Individual and Group Interviewing

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This chapter is something of a personal reflection on 25 years of qualitative research, and draws on various training courses and lectures I have attended. It is an attempt to explicate the tacit knowledge that one develops over countless projects. While the conceptual discussions draw mainly from social psychological research, it is hoped that those from other social scientific persuasions will find the practical advice of value.

The objective of the chapter is to provide both a conceptual background and a practical guide to qualitative interviewing. Here, qualitative interviewing refers to interviews of a semi-structured type with a single respondent (the depth interview) or a group of respondents (the focus group). These forms of qualitative interviewing can be distinguished on the one hand from the highly structured survey interview, in which a pre-determined series of questions is asked; and on the other hand from the less structured ongoing conversation of participant observation or ethnography, where the emphasis is more on absorbing the local knowledge and culture over a longer period than on asking questions within a relatively confined period.

In the empirical social sciences, qualitative interviewing is a widely used methodology for data collection. It is, as Robert Farr (1982) writes, "essentially a technique or method for establishing or discovering that there are perspectives or viewpoints on events other than those of the person initiating the interview".

The first point of departure is the assumption that the social world is not an unproblematic given: it is actively constructed by people in their everyday life, but not under conditions of their own making. It is assumed that
these constructions form people's paramount reality, their life world. Using qualitative interviewing to map and understand the respondents' life world is the entry point for the social scientist, who then introduces interpretive frameworks to understand the actors' accounts in more conceptual or abstract terms, often in relation to other observations. Hence the qualitative interview provides the basic data for the development of an understanding of the relations between social actors and their situation. The objective is a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts.

Uses of qualitative interviewing

The understanding of the life worlds of respondents and specified social groupings is the *sine qua non* of qualitative interviewing. This may contribute to a number of different research endeavours. It may be an end in itself, providing a 'thick description' of a particular social milieu; it can be used as a basis for generating a framework for further research; it may provide empirical data to test expectations and hypotheses developed out of a particular theoretical perspective.

Beyond the broad objectives of description, conceptual development and the testing of concepts, qualitative interviewing may play a vital role in combination with other methods. For example, insights gained from qualitative interviewing may improve the quality of survey design and interpretation. In order to write appropriate questions it is necessary to appreciate both the concerns and the language of the target group. Equally, survey research often throws up results and surprises that need further exploration. Here the more in-depth understanding offered by qualitative interviewing may provide valuable contextual information to help to explain particular findings.

The versatility and value of qualitative interviewing is evidenced in its widespread use in many of the social scientific disciplines and in commercial social research in the areas of media audience research, public relations, marketing and advertising.

Preparation and planning

In this section some of the key aspects of individual and group interviewing are introduced. These cover preparation and planning, selecting respondents, and an introduction to individual and group interviewing techniques. It is assumed here that the researcher has either developed a theoretical or conceptual framework to guide the inquiry, and identified key concepts and issues to be addressed in the research, or decided to work within the framework of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following this choice, two key issues must be considered prior to any form
of interviewing: what to ask (the specification of the topic guide) and whom to talk to (how to select the respondents).

The topic guide

The topic guide is a vital part of the research process and needs detailed attention. Behind the apparently natural and almost casual conversation seen in the successful interview is a well-prepared interviewer. If inappropriate questions are asked then not only is the respondent’s time wasted but so is the researcher’s. It is essential to put time and effort into the construction of the topic guide and it is likely to go through a number of drafts. Essentially it is designed to capture the aims and objectives of the research. It will be based on a combination of a critical reading of the appropriate literature, a reconnaissance of the field (which might include observations and/or some preliminary conversations with relevant people), discussions with experienced colleagues, and some creative thinking. Ideally the topic guide should cover one page. It is not an extensive series of specific questions, but rather a set of paragraph headings. It acts as a prompt to the interviewer, a security blanket when the mind goes blank in the middle of an interview, a signal that there is an agenda to follow, and (if a number of minutes is attached to each paragraph) a way of monitoring the progress over the period of the interview. A good topic guide will create an easy and comfortable framework for a discussion, providing a logical and plausible progression through the issues in focus. As the topic guide is drawn up it is a reminder to the researcher that questions about social scientific issues must be pitched in ordinary language using everyday terms adapted to the interviewee. Finally, it acts as a preliminary scheme for the analysis of the transcripts.

