

4 Interviews and Interviewing¹

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This chapter provides an accessible introduction to conducting qualitative research interviews in psychology. It focuses on interviews with individual participants and also focus group discussions. The chapter is structured around the basic stages of conducting research interviews, beginning with the translation of research aims into research questions and then interview questions. From there, we move to the generation of an interview schedule, consideration of the interactional dynamic between interviewers and interviewees, and practical issues such as where to conduct interviews or focus group discussions. That question of where to locate interviews leads into a consideration of conducting interviews and focus groups online.

Introduction

In psychology it is hard to conceive of a form of data more closely associated with qualitative research than interview data. After all, as psychologists, we are interested in people, their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Generally, qualitative researchers in psychology believe that the research interview can give us access to those things and more. When planning their undergraduate dissertation projects, students will often come to see me and say, ‘I would like to do an interview-based study on ...’, having decided on their mode of data generation at the same time as or even before thinking about their research topic. One possible reason why interviews may be seen as the data of first resort for those not doing quantitative research is that people have access to a readily available ‘script’ for interviews. As media consumers, we see interviews being done all the time; we know that they involve an interviewer, an interviewee and the asking of questions. On the face of it, we are familiar with what interviewing involves, but the novice researcher’s understanding of what planning and conducting a research interview involves is probably quite limited. The purpose of this chapter is to fill the gaps in that script.

This chapter will focus mostly on individual research interviews, although it will also deal with focus group interviews/discussions. Individual interviews and focus group discussions differ in various ways. Most obviously they differ in the number of participants and the interactional dynamics that characterize them. Interviews are a dialogue between an interviewer and usually one interviewee, although there are occasions when two interviewees might be present (for example, when the research is focused on couples). Focus groups provide for discussion and possibly even argument on a specific topic with (usually) between six and eight participants. Both individual interviews and focus group discussions will generate talk on a particular topic and will support analysis of the content of that talk. However, focus group discussions also allow analysis of

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the process by which speakers come to adopt particular positions on a research topic or phenomenon, as a group or as individuals, in relation to each other. In other words, they allow the researcher to see how ideas, views, attitudes, etc., on a given topic are negotiated between people. This can be particularly useful if you want to understand how new ideas and developments are being received and worked with by the public. For example, as part of a project on public responses to new genetic technologies, I co-facilitated focus group discussions that elicited views from members of the public about the possibility of human cloning. The groups expressed generally negative views, with concerns centred around ‘interfering with nature’ and ‘the status of the embryo’ (Shepherd et al., 2007).

Research questions and structure in interview studies

Before we move into the heart of our chapter and examine how to create and implement an interview schedule (that is, a set of questions and/or topic areas that will be asked or addressed during the course of your interviews), we first need to define some terms, note different types of interviews and stress one basic principle. This chapter and the advice and information it contains are guided by a single concern: to ensure that when you do your interviews, they will produce good-quality, rich data. The quality of a research interview relates to its capacity to generate data that are rich enough to support a detailed and sophisticated analysis that can provide complete and rigorous answers to the research question(s) you set out to address. As with all research methods, the starting point for determining whether we might conduct research interviews – never mind how we might conduct them – is to be found in the study’s aims and research questions and the researcher’s understanding of these.

The distinctions between research aims and research questions and between research questions and interview questions are worth making explicit here because novice researchers sometimes get these confused. A study’s research aim states in general terms the topic, issue or problem to be addressed by the study. It concerns the purpose of the study – what the researcher is trying to find out. For example, ‘This study aims to examine the processes underlying young men’s experiences of receiving a diagnosis of testicular cancer’.

Research aims are often expressed as one or more research questions. These are specific questions about a research topic that can be answered through the generation/collection and analysis of data. For example, ‘How do young men experience receiving a diagnosis of testicular cancer? How do young men diagnosed with testicular cancer experience accessing and receiving support with their diagnosis and treatment?’ The second research question in that example is designed to build upon the first research question and take the research in a more specific direction by addressing one particular aspect of the experience of diagnosis. The researchers will have a rationale for adopting that focus, based on perceived gaps in existing research literature.

As was noted in Chapter 2 in this volume, research aims and questions in qualitative psychological research often focus on people’s experiences of specific

phenomena or particular aspects of those experiences – people’s understandings of and thoughts and feelings about these experiences, their responses to them and the implications that they hold for them. Qualitative research questions are often phrased as ‘What?’ and/or ‘How?’ questions. They aim to describe the nature of people’s experiences, understandings and evaluations of a particular event or phenomenon and their engagement with that event or phenomenon (that is, to answer ‘What?’ questions) and/or to examine the processes that underlie these experiences, understandings, evaluations and engagements (that is, to answer ‘How?’ questions – how they came about, how they operate). In Chapters 7, 9, 11, 13 and 15, examples are provided of the types of research question associated with each of the analytic approaches covered in this volume.

