

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods produce detailed and non-quantitative accounts of small groups, seeking to interpret the meanings people make of their lives in natural settings, on the assumption that social interactions form an integrated set of relationships best understood by inductive procedures.

Section Outline: Two traditions? ***Core issues:*** interpreting meanings; holistic; naturally occurring events; less abstract; small samples; detailed accounts; inductive reasoning. ***Advantages over quantitative methods.*** ***Techniques:*** philosophy and temperament. ***Conflicts between academics:*** USA and Britain. ***Methodological pluralism.*** ***Overlap of qualitative and quantitative methods.***

It is conventional to divide social research methods into two types: (a) qualitative or soft, and (b) quantitative or hard. This makes it easier to identify differences between approaches to research, in the form of a rough 'shorthand' way of talking about things. It provides a loose framework for linking specific techniques, like **Auto/biography and Life Histories**, **Case Study** or **Coding Qualitative Data**. We shall therefore use the distinction as a convenient way of exploring basic styles of research, although qualitative and quantitative methods *sometimes overlap* (e.g. Finch's (1989) use of sources in discussing family obligations).

The quickest way to gain a sense of qualitative methods is through examples. In this book for instance, there are sections on Community Studies, Ethnography, Feminist Research, Grounded Theory and Participant Observation. This is not an exclusive list: other references can be found in more general sections, such as Documentary Methods, Fieldwork, Levels of Measurement, or Methods and Methodologies (although not all of these are shown in the 'link list' at the end of this section).

Qualitative methods are 'especially interested in how ordinary people observe and describe their lives' (Silverman 1993: 170). It is an umbrella term covering different types of research. Almost all share certain features:

- The core concern is to seek out and *interpret the meanings* that people bring to their own actions, rather than describing any regularities or statistical associations between 'variables'.
- They treat actions as part of a *holistic social process and context*, rather than as something that can be extracted and studied in isolation.
- They set out to encounter social phenomena as they *naturally occur* (observing what happens, rather than making it happen).
- They operate at a *less abstract* and generalised level of explanation.
- They utilise *non-representative, small samples* of people, rather than working from large representative samples to identify the broad sweep of national patterns.
- They focus on the *detail* of human life.
- Rather than starting with a theoretical hypothesis, and trying to test it, they explore the data they encounter and allow ideas to emerge from them (i.e. using *inductive*, not deductive, logic).

Thus qualitative sociology focuses on how individuals interact, emphasising the interpretation of the meanings which each (including the researcher: **Reflexivity**) brings to the interaction and the way mutual understandings are negotiated. In this approach, there is no prior social order, or social structure external to the lived experiences of the actors, that predetermines outcomes. It makes little sense to seek general 'laws' of how 'society' works, because society is only the sum total of the many complex social situations that are going on at one time (Bryman 1988).

With social life being so intricate, and so dependent on circumstances, what would be the point of trying to reduce it to statistical simplifications? Social survey questionnaires cannot hope to catch the essence of social interactions. Only qualitative methods, with their detailed, flexible, sensitive and naturalistic characteristics, are suited to producing adequate sociological accounts. The term 'soft methods' suggests *subtlety*, not easy to do, whereas 'hard methods' does not mean more difficult, but less flexibility. The method follows from the kind of sociology adopted, which in turn incorporates a philosophical view of what the world is like, and how humans can know about it (**Reliability; Validity**).

Most sociologists would argue that the methods they use follow logically from prior intellectual understandings of the world (e.g. Seale 1999). These philosophical standpoints about what counts as 'social', and how it can be accessed, are rigorously developed. Research practice depends on pre-existing conceptual frameworks that have been carefully elaborated, and can be logically defended (this of course also applies to

quantitative sociology). In some cases that draw heavily on phenomenological philosophy (**Positivism and Realism**) – like symbolic interactionism or ethnomethodology – qualitative methods are logically the *only* way to engage with the social world.