However the topic guide is, as the label suggests, a guide, and it should not be followed slavishly as if the success of the research depended on it. The interviewer must use his or her social scientific imagination to recognize when issues beyond prior planning and expectation arise in the discussion which may be important. When such an issue arises this may lead to a modification of the guide for subsequent interviews. Equally, as a series of interviews progresses some topics which were originally considered central in the design phase may turn out to be uninteresting, either for conceptual reasons or because respondents have little if anything to say about them. Finally, as the study progresses the interviewer may form some hypotheses, which can then be explored with a different form of questioning. Essentially, while the topic guide should be well prepared at the beginning of a study, it must be used with some flexibility. Importantly, any such changes should be fully documented with the rationale.

Selecting respondents

The term ‘selecting’ is used explicitly in preference to ‘sampling’. This is because sampling inevitably carries connotations from surveys and opinion
polls, where from a systematic statistical sample of the population, results may be generalized within specified confidence limits. In qualitative research the selection of respondents cannot follow the procedures of quantitative research for a number of reasons.

First, in the unlikely event of selecting a random probability sample of say 30 persons for a qualitative study, the range of error attached to a 50/50 split on any indicator would be in the region of plus or minus 20 per cent. So if 30 doctors were interviewed, and half said they would prescribe homeopathic medicines and the other half said they would not, one could confidently say that in the population of doctors between 30 and 70 per cent would prescribe homeopathic cures. With a non-probability sample the range of error might be doubled. Clearly, if one wanted to assess medical enthusiasm or the lack of it for homeopathy, other forms of social research would be better indicated, for example the survey. But often reports of qualitative research include numerical details or vague quantifiers such as 'more than half' concerning the distribution of opinions or experiences among the respondents, as if somehow such numbers lend weight to the interpretation and legitimate generalization to a wider population. This is to misconceive the purpose of qualitative research.

The real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue. Given a particular social milieu, for example the medical profession, what one is interested in finding out is the variety of views on the issue in question, for example homeopathy, and crucially what underlies and justifies these different viewpoints. In order to be confident that the full range of views has been explored the researcher would need to interview different members of the social milieu. Not all doctors have the same views. But equally, it is generally the case that there are a relatively limited number of views or positions on a topic in a particular social milieu. Thus the researcher would need to consider how this social milieu might be segmented on the issue. There may be some survey data or recorded information to inform the selection of respondents, but this is not often the case. With no prior information to inform the selection of respondents a researcher might talk to some people in the medical profession and ask why they think there are differences regarding support for homeopathy, or he/ she might assume that such factors as recency of training, gender, or the profile of the patients would be related to different practices. Whatever the criteria, the objective is to maximize the opportunity to understand the different positions taken by members of the social milieu (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

For other research questions the problem of the selection of respondents may be more complex, as the issue is of relevance to more than one social milieu. Take for example the introduction of genetically modified foods. This is a new technology that impinges on most, if not all, of the public. To understand the range of reactions to GM foods it would be necessary to define relevant milieus from which to make a selection. The default or traditional option is to use the standard socio-demographic variables, that
is gender, age, social category and some geographic split, for example urban/rural. Let us assume that each of these indicators is classified as a dichotomy. This would give 16 cells to cover all possible combinations. On the assumption that for both individual and group interviews, at minimum, two interviews for each cell would be required, this would give 32 interviews.

This would be a major undertaking, too large for many studies. So the researcher makes a selection from the 16 cells, picking out combinations of socio-demographic characteristics which are likely to be of interest. All the characteristics are thereby included, but not all possible combinations of the characteristics.