In qualitative research where data are generated through individual interviews or focus group discussions, interview questions are the questions that are asked of participants by the researcher. Interview questions are intended to elicit data relevant to the research aim(s) and research question(s) so that the analysis of the data will allow the research question(s) to be answered and the research aim(s) to be met. It is important to realize that the interview questions you might ask may be quite different from the research questions. Research questions written by and for psychologists may not be accessible to lay people and so the interview questions might address the research topic in an indirect manner. See Table 4.1 for examples of research aims and questions and interview questions in qualitative interview-based psychological research.

Both individual interviews and focus group discussions can be described as structured, semi-structured or unstructured. These terms relate to the formality of the interview or focus group discussion. In structured interviews, the emphasis is on asking precisely-worded, pre-formulated questions in a specific order, with the same questions presented in the same way in each interview or discussion. Sometimes the researcher will provide the participant with a set of possible answers to choose from and the questions are constructed in such a way as to elicit answers corresponding to, and easily contained within, pre-determined categories which can then be numerically analysed. In other cases, the participant is allowed a free response. In order to enhance the consistency and comparability of the data, the interviewer is supposed to stick closely to the interview schedule and behave with as little variation as possible between interviews. While the structured interview offers a lot of control to the researcher, the format clearly puts considerable constraints on the encounter between the researcher and participant. Focus group discussions do not usually adopt a highly structured approach because overly constraining participants’ freedom to discuss and debate rather undermines the rationale for using focus groups in the first place.

Semi-structured interviews are the most frequently-used type of interview in qualitative psychological research. The interview transcripts that appear in Appendix 1 in this volume and that are analysed in Chapters 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16 come from interviews in which a semi-structured approach was used. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups start from a set of pre-formulated questions and issues but the interview is guided by this schedule of questions

Study, aims and data generation methods	Research question(s)	Examples of interview questions
Grogan et al. (2017) generated data through face-to-face and online interviews to explore young British men's understandings of prostate cancer.	'How do young men understand prostate cancer?' 'What kinds of factors (if any) might inhibit referral to primary care with prostate-related symptoms?'	'If I were to say the words "prostate cancer" to you, what would be the instant thoughts going through your mind?'
Mukkamala and Suyemoto (2018) combined an online survey and in-person focus group discussions to examine the intersection of experiences of racism and sexism among Asian American women.	'What is the nature of the intersectional experience of discrimination for Asian American women?'	'When you think about being discriminated against as an Asian American woman, what experiences come to mind? Can you choose one and talk more about it?'
Ravenhill and de Visser (2019) used in-person and online semi-structured interviews to examine how gay men negotiated discourses of masculinity in relation to their masculine identities.	'How did gay men conceptualize masculinity?' 'How were gay men's conceptualizations of masculinity related to lived experiences of masculine identity?'	'How masculine do you see yourself?' 'How important is it for you to be masculine?'
Caperton et al. (2020) used semi-structured interviews to examine experiences of depression and subsequent help-seeking among stay-at-home fathers in the USA.	The research questions addressed participants' experiences of depression during their time as stay-at-home fathers and 'their perceptions of, and experienced barriers to, help-seeking for depression'.	'Tell me about a period during your time as a [stay-at-home father] when you felt significantly depressed, depleted or "down in the dumps" for at least two weeks continuously.'

Table 1: Table 4.1 Examples of research aims and questions and interview questions in qualitative interview-based psychological research

and issues rather than dictated by it. Hence the ordering of questions is less important. The interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise and can follow the participant's interests or concerns as they emerge, with the interviewer creating relevant follow-up questions 'on the spot'. This might sound exciting (and it is), but it takes experience to be able to create questions spontaneously that are not leading questions (that is, questions that, in how they are worded, suggest a particular response is expected). The participant is more active in shaping a semi-structured interview than is the case with a structured interview. This form of interviewing reduces the control that the researcher has over the situation.

That control is further reduced in unstructured interviews. These tend not to involve pre-formulated questions except for an initial question or prompt designed to begin the conversation around the research topic (for example, 'Could you tell me about...?'). The interviewer may have a shortlist of issues to remind them of what needs to be discussed in order to meet the study's research aims. The focus is on helping participants to relate their stories, experiences, reflections, etc., on their own terms. That may involve using prompts and probes or creating questions spontaneously during the interview.

Decisions about whether to use structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews in any study will be determined by which format is most likely to generate the best data for meeting the study's research aims and answering its research questions. For example, research questions that centre on people's own understandings, views or experiences are more likely to be answered satisfactorily by using semi-structured or unstructured interviews than structured interviews.

Bite-sized summary 1

Some basic concepts around qualitative research interviews have been presented. Individual interviews have been distinguished from focus group discussions. The differences between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews have been noted. Decisions about the form of interview to use in any given qualitative study are made on the basis of which type of interview is most likely to generate rich, high-quality data that will best meet the study's research aims and answer its research questions.

The interview schedule

It has long been said that a research interview is a 'conversation with a purpose' (Webb and Webb, 1932: 130). The phrase may be somewhat clichéd, but it directs our attention to the resources and practices through which an interview is structured, maintained and ultimately accomplished. The interview schedule is the primary resource through which the prospective interviewer begins to give some structure to that future interaction. This section is concerned with the generation of a semi-structured interview schedule.

