to ‘tidy up’ their home in preparation for the interview. In the case of an older, frail person, this can be a major imposition. Also, some interviewees live in poor and overcrowded circumstances; tidying up in these situations can be challenging.

Researcher safety is another advantage of phone interviews. FTF interviews in an interviewee’s home, as discussed in Chapter 5, can be risky and anxiety provoking in certain circumstances. A phone interview obviously removes any risk.

Phone interviews facilitate your ability to take notes as the interviewee is talking. This can potentially enhance your capacity to ask appropriate probing questions.

A final benefit of telephone interviews is the flexibility they offer. In my research with older people I often have to change the time of a scheduled interview due to the interviewee having to go to the doctor or to hospital. It is not an unusual occurrence to phone at the time scheduled for the interview, only to find that the interviewee
is not available. However, it would be a lot more frustrating if I drove a distance and then found that my
interviewee had had to go to the doctor or had been admitted to hospital. Also, the interviewee would feel
embarrassed about the inconvenience they caused. Missing a phone interview is not an issue as it is very
easy to reschedule.

Although I have not systematically compared the quality of the FTF and phone interviews I have conducted,
my impression is that the quality is similar. In one of the few systematic comparisons, Sturges and Hanrahan
(2004) conducted 15 FTF and 19 phone interviews with visitors to a county gaol and the correctional officers
who monitor the visits. They concluded that there was no difference in the quality of the interviews.

**The use of Skype and other online software**

The use of Skype for in-depth interviewing has increased dramatically. If you use Skype's camera feature,
you have almost all of the advantages of FTF interviews combined with many of the advantages of phone
interviewing (Hanna, 2012). It is an intimate medium and you are able to witness the interviewee's non-
verbal communication and, to an extent, their immediate surroundings. However, you are not imposing on the
personal space of the interviewee. The convenience of Skype is profound; the researcher and the interviewee
can both be ensconced in their respective homes or offices. Another benefit is that you can purchase software
that allows you to record the interview directly onto your PC or Mac. Skype interviews, at no cost, allow you
to do interviews in all parts of the world.

The potential problems with using Skype are mainly around limited access and technical issues. Many
potential interviewees will not have access to Skype or alternatively will not know how to download the
program. In my work with older people not one interviewee has suggested that we use Skype. If you do
use it, you need to be in a quiet space; background noise can mean that you miss vital information when
transcribing. A good headset and microphone are recommended. A secure connection on both sides is
essential. A poor connection may result in you having to switch off the camera and it may also affect the audio
quality.

Besides Skype there are a number of alternative programs that offer similar functionality and features, such
as Google Hangouts, Viber and GoToMeeting. Some of these programs require downloading software, while
for others you can use them within your Internet Browser. When considering what program to use it is worth
testing which one works best for your needs and fits into your budget. Importantly, you should consider how
easy it will be for your interviewees to access and use the software. You do not want to set up unnecessary
barriers for people to participate in your interviews.

**In-depth interviewing using email**

The conducting of in-depth interviews using email has numerous strengths. It is convenient and cheap and
does not require much effort from the interviewee. It allows you to cover whatever geographical space
you want and carry out national and international comparisons. For example, Murray and Sixsmith (1998) researched the use of prosthetics by interviewing 21 prosthetic users in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Netherlands, using email. Cook (2012) used email to interview 26 women in New Zealand, the United States, Canada and England who had contracted sexually transmitted viruses. It allows you to contact interviewees who may be impossible to interview FTF and are difficult to reach via the phone. Another important advantage of interviewing by email is that it allows you to interview people who may be reserved in an FTF situation or on Skype or the phone, but who have no difficulty communicating their experiences and understandings in an email. Meho (2006) makes the interesting point that email interviewing removes the interviewer–interviewee effect – class, gender, race, disability, dress mode, body aesthetics and accent become inconsequential or their impact is dissipated. A further benefit is that the interviewee can take some time to consider their answers, potentially enhancing the quality of their responses. The limited research done suggests that there is no difference in the quality of responses obtained via email and FTF interviews (Meho, 2006). A major time and cost-saving feature is that you do not have to transcribe the interviews. Also, you can conduct multiple interviews at the same time. A final advantage is that the interviewees can remain anonymous. This is important when the research is on a sensitive topic. The study by Cook (2012) was only possible because of email. The anonymity and distance enabled the women who participated to communicate intimate details about the impact the diagnosis of a viral sexually transmitted infection had had on their lives.