An alternative way of thinking about segmentation is to use 'natural' rather than statistical or taxonomic groups. In natural groups people interact together; they may share a common past, or have a common future project. They may also read the same media and have broadly similar concerns and values. In this sense natural groups form a social milieu. Returning to the example of GM foods, instead of proceeding on the assumption that social and demographic characteristics will be diagnostic of differing views of the topic, the selection of respondents could be based on relevant natural groups or social milieus. Since GM foods have been discussed by environmentalists in terms of risks, by consumer groups in terms of safety issues particularly for children, by religious groups in terms of ethics, and by farmers in terms of both profits and threats to organic farming, these are candidate milieus. Thus interviews might be conducted with members of environmental organizations, mothers with children, people of different religious faiths and those involved in farming. Within these groupings it would be necessary to consider whether such characteristics as gender, age and education would be relevant or not. It is known for example that while males tend to be more accepting of new technologies than females, the relationship with age is not straightforward. Once again the researcher has to make some judgements about the trade-off between the benefits of researching certain segments and the costs of ignoring others. For such choices a social scientific imagination is essential. There are no right answers.

In summary, the objective of qualitative research is to sample the range of views. Unlike the sample survey where the probability sample can be applied in most research situations, there is no one method for selecting respondents for qualitative inquiries. Here, because the numbers of respondents are necessarily small, the researcher must use his or her social scientific imagination to inform the selection of respondents. While standard socio-demographic characteristics may be relevant and clearly are for consumer and political issues, it may be more efficient and productive to think in terms of the relevant social milieus for other issues in question. In some circumstances the research may follow a phased approach. Here the first phase may use a sample design based on all the available information prior to researching the topic. Having evaluated the data from this phase, a second phase may then focus on particular categories of respondent who seem to be particularly interesting. Finally, whatever the criteria of
respondent selection, the procedures and choices should be detailed and justified in any report.

How many interviews are required?

In many respects this question invites the response, 'how long is a piece of string?', and in reality the answer is, 'it depends'. It depends on the nature of the topic, on the numbers of different milieus that are considered relevant and, of course, on the resources available. However there are some general considerations to guide the decision. A key point to bear in mind is that, all things being equal, more interviews do not necessarily imply better quality or more detailed understanding. There are two bases to this claim. First, there are a limited number of interpretations or versions of reality. While experiences may appear to be unique to the individual, the representations of such experiences do not arise in individual minds; in some measure they are the outcome of social processes. To this extent representations of an issue of common concern, or of people in a particular social milieu, are in part shared. This can be seen in a series of interviews. The first few are full of surprises. The differences between the accounts are striking and one sometimes wonders if there are any similarities. However, common themes begin to appear and progressively one feels increased confidence in the emerging understanding of the phenomenon. At some point a researcher realizes that no new surprises or insights are forthcoming. At this point of meaning saturation the researcher may depart from the topic guide to check his or her understanding, and if the appreciation of the phenomenon is corroborated it is a signal that it is time to stop.

Secondly, there is the issue of the size of the corpus to be analysed. The transcript of an interview may run to 15 pages; thus with 20 interviews there are some 300 pages in the corpus. In order to analyse a corpus of texts from interviews and to go beyond the superficial selection of a number of illustrative quotations, it is essential to almost live and dream the interviews - to be able to recall each setting and respondent, and the key themes of each interview. There is a loss of information in textual record and the interviewer must be able to bring to mind the emotional tone of the respondent and to recall why they asked a particular question. Accounts or comments which at first hearing appear to be inconsequential may suddenly come into focus as the contributions of different interviewees are compared and contrasted.