Identifying and structuring topics for the interview

The function of the semi-structured interview schedule is to help the interviewer and the interviewee to generate talk on the interviewee's subjective experiences and understandings. The issues on which the content of the interview schedule is based are determined by the study's research aims and research question(s). The researcher usually conducts a review of existing research literature to identify potentially relevant factors, issues, cognitions and feelings that are or could be relevant to those research aims and question(s). (However, see Chapter 11 on grounded theory approaches because there has been some debate about whether and to what extent a literature review should be undertaken to identify topic areas before interviewing begins in grounded theory studies or whether the researcher should simply adopt an open, unstructured interviewing approach and let the topic areas be determined by the participants.) The aim at this stage is to think exhaustively about the factors and considerations that might bear upon an individual's experience of the core research issue (see Box 4.1). To return to the example that we used when explaining research aims and research questions, young men receiving a diagnosis of testicular cancer might experience this differently depending on their age, the stage which their cancer has reached, the prospects for effective treatment, the side-effects of any potential treatment, their relationship situation and the availability of social support. Clearly this is not an exhaustive list. No matter how much effort a researcher expends in trying to produce a comprehensive list of potentially relevant issues, any interviewee has the potential to introduce something that has not previously been considered. It is their right as experts on their subjective experiences to do that. Indeed, it is always a real pleasure when that happens because it means that, in your research, you may be discovering things that you and others did not previously know. Developing new knowledge is, after all, the reason for conducting research.

The list of potentially relevant interview topics then needs to be reviewed and restructured. The topics should be examined to see whether any of them obviously go together and are best covered in the same section of the interview. For example, the discussion of immediate thoughts and feelings after diagnosis will likely coincide with the description of the consultation in which the diagnosis was given. When clusters of topics are formed, they should be reviewed to see whether there is a natural sequence to them – in other words, whether the discussion of one topic might prepare the ground for or lead into the discussion of another topic. In our example, there is a clear chronological sequence that might guide the interview, from the initial detection of a possible problem to early encounters with health services, then the diagnostic consultation, recommendations and decisions about treatment, responses of others, including the seeking of (and, if relevant, obtaining) informal and formal support from individuals and groups, experiences of treatment, and the person's present state. In this way, an outline structure can be generated for the main body of the interview, even if some issues belong in more than one place and need to be revisited across the interview (for example, seeking and obtaining support).

In general terms, when deciding on the order in which interview topics will appear in an interview schedule, it is best to place any sensitive topics later in the interview when hopefully a rapport will have been established between the interviewer and the interviewee. Sometimes, though, almost everything in an interview schedule is at least potentially sensitive, as is the case with the example that we have been using. In that situation, there may be some issues that are particularly sensitive, and so, if possible, they are best left until later in the interview.

Box 4.1

Practising the first steps in generating an interview schedule

When formulating an interview schedule, researchers generally identify potentially relevant topics from a review of previous research but they may also use other sources. For example, researchers in clinical settings who seek to address clinically-focused research questions might draw upon colleagues' insights about their clinical practice. To give you experience of starting the process of generating an interview schedule, you are now invited to use your own lived experience as a resource. That will allow you to complete the exercise more quickly than if you were to do a review of relevant research literature – but, to reiterate, if you were generating an interview schedule for real, a thorough review of research literature is usually where you would start.

Imagine you are conducting research on national identity and you will generate data through individual semi-structured interviews. You will research the national identity that you hold, so, if you see yourself as British or Irish or Nigerian or American, your research will aim to examine current British or Irish or Nigerian or American national identity. In that case, your research questions would be 'What thoughts, emotions, behaviours and implications do British/Irish/Nigerian/American people attribute to their national identity? How do they see these as having developed over time – if they see their national identity as having developed?' (Substitute your own national identity for the examples given here, if relevant. We are referring here to national identity rather than ethnic identity, although the two are often connected. If you have a dual national identity, that will add some interesting complexity to the research.) Note that the research questions embody features that we described earlier: there is a 'What?' question and a 'How?' question, with the latter building upon the former in a specific way.

Now consider all the things that go to make up your understanding of your national identity. Think about the thoughts, feelings, images, values, beliefs, ideologies and behaviours (or behavioural expectations) that you associate with your nationality. You may wish to note these in relation to your understanding of your national identity and also what you see as other people's understandings of that national identity. So, for example, if you are British, note your own understanding of what it means to be British and what you see as other people's understandings (that is, other British people and people of other nationalities). Keep these lists separate for now. Think about how your national identity intersects with other aspects of self, such as your ethnicity, gender, education and socioeconomic position; how your national identity might have changed over time; how others' perceptions of your nationality might have changed; and the factors that might have influenced those changes.

What you are doing here is considering all the things that might shape an individual's experience of, and the meanings they might attach to, their national identity. Write these things down and be exhaustive. Then look at your lists and cluster together those things that address the same general issue. In the previous paragraph, some general headings were suggested to help with your brainstorming. These might already have generated clusters of closely related material, but other things might also have come to mind when you were in the midst of the brainstorming process, so you may need to create new clusters to accommodate those. The materials and clusters show the topics that you are going to aim to cover during your interview.