We can identify three elements here. One is research technique per se (**Participant Observation; Ethnography**, etc.). The second is the underlying intellectual understandings from which sociologists start. Other examples can be found in the sections on **Positivism** and **Ethnomethodology**. Third, debates over qualitative and quantitative methods reflect basic assumptions about free will and determinism: qualitative methods fitting more comfortably with those who stress the freedom of the individual to choose, and quantitative methods suiting those who tend to see human life as constrained and determined by external factors.

It would be easy to over-emphasise the logical consistency of philosophical orientation and methods used. The limited length of journal articles often means there is no room for such discussion, and the matter is left largely implicit. Platt's study of American sociology suggests that there has been a lot of post-hoc rationalisation of what were simple pragmatic choices: 'general theoretical/methodological stances are just stances: slogans, hopes aspirations, not guidelines' (Platt 1996: 275).

Two tendencies can be discerned. Currently, a commonly used method (to judge by what has recently been published in the main British journals) is discursive interviews with small numbers of informants (e.g. Solomon et al. 2002; Thomson et al. 2002). This might be called the soft version of soft methods, because little attempt is made to invoke substantial philosophical justifications for the research design, beyond a respect for complexity and sensitivity of social life and an attempt to represent the informants' views as they naturally exist.

The other tendency, an older tradition, adopts a hard version of soft methods, vehemently dismissing alternative approaches (e.g. Reinharz 1992; Stanley 1993). Academics trained to think consistently are naturally critical of views that they reject. For instance, quantitative sociologists have criticised qualitative methods as being 'unscientific' and a-theoretical (**Positivism and Realism**), open to subjective bias by the individual researcher (**Fieldwork**), and not open to inspection or replication. However, such attacks to a large extent merely reflect the history of academic institutions.

In the US, the early success of the University of Chicago's qualitative style of ethnographic sociology was later challenged by rival new departments espousing an alternative quantitative style. The emphasis

placed on abstract theory and survey research by those like Parsons and Lazarsfeld at Harvard and Columbia was due not only to their personal preferences as sociologists, but also to the tactic of competing academically against a discipline's leaders by embracing alternative stances.

The emergence of 'abstracted empiricism' and 'mindless number-crunching', as some critics called the new styles, was also facilitated by the extremist politics of the McCarthy Era. McCarthyism tolerated no questioning of the neo-Conservative version of the American Way of Life. Whereas Chicago had interested itself in the less advantaged in society, the new departments could appeal to the 'scientific' basis of statistical analysis, and the idea of social cohesion in functionalist social theory, so escaping accusations of 'Anti-Americanism'.

In Britain, neither qualitative nor quantitative sociology initially established itself as the dominant form in that way (Payne et al. 1981). If there was an older tradition to confront, it was an emphasis of abstract social theorising. Developing later (only after the Second World War was there more than one department of sociology), and with intellectual links to the Labour Party, British sociology used simple surveys alongside ethnographic methods to investigate social problems (Platt 2003). The creation of new sociology departments in the rapid expansion of Higher Education initially allowed space for any methodological disputants to co-exist.

Later on, in a rejection of both grand theorising (especially Marxist) and the focus on class-based social inequalities, a new generation of sociologists borrowed the dismissive (and often incorrectly applied) language of 'number-crunching' and 'positivism' (**Positivism and Realism**) from the US to challenge 'the old guard', and to legitimise their own feminist and ethnomethodological revolts. Attempts by the major research funding body, the Social Science Research Council (and its successor, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)) to raise standards of numeracy provided a rallying point for resistance against alleged governmental interference with academic freedom.

By the mid-1970s, advocates of 'methodological pluralism' (**Methods and Methodologies**) called for quantitative and qualitative sociologists to co-exist. Methodological pluralism was basically a plea for tolerance. It did not demand that every sociologist must practise all kinds of methods. Pluralism is achieved by the sum total of output, rather than by each individual.

Some researchers with broad interests do however adopt a pragmatic approach, allowing the nature of the problem (the thing to be investigated) to dictate the techniques adopted for each study. This

acknowledges that small-scale processes can best be studied qualitatively, whereas national patterns require quantitative methods. Preliminary exploration may best use 'softer' methods, in order to set up a more conventionally quantitative analysis as the next step. This pragmatism attempts to build on the strengths of both traditions rather than taking an exclusive philosophical stance.

