World Showcase in the Epcot Centre. The couple are clearly aware that it is the prompting that has made them provide these reflections when they say: ‘Well thinking about it now, because I hadn’t really given this any consideration before you started asking about it’ and ‘Well, like you, I hadn’t thought of it like that before’. This is the whole point of prompting—to get the interviewee to think more about the topic and to provide the opportunity for a more detailed response. It is not a leading question, since the interviewees were not being asked ‘Do you think that the Disney company fails to recognize the significance of Black history (or ignores the Third World) in its presentation of different cultures?’ There is no doubt that it is the prompts that elicit the more interesting replies, but that is precisely their role.

Tape recording and transcription

The point has already been made on several occasions that, in qualitative research, the interview is usually tape-recorded and transcribed whenever possible (see Box 15.8). Qualitative researchers are frequently interested not just in what people say but also in the way that they say it. If this aspect is to be fully woven into an analysis, it is necessary for a complete account of the series of exchanges in an interview to be available. Also, because the interviewer is supposed to be highly alert to what is being said—following up interesting points made, prompting and probing where necessary, drawing attention to any inconsistencies in the interviewee’s answers—it is best if he or she is not distracted by having to concentrate on getting down notes on what is said.

As with just about everything in conducting business research, there is a cost (other than the financial cost of tape recorders and tapes), in that the use of a tape recorder may disconcert respondents, who become self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved. Most people accede to the request for the interview to be tape-recorded, though it is not uncommon for a small number to refuse (see Box 15.9). When faced with refusal, you should still go ahead with the interview, as it is highly likely that useful information will still be forthcoming. For example, Prasad (1993: see Chapter 13)

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Box 15.8 Why should you record and transcribe interviews?

With approaches that entail detailed attention to language, such as conversation analysis and discourse analysis (see Chapter 17), the recording of conversations and interviews is to all intents and purposes mandatory. However, researchers who use qualitative interviews and focus groups (see Chapter 16) also tend to record and then transcribe interviews. Heritage (1984: 238) suggests that the procedure of recording and transcribing interviews has the following advantages.

- It helps to correct the natural limitations of our memories and of the intuitive glosses that we might place on what people say in interviews.
- It allows more thorough examination of what people say.
- It permits repeated examinations of the interviewees’ answers.
- It opens up the data to public scrutiny by other researchers, who can evaluate the analysis that is carried out by the original researchers of the data (that is, a secondary analysis).
- It therefore helps to counter accusations that an analysis might have been influenced by a researcher’s values or biases.
- It allows the data to be reused in other ways from those intended by the original researcher—for example, in the light of new theoretical ideas or analytic strategies.

However, it has to be recognized that the procedure is very time-consuming. It also requires good equipment, usually in the form of a good-quality tape recorder and microphone but also, if possible, a transcription machine. Transcription also very quickly results in a daunting pile of paper. Also, recording equipment may be offputting for interviewees.
Box 15.9 Getting it taped and transcribed: an illustration of two problems

Rafaeli et al. (1997) conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty female administrators in a university business school in order to study the significance of dress at the workplace. They write:

Everyone we contacted agreed to participate. Interviews took place in participants’ offices or in a school lounge and lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. We recorded and transcribed all but two interviews: 1 participant refused to be taped, and the tape recorder malfunctioned during another interview. For interviews not taped, we recorded detailed notes. We assured all participants that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous and hired an outside contractor to transcribe the interviews. (1997: 14)

Even though, overall this interview study was highly successful, generating eighteen interviews which were recorded and transcribed, it does show two kinds of problems qualitative interviewers can face—namely, hardware malfunctions and refusals to be recorded.

Practical tip transcribing interviews

If you are doing research for a project or dissertation, you may not have the resources to pay for professional transcription, and, unless you are an accurate touch typist, it may take you a lot longer than the suggested five to six hours per hour of speech. If you have access to a transcription machine with a foot-operated stop–start mechanism, this will make the task of transcription somewhat easier. However, the important thing to bear in mind is that you must allow sufficient time for transcription and be realistic about how many interviews you are going to be able to transcribe in the time available.

recounts that, in the few instances where employees at Paragon indicated discomfort with being recorded, she took notes during the interview and wrote these up after the session. The summary notes were then shown to the interviewee, who evaluated their accuracy. This advice also applies to cases of tape-recorder malfunction (again see Box 15.9). Among those who do agree to be tape-recorded, there will be some who will not get over their alarm at being confronted with a microphone. As a result, some interviews may not be as interesting as you might have hoped. In qualitative research, there is often quite a large amount of variation in the amount of time that interviews take. For example, in Milkman’s (1997) study of technological change at General Motors the length of the interviews ranged from between forty-five minutes and four hours. Similarly, Marshall’s (1995; see Box 13.3) research into women managers involved interviews with women managers that lasted between one and a half and two hours. It should not be assumed that shorter interviews are necessarily inferior to longer ones, but very short ones that are a product of interviewee non-cooperation or anxiety about being tape-recorded are likely to be less useful. In the extreme, when an interview has produced very little of significance, it may not be worth the time and cost of transcription. Thankfully, such occasions are relatively unusual. If people do agree to be interviewed, they usually do so in a cooperative way and loosen up after initial anxiety about the microphone. As a result, even short interviews are often quite revealing.