Developing interview questions

What remains is the task of imagining how, during the interview, the interviewer might elicit talk from the interviewee across the topics of interest. The various types of question that can be used to do this are outlined in Table 4.2. Interviews are like other conversations in that they have beginnings, middles and ends. To have an appropriate beginning, the interviewer needs to consider how they might formulate a general opening or introductory question that will get the participant talking and establish their status (that is, the participant's status) as the expert on the topic of the interview. Good general introductory questions will often take the form of requests or invitations: for example, 'Can you tell me about ...?'. These questions allow the interviewee to share their stories about a particular event, experience, encounter, etc. People are generally good at telling stories about themselves. Depending on how much of a 'talker' the interviewee is, it is entirely possible that the first 15 to 20 minutes of the interview could be taken up with just that basic background account. This does, however, assume that the interviewer is providing the necessary support and encouragement to sustain them in telling their story. We shall return to that later.

The general introductory question also allows the interviewee to articulate what for them may be the more salient or important details in relation to whatever is being recounted, though they may not do that explicitly. For example, a young man who is asked to recount how he first became aware of a possible problem and sought medical attention that resulted in a diagnosis of testicular cancer might allude to the awkwardness and discomfort of broaching the topic with his parents and their role in supporting him through the process. It is the job of the interviewer to listen actively to the interviewee's responses, to register the issues and aspects that seem important to the interviewee and to be mindful of the list of topics on the interview schedule. Depending on the richness of the interviewee's initial response, there could be several topics to which the interviewer might want to return.

During an interview, it is likely that the interviewer will have to do some work to structure the interaction. This could be because the interviewee has wandered off topic and there is a need to bring them back to the core concerns of the interview, assuming that the interviewee has not simply introduced an aspect of the topic that had not previously been recognized by the researcher as relevant. Alternatively, it could be that time is running short and there are core issues that have not yet been discussed. Here, 'structuring questions' such as 'I think this might connect to something that we've not yet discussed ...' or 'I'd just like to go back to ...' are an essential part of the interviewer's repertoire.

The interviewer should not be afraid to adopt an explicit 'not-knowing' position during the interview and ask for the participant's help in understanding what they mean. 'Interpreting questions' such as 'Can I just check that I understand this correctly...?' or 'When you say... do you mean ...?' are essential in supporting the interviewee as they reflect upon their experiences and understandings and in ensuring that the interviewer has really grasped the interviewee's experiences and understandings. This is especially important in research

Question type	Example
<p>Introductory questions These opening questions are designed to get the interview off to the best possible start by eliciting a rich and detailed account of the research study's focus of interest.</p>	<p>'Please can you tell me about when you first ...?'</p>
<p>Follow-up questions These questions are designed to promote the extension and elaboration of the interviewee's answers. They communicate that the interviewer is an active and attentive listener.</p>	<p>These can be simple prompts or 'continuers', such as 'okay' or 'go on', or they could be more direct questions, such as 'So what happened then?'</p>
<p>Probing questions These questions are intended to promote elaboration and greater detail but without necessarily specifying what has interested the interviewer.</p>	<p>'Could you tell me a little more about that?'</p>
<p>Specifying questions These questions are oriented to a particular aspect of the topic under discussion (for example, thoughts and feelings). They aim to elicit more detail on those aspects.</p>	<p>'What were your first thoughts when you heard that?' 'How did you feel when that happened?'</p>
<p>Direct questions These questions invite the interviewee to adopt an explicit position on a topic. It is worth carefully considering when to ask such questions in an interview. Asking them too early in an interview might unhelpfully narrow what gets talked about because the interviewee might then feel they have to maintain the position they took.</p>	<p>'Do you think former service men and women receive sufficient support when they return to civilian life?'</p>
<p>Indirect questions These questions invite the interviewee to speculate on the motivations and beliefs of others in the hope that by doing so they will reveal something about their own motivations and beliefs.</p>	<p>'Why do you think people voted for Brexit?'</p>
<p>Structuring questions Interviews are conversations that must be actively managed. Sometimes you have to move the conversation along if you are to cover the topics that you have in mind. Structuring questions allow you to do that.</p>	<p>'One thing that we've not discussed so far is ... How do you think that might ...?'</p>
<p>Interpreting questions When using these questions, the interviewer adopts an interpretative position on what the interviewee has said and invites the interviewee to evaluate that interpretation.</p>	<p>'Let me see if I have this right ...?' 'So what you're saying is ...?'</p>
<p>Closing questions These are the questions that you will use to signal that the interview is</p>	<p>'We've talked about a lot of things so far. I just wondered if there ...'</p>

that adopts a phenomenological perspective (for more on that perspective, see Chapter 2 and Chapter 9 in this volume). With these types of question, the process of interpreting the data begins during the course of the interview as the interviewer and interviewee together work out an appropriate understanding of what the interviewee is saying.