For these two reasons there is an upper limit to the number of interviews that it is necessary to conduct and possible to analyse. For the single researcher this is somewhere between 15 and 25 individual interviews and some six to eight focus group discussions. Of course the research may be phased: a first set of interviews, followed by analysis, and then a second set. Or there may be a combination of individual and group interviews. In such situations it may be desirable to conduct a greater number of interviews and to analyse the different components of the corpus separately, bringing them together at a later stage.
Becker and Geer (1957) argue that participant observation is 'the most complete form of the sociological datum'. As such it provides a benchmark against which to judge other methods, or as they put it, to 'know what orders of information escape us when we use other methods'. In comparison with the intensive fieldwork of participant observation, Becker and Geer see three limitations or shortcomings with the interview. Essentially these arise from the fact that the interviewer relies on the informant's account of actions that occurred elsewhere in space and time.

In this situation the interviewer may not fully understand the 'local language': the connotation of some ordinary terms may be quite different. Secondly, for a variety of reasons the informant may omit important detail. It may be that some things are just part of the taken for granted; others may be difficult to put into words or appear to the respondent to be impolite or insensitive. Thirdly, an informant may view situations through 'distorted lenses' and provide an account which is misleading and not open to checking or verification.

These limitations of the interview may lead the researcher to make invalid inferences about situations and events. With participant observation the researcher is open to a greater breadth and depth of information, is able to triangulate different impressions and observations, and is able to follow up emergent discrepancies in the course of the fieldwork.

Becker and Geer do not suggest that these potential limitations of the interview invalidate the method. They acknowledge that for reasons of practicality and economy the interview is a useful method. What they offer are issues for consideration to sensitize researchers to the problems and to act as a catalyst for better interviewing skills. Practically speaking the implications of Becker and Geer are threefold. First, the interviewer should not take anything for granted. Secondly, they should probe assiduously for more detail than the interviewee may offer as a first reply to a question. Finally, it is in the accumulation of insights from a set of interviews that one comes to understand the life worlds within a group of respondents.

**Methodological choices: individual versus group interviewing**

Having acknowledged Becker and Geer's warnings, we now address the key consideration of which type of interviewing methodology would be best suited to the inquiry, individual or group interviewing. There is a striking contrast in choice of methods between academic and commercial research. Generally speaking academic research uses the individual depth interview, while the commercial sector favours group interviewing. The different orientations may be justified on the grounds of tradition, or on pragmatic considerations. For example since commercial research is often time pressured it is much quicker to run a small number of focus group interviews than it is to interview the same number of people individually.

Of course there are many similarities between individual and group interviewing. In both types of interview the researcher does not lead the
inquiry with a set of predetermined questions, as in a survey or questionnaire. While the broad content is structured by the research questions as these inform the topic guide, the idea is not to ask a set of standard questions or to expect the respondent to translate their thoughts into specified response categories. The questions are almost an invitation to the respondent to talk at length, in their own terms, and with time to reflect. Furthermore, unlike in the survey the researcher can obtain clarification and amplification of interesting points, with appropriate probing and targeted questioning.

But are there any conceptual grounds that might inform the choice of method? Any research interview is a social process, an interaction or cooperative venture, in which words are the main medium of exchange. It is not merely a one-way process of information passing from one (the interviewee) to another (the interviewer). Rather it is an interaction, an exchange of ideas and meanings, in which various realities and perceptions are explored and developed. To this extent both the respondent(s) and the interviewer are in different ways involved in the production of knowledge. When we deal with meanings and feelings about the world and about events there are different feasible realities depending on the situation and the nature of the interaction. Thus the interview is a joint venture, a sharing and negotiation of realities. In analysing the production of social knowledge or representations, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) argue that the minimal social system involved in representation is a dialogical triad: two persons (subject 1 and subject 2) who are concerned with an object (0) in relation to a project (P), along the time dimension. This triangle of mediation, extended in time (S–O–P–S), is the basic communication unit for the elaboration of meaning. Meaning is not an individual or a private affair, but is always influenced by the ‘other’, concrete or imagined.