It is also true that qualitative techniques draw on some of the stock-in-trade of what is normally regarded as quantitative methods. **Grounded Theory**, for example, uses both induction and deduction. Conversational analysis measures pauses in talk to the millisecond (**Ethnomethodology and Conversational Analysis**). Analysis of field notes involves content counting (**Content Analysis**). 'Qualitative research does imply a commitment to field activities. It does not imply a commitment to innumeracy' (Kirk and Miller 1986: 10). Reports based on qualitative methods often include statements about sample proportions, and can be written in such a generalising tone that it is hard to tell which tradition is being used (e.g. Jones 1999). For these reasons, while distinguishing between the two main 'schools' helps to clarify the different techniques, in practice too much can be made of the differences.

Key Words

ethnography
 grand theory
 holistic
 inductive
 McCarthyism
 meaning
 methodological pluralism

Links

Auto/biography and Life Histories
 Case Study
 Coding Qualitative Data
 Content Analysis
 Ethnography
 Ethnomethodology and Conversational Analysis
 Fieldwork
 Grounded Theory
 Methods and Methodologies
 Participant Observation
 Positivism and Realism
 Reflexivity
 Reliability
 Validity

Fieldwork

Fieldwork can mean the data collection stage of a project (particularly in the qualitative tradition); or how researchers go about collecting data; or more narrowly, data collection in a social setting that tries to reflect the naturally occurring order of events and subjective meanings of those being studied.

Section Outline: *Fieldwork as qualitative research. The natural setting. Anthropological inheritance: 'going into the field'. The drama of fieldwork. Making records of events as they happen. Preparations for fieldwork. Fieldwork as an exploratory stage. Planning inductive research. Access; gatekeepers; rules of engagement. Reactions to the fieldworker. 'Acceptance' and moral obligations.*

'Fieldwork' is used in two distinct ways in social research. It can be a general term for several kinds of **Qualitative Methods**:

a style of investigation that is also referred to as . . . 'qualitative method', 'interpretative research', 'case study method' and 'ethnography' (Burgess 1982: 1).

More specifically, it can refer to that part of the qualitative research process where data are collected in a naturally occurring setting, i.e. what researchers actually *do* when they are 'in the field' – in, say, a village, school, bar, factory, club, hospital, church, care home or gang. As qualitative research has become more specialist and widespread, the word has become slightly less fashionable in its first sense. However, including 'fieldwork' here, with our links, allows us to reflect how extensive such methods have become (Payne et al. in press) and in particular, we can draw attention to the practicalities of doing fieldwork.

Our model of fieldwork comes from social anthropology, where anthropologists left the comfort and familiarity of their homes and colleges to travel to distant places, to camp out with people they did not know, and live in non-industrial cultures very different from their own

(**Ethnography; Community Studies**). Although sociologists today may travel only a short way for their research (say, to the local school or a business), returning home and to the university each day, there still remains a sense of adventure and uncertainty even about this enterprise. Much of the excitement comes from the researchers not being in control of the place where they are collecting data, and the people from whom they are collecting them. The researcher must perform in an unfamiliar setting, responding ad lib to events, making sense of the detailed doings of other people's lives – people who owe the researcher no favours (the Zuni people even demanded payment from Pandey in return for being studied! (Srinivas et al. 1979)). Researchers' performances, and reactions to them, must be constantly reviewed, self-interrogated and re-interpreted (**Reflexivity**).

The intensity of fieldwork experience can be gauged from the many retrospective accounts published by sociologists (e.g. Burgess 1982; Srinivas et al. 1979; see also references in McKeganey and Cunningham-Burley 1987). They may subsequently write about their experiences, but researchers are notoriously defensive of 'their' fieldwork patches, discouraging others from 'intruding'. This is one reason why very few follow-ups or replications are carried out in the original settings.