So far, we have considered the generation of appropriate topics to be covered in an interview and some of the types of question that can be used. Turning to a very practical issue, how should you translate topics into actual, specific questions? There are some basic principles that you should bear in mind when developing interview questions. Generally, in qualitative interviews, questions should be open rather than closed. In other words, they should allow the interviewee to give free-form answers rather than only permitting yes/no responses or another limited set of possible answers. Almost all the example questions in Table 4.2 are open questions. Sometimes it is appropriate to pose what appears to be a closed, yes/no question if that actually functions as a ‘jumping off point’ for the interviewee to elaborate their response in a free-form way. In Table 4.2, there is an example of this: ‘Do you think former service men and women receive sufficient support when they return to civilian life?’ is, strictly speaking, a closed question but, in the context of an interview, it would be most unlikely for an interviewee to respond simply by saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and stopping there. You will find other examples of closed questions that initiate free-form responses in the transcripts of the interviews that Arnie Reed conducted with ex-soldiers in Appendix 1 in this volume.

Interview questions – like survey questions – should not be leading or biased. In other words, an expected answer should not be evident from the wording of the question. For example, ‘Do you think that the terrible cruelty of whaling has been adequately reported in the press?’ is a leading question because it carries a value judgement about whaling, assumes this must be shared by the interviewee and implies that this has not been adequately reported in the press.

Interview questions should not be too long and should not involve two or more questions bundled into one. For example, if you asked, ‘Thinking back to when you first received your diagnosis, who told you and what were your initial thoughts and feelings?’, you would be asking three questions in one: ‘Who told you?’, ‘What were your initial thoughts?’ and ‘What were your initial feelings?’ Interviewees would probably forget one of those elements or would focus on one aspect to the detriment of others.

Questions should be phrased using language appropriate to the participants. There is no point in asking beautifully-worded questions using technical psychological language if the interviewees are unlikely to understand what the question means. If you look at the transcripts of Arnie Reed’s interviews with ex-soldiers in Appendix 1, you will see that his questions are worded appropriately because the interviewees never ask ‘What do you mean?’ or demonstrate any difficulty in understanding the questions. Being an ex-soldier himself will surely have helped Arnie to know how to pitch the questions. During the piloting of an interview schedule (when the researcher tests it with people who meet the study’s recruitment criteria or with volunteers who play the role of participants)

or during initial interviews, if it becomes evident that a question is unclear to participants or is misunderstood by them, the researcher should reconsider its wording. Be mindful of how your questions will sound to the interviewee and consider how direct you want to be in your wording. For example, asking ‘Why did you do that?’ could sound confrontational, as if you are demanding that the interviewee justify their actions. Asking ‘What do you think led you to do that?’ poses essentially the same question but in a gentler way.

In Table 4.2, one of the types of question is ‘probing questions’. These are intended to encourage the interviewee to elaborate their initial response in greater detail: for example, ‘Could you tell me a little more about that?’ Not all probes and prompts need to be verbal or involve actual words, though. Leaving a short period of silence after an interviewee has spoken, glancing at them in an inquiring way or simply saying ‘Mmm’ can encourage them to expand upon what they have just said. Repeating back to them a key part of what they have just said or briefly summarizing what they said can also encourage the interviewee to continue and elaborate – and it also signals to them that you are listening closely to what they are saying. Researchers tend to develop their own favourite or characteristic probes and prompts. For example, having worked with the editors of this book for a long time, I know that a research interview with Adrian Coyle as an interviewer will always see him asking the interviewee, ‘What makes you say that?’ (Note once again the avoidance of a ‘Why?’ question here.) Try different probes and prompts and see which work best for you.

Do not expect to produce good interview questions quickly. Creating good interview questions is a skill that needs to be learned and developed. The process of creating questions involves drafting, thinking critically about draft questions, seeking advice on drafts from others, testing the questions, and amending or dropping questions in light of feedback and creating new ones. Then of course when you begin conducting interviews with ‘real’ participants, you may obtain feedback from them on your questions and you will need to continue to revise them if necessary. The type of qualitative research that this book is concerned with does not require the exact same questions to be asked of every participant in the same way. Hence it is permitted to amend questions in light of your unfolding fieldwork experience within a research study to ensure that the interview questions are generating rich data so that an analysis can be produced that will effectively answer the research question(s) you set out to address. For an example of good interview questions, see Box 9.2 in Chapter 9 in this volume where Jonathan A. Smith and Virginia Eatough present the first half of an interview schedule that they used in a study of women’s experiences of anger and aggression.

Box 4.2

Practising generating interview questions

If you completed the exercise presented in Box 4.1, you will have generated clusters of material related to the research questions ‘What thoughts, emotions, behaviours and implications do people of a particular nationality attribute to their national identity? How do they see these as having developed over time – if they see their national identity as having developed?’. Now you should arrange these clusters in an order that you think would create a logical sequence. Which cluster would you place at the start and why? Which would come next? How does the second cluster relate to or follow from the first? There are often clusters that belong in obvious places (a beginning cluster, an ending cluster and clusters that have to come late because they deal with particularly sensitive issues), so put them in sequence and then fit the others around them.