With this in mind, consider the depth interview. It is a one-to-one conversation, a dyadic interaction. But it differs from ordinary conversations in a number of respects. It lasts for over an hour and is between two previously unacquainted people. There is an unusual role relationship. One person, the interviewer, is expected to ask the questions; the other, the interviewee, is expected to respond to them. The topic is the choice of the interviewer; the interviewee may or may not have given it serious consideration beforehand.

In this strange situation the interviewee may be rather self-conscious and perhaps a little hesitant and defensive. What role should they take in this conversation of unequals? Can they trust the interviewer, can they say what they really feel? Their initial inclination may be to follow the norms of everyday conversation, to limit answers to what is presumed to be relevant and informative (Grice, 1975), and to adopt positions on issues that match a particular self-image.

To counter these understandable tendencies and to encourage the interviewee to talk at length, to expand on aspects of their life and to be frank, the interviewer must put the interviewee at ease and establish a relationship of trust and confidence, so-called rapport. This is achieved by the
interviewer's form of questions, by verbal and non-verbal reinforcement, and by being relaxed and unselfconscious. As the rapport develops, so is the interviewee more likely to be relaxed and expansive, to think and talk about things beyond the level of surface opinions, and less likely to offer normative rationalization. At the same time the interviewer is increasingly able to follow up issues with further questions and probes. To some degree the interviewer must adopt the role of a counsellor.

Essentially, in the successful depth interview the personal worldview of the interviewee is explored in detail. While such personal views reflect the residues or memories of past conversations, the interviewee has centre stage. It is their personal construction of the past. In the course of such an interview it is fascinating to hear a narrative under construction: some of the elements are well remembered, but details and interpretations are voiced which may even surprise the interviewee himself or herself. Perhaps it is only by talking that we know what we think.

Moving from the unique form of dyadic interaction of the depth interview to the group interview brings qualitative changes in the nature of the social situation. In the focus group the interviewer, often called the moderator, is a catalyst for social interaction (communication) between the participants. The objective of the focus group is to stimulate the participants to talk and to respond to each other, to compare experiences and impressions and to react to what other people in the group say. To this extent it is a more genuine social interaction than the depth interview. It is an example of the minimal social unit in operation, and as such the meanings or representations that emerge are more influenced by the social nature of the group interaction, rather than relying on the individual perspective, as in the depth interview.

The social processes in groups have been studied extensively in the literature on group dynamics. There are at least three progenitors of the focus group: the group therapy tradition of the Tavistock Institute (Bion, 1961), the evaluation of communication effectiveness (Merton and Kendall, 1946), and the group dynamics tradition in social psychology (Lewin, 1958).

Essentially research shows that the group, as distinct from a number of people in the same location, is more than the sum of the parts: it becomes an entity in itself. Processes occur in groups which are not seen in the dyadic interaction of the depth interview. The emergence of the group goes hand in hand with the development of a shared identity, that sense of common fate captured in the self-description 'we'. A group may subdivide into factions challenging each other's views and opinions. Group interaction may generate emotion, humour, spontaneity and creative insights. People in groups are more willing to entertain novel ideas, and to explore their implications. Groups have been found to take greater risks and to show attitude polarization – the movement to more extreme positions. Based on these insights the focus group is a more naturalistic and holistic setting in which the participants take account of the views of others in formulating their responses and commenting on their own and others' experiences.

Based on these considerations we can summarize the key features of the group interview:
1 A synergy emerges out of the social interaction: in other words, the group is more than the sum of its parts.
2 It is possible to observe the group process, the dynamics of attitude and opinion change and opinion leadership.
3 In a group there can be a level of emotional involvement which is seldom seen in one-to-one interviews.

Underlying the focus group are various theoretical frameworks about the process of group formation. For example, Tuckman (1965) identified four developmental stages. First, there is the forming stage in which there is confusion and uncertainty, the establishment of acquaintances and the beginnings of the establishment of a group identity. This is followed by the storming stage where there is conflict between group members and between the group as a whole and the leader. If this period of conflict is resolved the group becomes cohesive, the norming stage. With roles defined and the group established, the performing stage is reached in which the real work of value to the researcher is done. To this list Gordon and Langmaid (1988) add a final phase, that of mourning. Here, as the group session comes to a close and the tape recorder is off, there are semi-private discussions between group members themselves and between some of the group and the moderator. There are last things to be said, explanations for embarrassing admissions and more generally a re-entry to the real world. The moderator may wish that the tape was still recording as points of some significance may be raised. In such circumstances it is always a good idea to take notes after the participants have left the room.