Of course, not all fieldwork involves the drama of hanging out with motor-cycle gangs, soccer hooligans, Ulster Protestant terrorists, the inmates of mental hospitals, naturists, undertakers, homeless men, sex industry workers, religious cultists, jazz musicians or drug dealers. Fieldwork also includes visiting a school while pupils complete a questionnaire under teacher supervision, or analysing what happened at an academic conference one has attended. Indeed, almost any data collection trip out of the office, using whatever research methods, can be referred to as fieldwork. However, the term is more typically reserved for qualitative research, over a period of time, in some specific setting. The most popular data collection methods are currently in-depth **Interviewing** and **Participant Observation**.

As an enterprise, fieldwork is primarily undertaken to encounter life *as it happens* in the place or organisation where it usually occurs; to identify its patterns; and to produce an *understanding* of these (Grills 1998). Two things follow from this. First, there are practical problems around what data are recorded and how they are recorded for later analysis: this is further discussed in **Coding Qualitative Data** (see also Grbich 1999: 121–38; 158–92). Second, it is not simply that mainstream fieldwork takes place 'in the field': it is part of a specific theoretical position. There is a prior commitment to a theoretical orientation that assumes there is

a world external to the researcher which is best interpreted in its own context; as coherent units of action; through direct interaction with, and interpretation by, the researcher.

While this implies understanding things on their own terms, that does not mean fieldwork can be blithely entered into without preparation. Good fieldwork is based on systematic thinking *before* it starts, with literature review, discussion, reflection, and at least outline formulation of propositions about what may be encountered and its meaning. Even

in [**Grounded Theory**] development, the literature review provides theoretical constructs, categories, and their properties that can be used to organize the data and discover new connections between theory and real-world phenomena (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 52; added emphasis)

There are, however, two variations to this guideline. Fieldwork is sometimes undertaken as a brief, *preliminary exploration* precisely in order to develop ideas and hypotheses; the natural setting stimulating questions and hypotheses to be addressed in subsequent research through quantitative methods. Second, some researchers would argue that, because the setting is not under control, and needs to be understood on its own terms, research must necessarily proceed in a relatively unplanned and open-minded way. Rather than imposing our preconceptions on the data, our concepts and theories should emerge from the data in an inductive way. It is certainly true that if we knew all the answers in advance, there would be no point in doing research. Serendipity does play a part in determining the path that some projects follow. None the less, nothing is more likely to expose a project to the criticisms of being sloppy, subjective, superficial and 'soft' in the worst sense – criticisms often levelled against qualitative methods – than inadequate prior conceptualisation of the 'problem' to be researched.

Preparation for fieldwork is not just intellectual. One of the major problems is *access*, the selection of a research site and the negotiation necessary to gain entry to it. Sometimes there is little alternative but to take whatever site is available. Physical location (distance to be travelled), type of site, and how restricted the entry, can all constrain choice. Often access follows from a personal contact. A researcher's colleagues, supervisor, friends, family or prior paid or voluntary work may open a door that would otherwise remain closed. Limitations on access mean that researchers often have to make do with what they can get, whether or not it best suits their topics of interest.

Central to gaining access is the question of who can give permission –

or, as it is usually put, who are the 'gatekeepers'? Gatekeepers may be the senior managers in organisations who give formal approval, trade union officials who expect to be consulted, or unofficial 'leaders' who by personality or experience can influence their colleagues. The latter are less obvious during the preliminary stage.

Any requests for access, however initiated, should be followed by face-to-face negotiation, to establish 'rules of engagement'. It is important that the project is clearly, fully and honestly explained (**Ethical Practice**). The price of access may well be a compromise on schedules, goals or personnel. An offer of feedback may facilitate access, but it is crucial to be clear about who 'owns' the results and right to publish.

Even with 'permission', or the support of a 'sponsor' who can vouch for the researcher, co-operation from every member of an organisation cannot be guaranteed. Any given sponsor will represent only one faction. Once into a setting, continuing access depends on researchers' social and research skills in maintaining acceptance of their roles and tolerance of their presence. Researchers can expect to be 'tested' by confrontations or involvement in activities that should be reported as rule breaches. Is the researcher really just a management spy? Can he/she be trusted to keep secrets? Is he/she what is being claimed?