Next, choose two clusters (perhaps the first two). Using the guidance presented in this section of the chapter, translate those clusters into interview questions, with probes and prompts if necessary. You may find that you only need to create one question to capture the concerns of a cluster or you might need several questions.

If you are doing this exercise in a class, work with a classmate and evaluate each other’s draft interview questions, using the principles that have been presented here. Try them out with each other and see whether you understand each other’s questions clearly and can provide detailed responses to them (perhaps after some prompting and probing).

There is one final consideration about generating data in interviews that needs to be mentioned. In your research report, dissertation or article, it is always important to be able to describe the interviewees who took part in your research. The reason for this is to contextualize your analysis and also to let other researchers know which perspectives feature in your work. If they want to extend your research, they will know which other perspectives need to be examined and that will shape their sampling. For example, if the researcher in the study of young men’s experiences of receiving a diagnosis of testicular cancer recruited only White British participants, and if culture and ethnicity are thought to be important in shaping these experiences, other researchers might decide to focus on recruiting young men from other backgrounds in their research. To describe your sample, you will need data on participants’ age, gender, ethnicity, education, occupation and any other dimensions that are important to your research. You might choose to obtain that information by giving participants a short demographic/background information questionnaire to complete or by asking questions at the start or the end of the interview. Describing your sample needs to be done carefully, though, to avoid infringing participants’ confidentiality.

Questions for focus group discussions

In preparing for focus group discussions, the principles for creating interview questions still apply, although an unstructured approach is more likely to be used in focus group discussions than in individual interviews. In that case, the interviewer uses a topic guide which specifies a set of topics (like the ‘clusters’ that you will have generated if you completed the exercise in Box 4.1) that may or may not be covered in the discussions, depending on how they unfold and what comes up as participants discuss and debate with each other. When a semi-structured approach is used, the focus group interview schedule tends to have fewer questions than a schedule for an individual interview. These questions are addressed to participants as a group and not to individuals. Prompts and probes are even more important in focus group discussions than in individual interviews. Alongside the ability to handle group dynamics effectively, they are a key resource in keeping the discussion flowing and accessing the variety of ways in which the group understands, evaluates and otherwise responds to the research topic.

It is common to use stimulus material as a means of initiating or focusing discussion, such as news headlines, photos or specially-created vignettes (‘short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond’ – Finch, 1987: 105). These can be particularly useful if the discussion is about an issue that participants may not all be familiar with, because a vignette will give participants something ‘concrete’ around which to focus their discussion. In Box 4.3, you will find an example of a vignette and interview schedule that Victoria Uwannah (2015) used in a study of Pentecostal Christians’ representations of and responses to people with mental health conditions. The vignette presents a fictitious case of a man with a mental health condition who turns up at a Pentecostal church. Uwannah thought that if she had begun the discussion by asking participants about their church congregation’s experience of engaging with people with mental health difficulties, this might have elicited only wary, socially desirable responses (see Barter and Renold, 1999). Instead she decided to use the vignette as a means of allowing participants to engage with the research topic in some detail but at a distance from them personally: the central character is said to turn up at an unspecified Pentecostal church. You can see in Box 4.3 that there is a turning point in the interview schedule where Uwannah shifts the discussion away from the vignette and onto the experiences of the participants’ own congregations. By this time, she believed that participants would have become more accustomed to and comfortable with the topic and each other and that they would speak more freely and in a less guarded manner. That indeed proved to be the case.

Box 4.3

An example of an interview schedule for focus group discussions

In the section of Chapter 2 in this volume dealing with ‘Reflexivity in qualitative research’, we encountered Victoria Uwannah’s (2015) study of Pentecostal Christians’ representations of and responses to people with mental health conditions. In that work, Uwannah conducted three focus group discussions involving a total of 19 Pentecostal Christians. Each discussion lasted for approximately 90 minutes.

Before each discussion began, she invited all participants to read information sheets about the research and what it involved, to ask any questions, and then to read and sign consent forms and fill in brief demographic information questionnaires. Next, she asked participants to read a short fictional vignette which she had created in consultation with expert informants. This vignette presented the story of Josh, who had a history of low moods and who lost his job after complaints from workmates about his aggressive behaviour and non-adherence to work safety requirements. That night, ‘he woke up and saw an image of Jesus in his room. Although Josh had not previously considered himself to be a religious person, he felt comforted by this presence and felt that Jesus was telling him that everything would be OK. Josh shared this experience with his family who became worried about him. They eventually persuaded him to see his doctor, who diagnosed him with bipolar disorder and placed him on medication to regulate his moods. However, Josh could not stop thinking about his experience of seeing Jesus and felt a sense of connection with God. This led him to start attending his local Pentecostal church’.

Uwannah then posed the following questions to the group of participants and facilitated a discussion between them in response to the questions:

- How do you think Josh would have been received by his church?
- Do you think this response would have been different in a non-Pentecostal church?
- If so, how? What makes you say that?
- What role, if any, do you think Josh’s mental health condition would have played in how his church congregation responded to him?
- What effect do you think these responses would have had on Josh?

