

6.4.2 Preparing for the interview and designing the interview guide

The complete interview process involves a series of carefully designed steps, with the preparation starting well before the first interview session. After the initial sampling plan has been finalized and ethical issues such as informed

consent have been considered, the researcher needs to prepare a detailed interview guide, which will serve as the main research instrument. Although we may believe that this is a straightforward and quick job—after all, all we need to do is jot down a few relevant questions—a good interview guide requires careful planning followed by some piloting. A few trial runs can ensure that the questions elicit sufficiently rich data and do not dominate the flow of the conversation.

The main function of the interview guide (or ‘interview schedule/protocol’) is to help the interviewer in a number of areas: (a) by ensuring that the domain is properly covered and nothing important is left out by accident; (b) by suggesting appropriate question wordings; (c) by offering a list of useful probe questions to be used if needed; (d) by offering a template for the opening statement; and (e) by listing some comments to bear in mind. It might be advisable to combine this guide with an ‘interview log’ and thus leave space in it for recording the details of the interview (for example, participant, setting, length) as well as for the interviewer’s comments and notes. As McCracken (1988) points out, the use of an interview guide is sometimes regarded as a discretionary matter in qualitative interviews; this, he argues, is wrong because due to the demanding objectives we want to achieve and the multiple factors we have to attend to during the interview, the interview guide is indispensable. Indeed, as anybody who has done interviewing will confirm, the interviewer can do with every bit of help during the interviewing process and the interview guide offers us the best possible help in this respect.

Question types and wording issues

There are a variety of questions we can include in the interview guide, but we need to bear in mind that these only provide the framework and the real meaning is so often uncovered through exploratory and unstructured responses that deviate from the interview schedule.

- *The first few questions* These are particularly important in an interview, not so much from the content point of view but rather because they set the tone and create initial rapport. If the interviewees feel that they can do themselves justice when answering these initial questions, this will make them feel competent, help them to relax and consequently encourage them to open up. This is why researchers often start with easy personal or factual questions (for example, about the respondent’s family or job). The quality of the subsequent responses will to a large extent depend on the climate of trust that we create in this initial ice-breaking period.
- *Content questions* Patton (2002) points out that on any given topic, it is possible to ask any of six main types of question focusing on: (a) experiences and behaviours, (b) opinions and values, (c) feelings, (d) knowledge, (e) sensory information (i.e. what someone has seen, heard, tasted, smelled, etc., and even what the interviewer would have seen or heard if he/she had

been in a particular place), and (f) background or demographic information. These six categories concern different aspects of the participant's overall view/experience of the phenomenon and therefore we can get a rounded picture by including in our interview guide questions that tap into each dimension.

- *Probes* The emergent nature of qualitative interview data can be enhanced by applying various probes that use what the interviewee has said as a starting point to go further and to increase the richness and depth of the responses. Probes may include detail-oriented and clarification questions but a technique often used in person-centred psychotherapy is to simply take a salient content word used by the respondent and ask to elaborate ('You have used the word "freedom" twice—what exactly does it mean to you/do you mean by that ...?'). Patton (2002) also mentions an interesting probe, the 'contrast probe' which asks about how a particular experience/feeling/action/term compares to some other, similar concept.
- *The final closing question* This permits the interviewee to have the final say. Several scholars have noted in the literature the richness of the data that simple closing questions such as the following ones can yield: 'Is there anything else you would like to add?' or 'What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?'

With regard to the wording of the questions asked in a qualitative interview, the literature contains a great deal of advice. Some of this advice is self-evident (for example, 'Don't use words that the interviewee does not understand'), but some other suggestions are truly practical and useful—Patton (2002), for example, offers particularly detailed guidelines. Similar to the wording of written questionnaire items (see Section 5.2.3), there are some rules of thumb about how to formulate our questions. Two particularly important rules are that we should avoid (a) leading questions ('It was frustrating, wasn't it ...?') and (b) loaded or ambiguous words and jargon. In general, short and relatively simple questions that contain only one idea work best. Using words that make sense to the interviewee and reflect his/her worldview help to connect to the respondent and improve the quality of the interview data.