Continued acceptance can best be achieved by consistency of role-playing (most fieldwork involves some kind of role-adoption). Indeed, consistency is generally important: if a position has been adopted, with the gatekeepers or others, it must be kept up. If undertakings about confidentiality have been given, or offers of feedback made, then these must be delivered, both on moral grounds and the expediency of ensuring further access. The project is not accomplished until all its aspects have been completed.

Key Words

access
gatekeeper
inductive
role-playing
rules of engagement
sponsor

Links

Coding Qualitative Data
Community Studies
Ethical Practice
Ethnography
Grounded Theory
Interviewing
Participant Observation
Qualitative Methods
Reflexivity

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Grounded Theory

Grounded theory seeks to build systematic theoretical statements inductively from coding and analysing observational data, by developing and refining conceptual categories which are then tested and re-tested in further data collection.

Section Outline: Correct use of 'grounded theory' as a rigorous method. Combining induction with deduction. Elaborating pre-existing understandings. Testing emerging concepts. Stages in grounded theory. Open sampling and coding. Axial coding. Relational and variational sampling. Testing and re-testing concepts. Selective and discriminate sampling. Theoretical saturation.

Grounded theory is one of the more widely used, and abused, current research methods. It involves a precise and systematic set of methods, but inexperienced researchers frequently invoke it when what they really mean is that they believe (quite sensibly) that theoretical knowledge should be based on the social phenomena described, and that they wish to take an inductive stance. Miscalling this 'grounded theory' is no substitute for rigorous fieldwork (**Fieldwork**). Any study that does not embrace its full set of procedures cannot, and should not, be properly called 'grounded theory'.

Grounded theory works within both an *inductive* and a *deductive* framework (**Qualitative Methods; Positivism and Realism**). In induction, the researcher explores data, allowing them to suggest meanings and explanations that may cumulate into a theoretical model. Induction claims to start with fewer preconceptions, and to be 'truer' to the data (and indeed, may be slow to identify what is and what is not data). Most qualitative methods operate within this framework. In deduction, the researcher starts with theories and hypotheses, then collects data to test them. This is the basis of most quantitative methods (e.g. Allen 2003).

Grounded theory starts by approaching fieldwork and data collection from an inductive perspective.

The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the 'reality' than is theory derived from putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work). Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 12).

However, this emphasis on *building* rather than testing preconceived theories does not mean that researchers start with no ideas at all. Strauss and Corbin recognise that researchers bring a considerable background knowledge to their projects, including concepts that they will use in confronting their data (*ibid.*: 48–9). They approve of researchers whose 'purpose is to elaborate and extend existing theory' (*ibid.*: 12). Even where researchers are trying to maximise their open-mindedness, they must give prior thought to what question the research addresses and where best it might be researched (*ibid.*: 53, 215).

As the project progresses, the approach shifts from induction to deduction. The initial ideas derived from the data are tested back against new data. This process clarifies and elaborates the concepts (or 'categories'). 'Validation' is repeated until the researcher feels confident

that a theoretical statement can be made which rigorously accounts for the phenomena being studied (Huberman and Miles 2002: section three).

This approach's origin was a collaboration between Glaser and Strauss, whose evolving methods of researching the sociology of dying led to the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and several further books, most notably Strauss's *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987). Glaser had originally come from a **Quantitative Methods** background, from which he brought an emphasis on using empirical data to develop theories. He identified internal comparison of one's data as the key source of specifying concepts and connections between them. Strauss was a product of the Chicago School (**Ethnography**). Influenced by social interactionism, he recognised the importance of people as actors bringing complex meanings to the negotiation of everyday activities (**Ethnomethodology**).

The results of their collaboration can be understood as two parallel processes, *sampling* and *coding*, each with three main stages:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 Open Sampling | 1 Open Coding |
| 2 Relational and Variational Sampling | 2 Axial Coding |
| 3 Discriminate Sampling | 3 Selective Coding |

At the outset, people and events are 'sampled' as they conveniently occur. This *open sampling* might simply follow informants who happen to be available, or picking up the sorts of situations in which the topic of interest seems likely to present itself. If an opportunity to collect data comes along, the researcher goes with the flow. This is very different from the idea of 'random sampling' (**Sampling: Questions of Size and Sampling: Estimates and Size**). Its purpose is not to represent a 'population', but to keep the data collection as unconstrained as possible.