The task of the moderator is to facilitate the group’s progress towards the final stage, that of ‘performing’, which in the typical 90 minute group session may take between 15 and 45 minutes.

Having considered some conceptual issues underlying individual and group interviewing, we turn to the problem of deciding how to select between the two approaches. While many practitioners have well-articulated views on when and why they would use one or other approach, on this issue the research literature is rather equivocal (Morgan, 1996). There is no consensus as to when one method is likely to be more effective. Some suggest that groups are more creative, others not; some recommend individual interviews for sensitive topics, but other researchers have successfully explored sexual behaviours in focus groups. In all probability it depends on the nature of the research topic, on the research objectives, on the types of respondent, and to some extent on the skills and personal preferences of the researcher. There is insufficient methodological research to draw hard and fast conclusions. However, it is possible to make some general observations which may help researchers to consider the options and make an informed decision.

For the same number of respondents the focus group is more efficient. The group gives insights into the emerging consensus and the way people handle disagreements. In a group setting people may be creative; the researcher/moderator can explore metaphors and imagery and use projective type
stimuli. In the group situation the sharing and contrasting of experiences builds up a picture of common interests and concerns which, in part experienced by all, are seldom articulated by the single individual. The group is rather like a soap opera, a perspective on everyday life that is revealed only through watching the whole programme and not merely the contribution of a single actor.

But there are a number of disadvantages to focus groups which illustrate the advantages of the individual interview. First, the participants in focus groups tend to be somewhat self-selective. Not all those invited turn up and some target groups are difficult to recruit, e.g. ethnic minorities, the old and disabled, mothers with very young children. Similarly it is difficult, but not impossible, to recruit busy elite respondents to a group session. Such selection problems can be avoided with individual interviews, where the interview can be scheduled at a time and place convenient to the respondent. Secondly, it is not feasible to focus attention on a particular individual in a group discussion in the same way that can be achieved in a one-to-one interview. With the single respondent, far richer detail about personal experiences, decisions and action sequences can be elicited, with follow-up probe questions focusing on motivations in the context of detailed information about the particular circumstances of the person. What the interviewee says, and how the interview develops, can be related to other relevant characteristics of the individual in a way that is not possible within the discussion and subsequent analysis of a focus group.

In Table 3.1 the various advantages of individual and group interviewing are tentatively summarized. Given these differential strengths and limitations of focus groups and individual interviews, some researchers opt for a

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<tr>
<th>Table 3.1</th>
<th>A summary of the indication of depth and group interviews</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Individual interview</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group interview</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Where the research objective is to:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Orient the researcher to a field of inquiry and the local language</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore the life world of the individual in depth</td>
<td>Explore the range of attitudes, opinions and behaviours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do case studies with repeated interviews over time</td>
<td>Observe the processes of consensus and disagreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test an instrument or questionnaire (the cognitive interview)</td>
<td>Add contextual detail to quantitative findings</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>When the topic concerns:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Issues of public interest or common concern, e.g. politics, the media, consumer behaviour, leisure, new technologies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Detailed individual experiences, choices and personal biographies</td>
<td>Issues and questions of a relatively unfamiliar or hypothetical nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issues of particular sensitivity which may provoke anxiety</td>
<td><strong>When the respondents are:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficult to recruit, for example the elderly, mothers with young children, the ill, elite or high-status respondents</td>
<td>Not from such different backgrounds as to inhibit participation in the discussion of the topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children younger than about seven years</td>
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mixture of the two methods within the same project: a multi-method approach that has some justification.