

# eight

## COLLECTING QUALITATIVE DATA

### The interview

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Clearly, the interview, in all its many forms, is central to qualitative research today. In addition to what I have said in the chapter, in my teaching I emphasise the following points.

#### Quality of data

In all empirical research, quality of data is central, but, surprisingly, it is often overlooked as an issue in the planning of research. Poor quality data means poor research, with no confidence able to be placed in any findings and conclusions which are put forward. In a very real sense, research with poor quality data is not worth doing. While this is a general point, applying with equal force to quantitative, qualitative and mixed method data, it has special relevance when it comes to data collected by interview. I have two reasons for making this statement:

1. The more open-ended and in-depth the interview is, the more skill is required from the researcher/interviewer. And much qualitative research – quite rightly – favours exactly this sort of open-ended in-depth interviewing. Indeed, for many people, this is what the term ‘qualitative interviewing’ actually means. However, none of us should assume that we will automatically, or naturally, have a high level of skill when it comes to this sort of interviewing. Rather, it is a skill which needs to be developed and practised. Ideally, training would be involved, and in past times, when more time and resources were available, we would hold training courses for qualitative interviewing. Unfortunately, this is seldom possible today.

However, this does not mean that nothing can be done in the way of preparing for interview research, and developing the skill needed to produce top-quality interview data. Books are available on the topic of the skills required for effective qualitative interviewing, and a variety of training exercises are suggested and recommended in the literature. In addition to this, a lot can be learned by the trainee researcher conducting mock interviews with classmates, friends and even family members, together with critical observation and feedback. Therefore, I recommend, at the very least, that the student read several books on this topic, identify and list the sorts of skills required of an effective in-depth interviewer and go through practice sessions with whoever might be available in an effort to develop these skills.

2. I stress that a great deal of thought and organisation need to go into the setting up of the qualitative interview. The way in which it is set up, and the extent to which organisational

arrangements take account of and respect the situation of the interviewee, can powerfully affect the quality of the data. Perhaps this is best illustrated by citing a typical example: Imagine that a research plan calls for in-depth interviews with, say, six school principals, about some aspect of school operation – perhaps the implementation of some new policy. Imagine that the plan has dealt with the sampling aspect (how would these six principals be selected and why?) and it is time to organise the interviews. How should interviewees be approached and how should the interview be set up? I recommend a set of steps along the following lines:

- A short letter is written to each principal, introducing the research and the researcher, saying briefly what the research is about, how and why each principal was chosen, and what time commitment the interview is likely to involve. The letter should be on university letterhead and should indicate that the research proposal has been approved by appropriate university authorities. A good way to finish is to indicate that the researcher will telephone in a day or two to follow up.
- Preparation for the phone call should include a short summary of the project and why it is thought to be important, and should anticipate questions the principal is likely to ask. Assuming the phone call goes well, the principal should be thanked for agreeing to participate and details regarding the interview should be discussed (time, place, method of recording, ethical issues, etc.). After this is done, it is generally a good idea to arrange to send the principal a one-page outline of the project, and topics the interview intends to cover, a day or two before the scheduled interview.
- After suitable preparation for the interview (development of skills, preparation of topic list and list of questions, etc.), the interview is held at the time and place of the principal's choosing. Suitable attention is paid by the researcher to opening the interview, establishing rapport and closing the interview (these important interview skills are thoroughly covered in the research methodology literature on this topic).
- Assuming the interview is audio-recorded, a transcript of the interview is then prepared (along with a thank you note) and sent back to the principal for cross-checking. Importantly, the respondent is invited at this stage to amend, add or delete, as appropriate. The amended transcript then becomes the data for the research.

Such careful and thorough preparation is essential, in making every effort to maximise the quality of interview data. The steps involved are really common sense and are also designed to acknowledge and respect the professionalism of respondents. Of course, ethical issues, such as anonymity, and, if appropriate, confidentiality, and who will have access to the information, are also covered in the preparation outlined above. Many of these points are made in section 8.5, on data collection procedures.

## Focus group interviewing

The point made above – about the skills needed for qualitative interviewing – applies very much to focus group interviewing. Focus groups are a very good and efficient way to collect rich and interesting qualitative data, and their use is to be encouraged, as long as there is a good logical basis for it, and as long as it fits with

the research strategy. Often, focus groups are especially effective when used in conjunction with other data collection techniques. The issue now is the skill of the researcher in conducting focus groups – once again, the quality of (focus group interview) data is at stake. As before, we should not assume we will automatically be good focus group interviewers. This is a specialised skill for which preparation and practice are required.

The main point to understand is that the good focus group interviewer is really more of a facilitator than a questioner (as in one-to-one interviews). The task is to unlock the ‘power’ of the group – to facilitate group dynamics so that the ability of a group to encourage discussion can operate, while at the same time keeping discussion focused on the topics and questions of the research. Group facilitation is a specialised skill, for which, ideally, training would be provided. Without the provision of formal training (which is a common situation in today’s research world), the researcher has to depend on books (and sometimes training materials such as CDs or DVDs) and whatever practice sessions can be arranged. Fortunately, there is plenty of literature available analysing the skill of focus group interviewing and recommending activities to practise to develop this skill. As a research supervisor, I do not want to see focus group data collection proceed without the student showing evidence of reading and practice, and being able to demonstrate the skill in practice.