During this phase, researchers begin to process their data, applying *open coding* (see also **Coding Qualitative Data; Levels of Measurement**). This lists the information (typically statements, answers and comments by informants) in sequence, reviewing it in sections, and writing 'code notes' to record initial interpretations of the information. Data might be examined line by line (which emphasises micro-analysis of words and phrases); sentence – or paragraph – by sentence; or starting with a whole episode and trying to grasp its significance in a holistic way. Whatever the level, the researcher highlights those items that seem to be important, without attempting to group or compare the items very much at all. It is important to keep the coding 'open' and not quickly to organise data into categories. This allows the researcher to remain receptive to new

experiences and 'hear the voice' of informants. However, open coding progressively moves into identifying concepts.

Comparison and grouping become more intensive in the next stage, *axial coding*. The researcher begins organising and re-labelling data under collective headings, which in turn build towards concepts (or 'categories'). For instance, informants' talk about 'football', 'hockey' and 'athletics' could be grouped under 'sport', whereas 'sport', 'concerts', 'films' and 'parties' might be grouped under 'leisure'. Alternatively, the grouping might be organised around *who* took part in such activities, or as examples of *age-specific peer grouping*, or of *consumption patterns*. These are processes of data reduction and preliminary theory building.

What is happening here is that real-world phenomena are labelled so that they can be identified. The label is an abstract idea or name, or 'category'. In grounded theory, an important category is used as a central point around which to explore associated concepts, or 'sub-categories'. Typically these sub-categories ask: who, when, where, how, why, what follows from, the main category. The main category is the axis along which this exploration and elaboration takes place, by comparing items highlighted in case notes.

Axial coding is therefore not just a technical task but an intellectual process. It identifies the properties and dimensions of an axial category: what variant forms does it take; under what conditions? Axial coding goes with *relational* and *variational sampling*, by which the researcher seeks out those cases or events that help to demonstrate properties and dimensions, and the connections between concepts. This is a purposive sampling technique, designed to show the maximum similarities and maximum differences in cases of the concepts.

Axial coding, based on relational and variational sampling, is a process of testing and re-testing. It is here that grounded theory shifts from its initial emphasis on induction, to *deduction*, as ideas originally developed by induction from the initial data are re-explored in the light of further empirical data. This procedure of re-testing evolving ideas, to validate or negate them, is the most distinctive feature of the whole approach (compare this with **Hypothesis** and **Validity**).

The third stage of *selective coding* is the final integration and refining of the central or 'core' category, the theme that predominates in the project. The final category should be shown as compatible with the data, with its links to sub-categories and variations in its form explained. It should be logically consistent and 'theoretically dense', i.e. its full range of variability explored, and any gaps in this identified. This 'refining' is supported by *discriminate sampling*, a very careful selection of items designed to fill gaps and make final internal comparative tests of the core category.

The procedure is completed when *theoretical saturation* is achieved. New data no longer add to conceptual density. The core category has been fully refined and could be re-used in other research. This does not imply that all possible situations have been covered, nor that generalisation to other situations is possible on the basis of some statistical process. The sampling has been entirely subordinate to the emergent nature of the core category: hence its general name, *theoretical sampling* (Devine and Heath 1999: 56–60). The key issue is that a rigorous conceptual understanding has been built from data, and validated against further data.

Key Words

axial coding
category
deduction

discriminate sampling
induction
open coding
open sampling
relational sampling
selective coding
theoretical sampling
validation
variational sampling

Links

Coding Qualitative Data
Ethnography
Ethnomethodology and Conversational
Analysis
Fieldwork
Hypothesis
Levels of Measurement
Positivism and Realism
Qualitative Methods
Quantitative Methods
Sampling: Estimates and Size
Sampling: Questions of Size
Validity

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Interviewing

Interviewing is data collection in face-to-face settings, using an oral question-and-answer format which either employs the same questions in a systematic and structured way for all respondents, or allows respondents to talk about issues in less directed but discursive manner.