A disadvantage is that once you send out the interview guide there is no guarantee that potential interviewees will respond to the initial set of questions or to any further questions you may have. It is likely that the quality of the responses will vary considerably and in many instances you will need to follow up on responses. In order to optimise the possibility that interviewees will respond, follow up questions should be done in a timely fashion so that the momentum is not lost. However, interviewees may tire of responding to questions posed and ignore your follow-up questions or give sparse answers. Another drawback with the use of email is that the capacity for following up on responses in a spontaneous fashion and reading the non-verbal cues is not possible. The lack of verbal contact means that the questions on your interview guide need to be clear and precise. Ambiguity could result in an interviewee misinterpreting what you are asking. The ability of interviewees to express themselves in writing could also be a major limitation. If your interviewees are well educated this is not an issue, but if they have limited literacy, an interview by email is probably not appropriate. A serious limitation is that people who do not have access to email cannot participate in the study. Depending on the study, this can be a serious limitation.

The process of setting up in-depth interviews by email varies and presents challenges. In your initial email you should tell the recipient who you are and how you obtained their email address. You need to formally request if you can interview them using email and explain how it will work. The basics of the study should be explained and the recipient needs to be informed as to how and why they were selected for the study. This initial email could contain the information sheet, consent form and interview schedule. Alternatively, it could inform the recipient that you intend to send these once they indicate that they are interested in taking part in the study. Research indicates that when the interview questions are embedded in the email and not sent as an attachment there is a greater chance that the recipient will respond (Meho, 2006). Recipients are
hesitant to open an attached document from an unknown source. If you are going to send the documents as attachments it is important to send a prior email informing potential interviewees that you are going to send them an email with attachments.

### Summary

The chapter illustrates the crucial importance of developing a rapport with the interviewee and indicates how this can be done. It then outlines the making of a good interview. The order of the questions is important. Ideally, the interview should start gently and the first part of the interview should not be confronting. There are times when this is difficult and an apparently non-threatening question can be upsetting for the interviewee. The questions posed are to an extent determined by your interview guide, but a key point is that you respond to the interviewee rather than slavishly follow your interview guide. The interview should be conversational in that your responses follow the responses of the interviewee. However, ultimately you need to work through the topics that you have identified as important. A central aim of an in-depth interview is to obtain as much data as possible. This requires that you probe, that is, ask the interviewee to clarify, give examples or elaborate on an answer. You should endeavour not to interrupt unnecessarily. To keep the interview going it is important that you respond appropriately not only in terms of questions asked but also in terms of your body language. You need to show that you are interested and enthusiastic. When you conclude an interview it is useful to indicate that you may contact the interviewee if you have any further questions. You should ask the interviewee whether they would like to see a copy of the transcript and if so, tell them that they can make whatever changes and additions they feel are necessary. In most interview situations it is appropriate to talk about your own views and experiences. There is a growing consensus that the notion of a neutral interviewer is passé. There is also increasing agreement that the argument that interviewing FTF is the only legitimate mode is no longer accurate. Phone, Skype and interviewing using email are becoming standard and, in some instances, are essential and do not necessarily affect the quality of the interview.

### Exercise

Conducting interviews

Select a topic, draw up an interview guide and interview a fellow student. The topic should be linked to student experience. The interviewee should be able to draw on their knowledge to answer the questions set. Transcribe the interview and note: a) where you interrupted inappropriately; b) where you asked unnecessary questions; and c) where you failed to probe.

Repeat the interview with the same student; transcribe the interview and assess whether the interview has improved.
References


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