So far, we have been focusing on Josh’s story in the vignette. Now I would like to move away from the story and explore in more general terms your experiences with and responses to individuals with mental health conditions.

- When you hear the term ‘mental health’, what comes to mind?
- What have been your experiences of individuals with mental health conditions within your congregation?
- How do you think your congregation could support members with mental health conditions?
- What do you think would be the ideal Christian response to individuals with mental health conditions?
- In what ways could your congregation be supported by external agencies specializing in mental health?
- Thank you for your participation. That is the end of all the questions I would like to ask. Are there any additional comments or observations that you would like to offer?
- Are there any questions before we end our discussion?

Bite-sized summary 2

We have now engaged with a core task in preparing to conduct research interviews and focus group discussions: the development of the interview schedule. We have considered how to identify topic areas for an interview schedule and have examined the principles by which interview questions can be developed that will potentially generate rich data. Our attention has primarily been directed towards individual interviews, but we have also considered questions in focus group discussions and the use of vignettes to stimulate discussion. However, having a good set of interview questions does not guarantee that they will produce high-quality data. That depends on the skill with which they are used in fieldwork – and that is where we turn next.

The interview dynamic

At various points in the previous section about the interview schedule, it was hard to resist the temptation to slip into a discussion of the interview dynamic. I use the term ‘interview dynamic’ to refer to the positions that the interviewer and interviewee take in relation to each other. It encapsulates the ease or awkwardness of the interaction, the ‘rapport’ between interviewer and interviewee that is often held up as a key aim, and the power relations that exist between them (Kvale, 2016). In many ways, and particularly in the practice of semi-structured interviews, the interview schedule and the interview dynamic overlap and are not easily distinguished. Many of the resources on which the interviewer relies to sustain, manage and structure the interview can be identified in advance as features of the interview schedule but there are other more elusive aspects of the interview dynamic. These aspects are what others refer to as the craft or art of interviewing (Brady, 1977; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). They are the features of the interviewer’s practice that can properly be considered skills honed by experience.

One of the trickiest skills to develop is the ability to generate rapport with interviewees. The concept of ‘rapport’ tends to be defined in rather general terms as, for example, ‘getting along with each other, a harmony with, a conformity to, and affinity for one another’ (Seidman, 2013: 98) and ‘conveying empathy and understanding without judgment’ (Patton, 2015: 458). Prior (2018) has offered a specific definition of rapport as involving affiliation and empathy between an interviewer and interviewee. ‘Affiliation’ refers here to the interviewer conveying solidarity with the interviewee and their experiences; ‘empathy’ refers to the imaginative sharing of the interviewees’ experiences and emotions by the interviewer. To achieve rapport requires relational, emotional involvement between the interviewer and the interviewee, which is why I described it as a tricky skill to develop and practise. However, there are several factors that will contribute to the generation of rapport, some of them practical.

One factor is interviewer preparedness: the more at ease you are with the interview context, the better able you will be to put the interviewee at ease. Preparedness includes a wide range of concerns, from having a clear under-

standing of the research aims and questions, to a comprehensive understanding of and familiarity with the interview schedule and competence in using your recording equipment. Beyond that, there is the matter of your credibility as an interviewer. For some interviews, particularly those with experts in an area, it will be necessary for you to have a credible understanding of the topic area so that the interviewee feels comfortable in talking at the level at which they understand the topic. For example, some years ago I had to interview leading figures and researchers in the field of genomics and, in order to feel and be credible as an interviewer of these experts, I needed to do my homework on their specialist area so that they could speak about the issues in the richest possible way without needing to ‘dumb it down’ for me. What struck me as interesting in those interviews was how often the interviewee would say something like ‘Of course, as you know...’, ascribing to me a level of understanding that often was not warranted, before explaining the issue in their own terms. Sometimes the appearance of credibility can be enough.

For most interviews, you should aim to create an interactional dynamic that the interviewee will experience as reassuring, as a space in which they can speak openly. You can do some of that in the way that you preface the interview, but a lot of it will come from the way that you present yourself in the interview. This aspect of interviewing is, in my experience, under-appreciated by novice interviewers, who tend to be more concerned with generating a good list of questions and then getting through them all during the interview. Consequently, they forget something important in the phrase ‘interviews are conversations with a purpose’ – that the *purpose* is to help someone to talk. The interview schedule deals with the ideal content of the talk more than the activity of talking (although probes and prompts orient towards that). Getting someone to talk, creating that reassuring dynamic in which the interviewee feels free to talk, requires you to:

- present yourself as someone who is really interested in and motivated to hear about the interviewee’s experiences;
- be empathic and sincere in listening and responding to their descriptions and stories;
- be attentive to the content of their talk so that you can ask follow-up questions that are clearly responsive to what they have said and are expressed in terms that the interviewee can relate to;
- demonstrate respect for the interviewee’s beliefs and lifestyles;
- monitor the interviewee’s body language for any signs of distress or discomfort, respond to any such signs and guide the interview accordingly. (For more on the ethics of interviewing, see the section on ‘Interviewing and debriefing’ in Chapter 3 in this volume.)