Section Outline: Many varieties of interviewing. Face-to-face interviewing in social surveys. Interviewer instructions, training and briefing. 'Neutrality'. Refusals. Interviewer bias. Qualitative interviewing: depth interviews and bias. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Recording answers. Limitations of interviews: cost; less anonymous; field-force hard to set up and manage. Benefits over other methods: high response rates; contacting the right people; handling more complex material; elaboration on answers.

The most extensive social research method, namely interviewing, covers a range of styles (Sarantakos 1998 lists nearly 30 sub-types). Here, we

concentrate on the face-to-face encounter of one interviewer with one person being interviewed – the ‘informant’ or ‘respondent’ (**Group Discussions/Focus Groups; Telephone and Computer-assisted Polling; Social Surveys**). This kind of encounter takes two main forms: those in surveys using standardised questionnaires, and those done in qualitative research where the questioning is less structured. In both cases, the quality of the data depends on the quality of the interviewing (Polgar and Thomas 1991).

In survey interviewing, information from large numbers of people is obtained via the same questions put in a standardised way, so that no differences, or **Bias**, is introduced by the person asking the questions (McFarlane Smith 1972). Interviewers are trained to follow instructions closely. This includes who is interviewed (**Sampling: Questions of Size: Sampling; Types**) and how they are approached (McCrossan 1991). Respondents are usually given a letter explaining the nature of the interview, and interviewers are briefed to show their identity cards and to make a standard introductory statement. A basic level of informed consent (**Ethical Practice**) is obtained, the emphasis being on interviewers completing the interview as quickly, and as accurately recorded, as possible.

Interviewers are instructed to follow the questionnaire exactly in order, and not to change the question wording (**Questionnaires**). They may ‘prompt’ for more information (‘What else is there? What else?’) or ‘probe’ to clarify (‘What exactly do you mean when you say . . . ?’). However, these interventions are usually at points marked in the questionnaire. Other deviations or paraphrasings are forbidden, because they could introduce additional extraneous factors into the data collection and so distort findings. Thus any temptation for interviewers to establish a social relationship or personal rapport by chatting, or the giving of opinions, is strongly discouraged, both as time-wasting and a source of biasing what respondents might say. Interviewers are instructed to be polite and positive in general attitude, but neutral on opinions and not demanding.

Interviewers are briefed to handle any problems that might arise. Only a very few people refuse to be interviewed if the survey is being carried out correctly. In this case interviewers should attempt to find out the reason for the refusal. It might be because they called at an inconvenient time, in which case a more suitable time should be arranged. Other reasons include fear, worry about views becoming known, being ‘not interested’, or informants feeling they know too little about the topic. The interviewer should attempt to reassure them. The interviewer’s

'neutrality' (plus the matching where possible of interviewers and informants for gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) is designed to be non-threatening. In the case of people not being in, the interviewer is instructed to call back twice more, at different times of the day, before a non-contact is recorded.

The potential for 'interviewer bias' is a major issue, because researchers cannot directly control every member of the interviewer field-force. Less able interviewers may contact the wrong respondents, deviate from the questionnaire or misrecord answers. Personal appearance, facial expression, tone of voice, in addition to comments, may misdirect the informant. Dishonest interviewers may fabricate interview results. This makes interviewer selection and training, backed up by good administration, skilled fieldwork supervisors, and checking of returns, all essential.

Some of these problems are less pressing in interviewing for qualitative research, because conventionally the numbers of people interviewed, and therefore the number of interviewers needed, are much smaller. It is common for the researcher to do all of the interviewing. While qualitative interviewing relies on the inter-personal skills and knowledge of the interviewer as an initiator of topics rather than on a carefully worded questionnaire, interviewers must still take care to avoid expressing their own opinions or suggesting answers. As the name suggests, the aim of this type of *depth interview* is to obtain an in-depth account of particular topics, but that account has to be the informant's and not simply a projection of the researcher's preconceptions.