## Observation

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Observational research is much trickier than it might first appear. There are two general possibilities. Either the data will be recorded in an unstructured way – as with videotaping some sample of behaviour (note the sampling issues involved here – which sample of behaviour and why? How many such samples? etc.), in which case there will be difficulties with the analysis. Or the data collection will use structured observation schedules, simplifying the analysis but running the risk of missing the full richness of the behaviour being studied.

These are ends of a continuum and there are obviously other possibilities in between which combine aspects of these two approaches, but I am concerned when students propose observational research without a full understanding of its complexities.

One area where observation can be used very profitably is in connection with qualitative interviewing. The combination of a respondent’s recorded behaviour, replayed to the respondent in conjunction with interview questions, can produce very high quality data.

## Participant observation

Non-participant observation is a potentially rich data collection technique which requires skill and training to maximise the quality of the data. This comment applies

even more to participant observation. This is a complex data collection technique, which, in my view, should not be undertaken without considerable training and practice. It is also highly specialised and demanding. As I have said in the text, my opinion (and experience) is that a full participant observation study is likely to be too demanding for most graduate student research projects, unless the study is located in a department of anthropology where the relevant expertise and guidance are available.

However, using 'elements of an ethnographic approach' can often add greatly to the richness and quality of a qualitative study, and this may or may not involve some partial use of participant observation. Fortunately, although full-scale participant observation is demanding and difficult, there is once again a good deal of excellent methodological literature to assist in preparation for it.

## Documentary data

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An incredible number of documents, not produced specifically for social science research purposes, exist in today's world. I think it is a fair criticism to say that social science research does not take full advantage of this.

I think all of us have a knee-jerk reaction in thinking that the next research project we plan and embark on will need a new set of data. (Obviously, secondary analysis of existing data, quantitative or qualitative, is an exception to this.) However, it is wise, in planning any project, to stop and think about what already existing documentary data is available, relevant to the topic we are working on, and how we could work it into our study. It is very often possible to do this and enrich the project. This may mean adding documentary data to other types of data in the research and amending purposes and research questions to reflect this. Three obvious areas where this sort of thinking is relevant are policy research and studies of organisations and institutions. But we should not be limited in our thinking on this point – as Anselm Strauss, co-founder of grounded theory and a wonderful sociologist, used to say, 'everything is data'.

A major practical advantage of using documentary data is that it already exists. This means that the data collection part of the research is reduced and simplified. I have even seen doctoral theses where the research used only existing documentary data. An example is a critical discourse analysis of the government's revised School Law in the State of Western Australia. The three sources of documentary data used – all public – were the law itself (the parliamentary bills with their many clauses), the background papers prepared by parliament for the law (in the Westminster system, new bills are typically accompanied by specially prepared background papers on topics relevant to the bills) and the Hansard discussion in parliament as the bills were debated (again, in the Westminster system, bills are debated in both houses of parliament and the Hansard contains a verbatim record of all such debates). A fine study resulted, from which a book was published (McGowan, W. (2006) *The Responsibility of Parents for the Education of their Children: A Foucauldian Analysis of the School Education Act, 1999*).

Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press) and the student solved all of his data collection problems very stylishly.

## Sampling in qualitative research

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The idea that sampling only applies to quantitative research is very much misplaced. All empirical research involves sampling, and the sampling issues in qualitative research are just as important as in any other type of research.

The one main point I stress in my teaching about qualitative research sampling is that, ideally, sampling should be driven by a sampling strategy, and this sampling strategy should fit in well with the overall strategy of the research. The situation is more complex here than in quantitative research sampling, where there are two main types of sampling – probability sampling and deliberate sampling – representing two different sampling strategies. There are many different strategies for sampling which can be and have been used in qualitative research and the table from Miles and Huberman (Table 8.1) summarises 16 of them.

I have used ‘ideally’ in the previous paragraph because, increasingly, in today’s world, and especially with student research projects, preferred sampling strategies are not possible – for a variety of reasons – and researchers must take whatever samples they can get. This is called convenience sampling. How should we handle this in a research proposal, and later on in the report? First, the student is not to blame for this sort of situation. Research has to be done in the real world, and this world is not organised to suit the convenience of researchers. So there is nothing wrong with admitting the real-world constraints. Second, I recommend describing the sort of sample and sampling strategy which ideally would be used. (This shows reviewers and examiners the student’s awareness of the issue.) Third, having been forced to study whatever we can get access to, we should be aware of any respects in which the sample we propose to study, or have studied, is atypical or biased, and report on these. If the sample does not seem to be atypical or biased in any way, then qualified (potential) generalisations can be made, using such statements as ‘there seems no reason to believe that...’. I think we can learn things of value from studying any sample (or case), but we need to be careful of exaggerated claims for general propositions based on convenience sampling.