The problem with transcribing interviews is that it is very time-consuming. Pettigrew (1985) notes that his interviews at Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) produced around 500 hours of tape-recorded information for analysis, which were either completely transcribed or coded onto 8 × 5 inch cards according to predetermined and emergent categories. Similarly, in their study of traders and managers in four investment banks, Willman et al. (2002) interviewed 118 traders and trader-managers and ten senior managers. Interviews averaged one hour in duration and they were all taped and transcripts were produced. It is best to allow around five to six hours for transcription for every hour of speech. Also, transcription
yields vast amounts of paper, which you will need to wade through when analysing the data. Prasad (1993) reports that her thirty-four interviews on computerization (see Chapter 13) generated nearly 800 pages of interview transcripts that needed to be analysed, in addition to over 1,800 pages of field notes from observations. It is clear, therefore, that, while transcription has the advantage of keeping intact the interviewee’s and interviewer's words, it does so by piling up the amount of text to be analysed. It is no wonder that writers like Lofland and Lofland (1995) advise that the analysis of qualitative data is not left until all the interviews have been completed and transcribed. To procrastinate may give the researcher the impression that he or she faces a monumental task. Also, there are good grounds for making analysis an ongoing activity, because it allows the researcher to be more aware of emerging themes that he or she may want to ask about in a more direct way in later interviews. The preference for ongoing analysis is also very much recommended by proponents of approaches to qualitative data analysis like grounded theory (see Chapter 19).

It is easy to take the view that transcription is a relatively unproblematic translation of the spoken into the written word. However, given the reliance on transcripts in qualitative research based on interviews, the issue should not be taken lightly. The first question to consider is whether to do the transcription yourself, or use secretarial assistance. Transcribers need to be trained in much the same way that interviewers do. Moreover, even among experienced transcribers, errors can creep in. For example, Spender (1989) describes how, of the thirty-four interviews in his sample, twenty-five were transcribed. During the exploratory stages of the research this was done by assistants. However, this proved unsatisfactory, as ‘there are important data in the respondent’s intonations, hesitations, etc. which need to be available’. He concluded that ‘the recording can help to recapture the actual data, which is neither the recording, nor the transcript, but the researcher’s experience of the interview in its own context’ (1989: 82). Poland (1995) has provided some fascinating examples of mistakes in transcription that can be the result of many different factors (mishearing, fatigue, carelessness). For example, one transcript contained the following passage:

I think unless we want to become like other countries, where people have, you know, democratic freedoms...

But the actual words on the audiotape were:

I think unless we want to become like other countries, where people have no democratic freedoms... (Poland 1995: 294)

Steps clearly need to be taken to check on the quality of transcription.

Flexibility in the interview

One further point to bear in mind is that you need to be generally flexible in your approach to interviewing in qualitative research. This advice is not just to do with needing to be responsive to what interviewees say to you and following up interesting points that they make. Such flexibility is important and is an important reminder that, with semi-structured interviewing, you should not turn the interview into a kind of structured interview but with open questions. Flexibility is important in such areas as varying the order of questions, following up leads, and clearing up inconsistencies in answers. Flexibility is important in other respects, such as coping with audio-recording equipment breakdown and refusals.

**Practical tip**

transcribing sections of an interview

Some interviews or at least large portions of them are sometimes not very useful, perhaps because interviewees are reticent or not as relevant to your research topic as you had hoped. There seems little point in transcribing material that you know is unlikely to be fruitful. It may be that, for many of your interviews, it would be better to listen to them closely first, at least once or more usually twice, and then transcribe only those portions that you think are useful or relevant. However, this may mean that you miss certain things or that you have to go back to the tapes at a later stage in your analysis to try and find something that emerges as significant only later on.
Practical tip  

**translating interviews into English**

If you are interviewing people whose primary language is not English but another language in which you the interviewer are fluent, you may decide to interview respondents in their primary language, so that their ability to communicate effectively is not impaired by having to speak in a language with which they are less familiar. You should first transcribe the interviews in the language spoken during the interview and then translate the transcript into English so that you can analyse the data in the language that you will be using when you come to write up your research. Differences in the meaning of words between the two languages may mean that the translation process leads to some distortion of the data. To overcome this, you may wish to back-translate the transcript into the primary language and then compare the back-translation with the original version, noting any discrepancies. However, it should be noted that this is bound to be a time-consuming process, so it needs to be borne in mind when deciding how many interviews to do.

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by interviewees to allow a recording to take place (see Box 15.9). A further element is that interviewers often find that, as soon as they switch off their tape recorders, the interviewee continues to ruminate on the topic of interest and frequently will say more interesting things than in the interview. It is usually not feasible to switch the machine back on again, so try to take some notes, either while the person is talking or as soon as possible after the interview. Such ‘unsolicited accounts’ can often be the source of revealing information or views (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This is certainly what Parker (2000) found in connection with his research on three British organizations—a National Health Service District Health Authority, a building society, and a manufacturing company—which was based primarily on semi-structured interviews: ‘Indeed, some of the most valuable parts of the interview took place after the tape had been switched off, the closing intimacies of the conversation being prefixed with a silent or explicit “well, if you want to know what I really think…”’. Needless to say, a visit to the toilet to write up as much as I could remember followed almost immediately’ (2000: 236).

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Practical tip  

**Keeping the tape recorder going**

Since interviewees sometimes ‘open up’ at the end of the interview, perhaps just when the tape recorder has been switched off, there are good grounds for suggesting that you should keep it switched on for as long as possible. So, when you are winding the interview down, don’t switch off the tape recorder immediately.