Interviewer bias is a frequent accusation made against depth interviewing. Qualitative research regards the social world as too complex to be represented by fixed questions, so that establishing a rapport is needed to access the informant's 'world'. Feminists have also argued that male researchers exploit their position of power over their informants, ignoring both ethical obligations and differences in gender experience (*Feminist Research*; also Finch 1984; Tang 2002). The conduct of interviews depends on who is being interviewed, what the interview is about, and which type of interview technique is being used. Children and 'sensitive' topics raise particular issues (Harden et al. 2000). Depth interviewing's distinctive theoretical frame of reference makes it a very different activity from survey interviewing.

There are two main types of depth interview, now one of the most popular sociological research methods. *Semi-structured* (or '*focused*') *interviews* are based on a small number of open-ended questions, the answers to which are actively and freely probed by the interviewer for elaboration. Often a sub-set of topics is listed, to help the interviewer concentrate on

these issues. The questions or topics have to be put in the order that they appear on the question sheet ('interview schedule'). The respondent can then be led from a general first question to more specific ones.

The *unstructured* (or '*non-directive*') interview is the least structured form of interview. No pre-defined questions are given and there is no ordering of topics. Instead, topics are simply listed as an *aide mémoire*. The interview enables respondents to give their accounts of their experiences, opinions and feelings in their own way. The interviewer's task is to probe for further details and ask for clarification when necessary. Thus, the questions the interviewer asks are determined by the direction taken in each interview. This type of interview often requires interviewers to have detailed knowledge of the issues so that suitable probing and supplementary questions can be asked.

Obviously these interviews cannot be recorded on a standard form, and copious note-taking might inhibit the flow of the interview. Instead, audio or video recorders are normally used if the respondent is agreeable. This is much better than relying on note-taking. The recorder should be placed as unobtrusively as possible and the interviewer should change tapes in a way that avoids too much interruption to the flow of the interview. Some basic notes should, however, also be made in case of mechanical failure. The recording should be checked for any problems as soon as possible afterwards. Good data collection is the basis both for team working and for the quotations to be selected later for inclusion in publications (e.g. Thomson et al. 2002).

The transcription of recordings is probably the most tedious and time-consuming aspect of these interviewing methods. It is usual for the recordings to be transcribed verbatim into readable text. This can then be manually processed or input into a text-coding computer program, like 'NUD*IST 4' (**Coding Qualitative Data**).

Things can go wrong, however well prepared the interviewer may be. For example, after completing an unstructured interview for a study of childless couples, one of the authors found that the audio tape had snarled up. Parking the car around the corner, she wrote down as much of the interview as possible. On later rescuing most of the tape, the hastily written notes proved to be accurate, but not comprehensive. Had she waited for the tape to be transcribed, much of the detail would have been forgotten (Payne 1978). Good memory is an asset.

Compared with other methods, the main disadvantages of interviewing are their cost (in money and time terms) and the potential for interviewer bias. They seem less anonymous, and may be inferior to self-written accounts on sensitive issues. Despite the semblance of the interviewer

being in control, fieldwork is hard to organise and both researchers and their readers cannot know everything that goes on.

The main benefits are high response rates from appropriate informants. Respondents need no special skills, and a longer session of more complex questions is possible without misunderstandings, because the interviewer is physically present. This also permits recording of non-verbal signals and spontaneous reactions. Survey interviewing produces greater *consistency of data*, while qualitative interviewing provides *flexibility and elaboration* of answers. The capacity for instant responsiveness by the interviewer differentiates interviewing techniques from less direct methods (**Documentary Methods; Auto/biographies and Life Histories; Unobtrusive Methods**).

Key Words

bias
 depth interview
 probe
 prompt
 semi-structured
 transcription
 unstructured

Links

Auto/biographies and Life Histories
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 Documentary Methods
 Ethical Practice
 Feminist Research
 Group Discussion/Focus Groups
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 Sampling: Questions of Size
 Sampling: Types
 Social Surveys
 Telephone and Computer-assisted Polling
 Unobtrusive Methods

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