The development of all these skills takes practice. For the novice interviewer, it can be hard enough remembering what topics you expect the interview to

cover, without also having to actually listen to what the interviewee is saying. Given that interviews require such self-presentational work from the interviewer and that not everyone experiences even everyday conversations as easy, the development of the rapport skills will come more easily to some than to others. As someone who doesn't find everyday conversations easy, the trick I adopted early in my research career was to remember that the research interview is a professional practice: it is the job of the qualitative researcher to attend to what people are saying in interviews and to ask appropriate follow-up questions. In ordinary conversation, you might not push and probe others to explore their thoughts, feelings and behaviours but, as a research interviewer in psychology, it is your job to do so. In short, if you find interviews difficult at a personal level, try taking the personal out of your practice as an interviewer and focus on what the interactional context requires of you as a professional interviewer. Ultimately, it's not about you: it's about the interviewee, their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

One final point on the interview dynamic relates to the role of the interview schedule. When preparing for interviewing, developing and testing the interview schedule are the activities that will have taken most time and effort (unless you are using or adapting a pre-existing schedule). Having an interview schedule creates a sense of reassurance and security for the novice interviewer: it provides a route map to get from the start of the interview to the end. However, depending on how it is used, it can also disrupt the interview dynamic and compromise the quality of the interview overall. The best practice in a semi-structured interview would be not to have a hard copy of the interview schedule to hand at all. Consider for a moment the rapport skills of being an empathic, engaged, interested and motivated listener and then consider how you can embody those qualities if you are constantly checking your interview schedule while the interviewee is talking. The interview schedule can be conceived – and perceived by interviewees – as a silent third party to the interview, one that dictates what gets talked about and when, and one that might already have decided what is important and not important in what the interviewee has to say. This might result in answers becoming shorter and less elaborate, and the interviewee might not introduce new topics, anticipating that the interviewer already has questions on the topics of interest to them. Consequently, the visible, felt presence of the interview schedule could have the effect of requiring the interviewer to say and do more than they might otherwise have to.

How should you deal with this? Develop your interview schedule and then commit it to memory so that you can call upon it when necessary to provide structure for the interview or to check that the interviewee is covering everything you need them to talk about. If we return once again to that old maxim that interviews are conversations with a purpose, we realize that conversations do not usually involve one person working their way through a pre-set series of questions written on a sheet in front of them and posing these questions to the other person. Your interview schedule provides a necessary structure for the interview but it should be used flexibly and in a way that responds to what the interviewee is saying.

For example, consider what you might do if an interviewee responds to an early question and includes in their answer material that seems important to them and to the research aims but that is addressed by questions towards the end of the schedule. Do you say, ‘That’s really interesting. We’ll come back to that particular issue later in the interview and look at it in more detail’? Or do you bring in the questions relating to that material now? The first response is acceptable but it emphasizes the powerful position of the interviewer within the interaction. It communicates that the interviewer has a schedule that takes priority and they will decide what will be covered in the interview and when. The second response follows the interviewee and could convey that the interviewer is attending closely to what the interviewee is saying and is respecting what the interviewee considers important. However, that second response requires some mental agility from the interviewer because, having asked a question out of its place in the schedule’s sequence, they will then have to consider what question should logically follow that. They will need to adjust the sequence of questions there and then. That is absolutely fine but it can be rather anxiety-provoking for some interviewers, especially if they are not experienced as interviewers and/or with the specific interview schedule that they are using. As you gain experience with an interview schedule, you develop an intimate understanding of it and how it can be used flexibly to generate the data that are needed in order to address the study’s research question(s).

Box 4.4**Reflecting on rapport**

If you completed the exercise in Box 4.2 and tried out your interview questions with a classmate, did that interviewing interaction involve rapport between you and them? At what points do you think the rapport was particularly evident? What makes you say that? Were there any points where rapport was difficult to achieve?

The dynamic of a focus group discussion, and the role that the researcher takes in shaping that dynamic, is quite different from that of an individual research interview. (See Millward, 2012, and Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015, for more detailed accounts of the role of the researcher in a focus group.) To start with, there are more speakers and the point of the focus group is to get the participants to speak to each other to negotiate their various perspectives and opinions on the discussion topic, ideally with the researcher saying as little as possible. For this reason, the researcher in a focus group discussion is more commonly referred to as a facilitator or moderator. Their role is to get the discussion started; to monitor it (including monitoring who is speaking and who isn’t); to respond by inviting contributions from those who have not yet spoken; to ensure that the discussion remains on topic and, possibly, to shift topics when appropriate; to encourage participants to remain respectful of each other and, if necessary, to ensure that this happens; and to bring the discussion to a close when it is appropriate and necessary to do so. Given the number of speakers in a focus group discussion – typically between six and eight people – those responsibilities can be a lot for one facilitator to manage, more so with

larger focus groups. When Adrian Coyle and I conducted focus groups for the project on public responses to new genetic technologies that I described earlier, we co-facilitated the discussions. In each focus group, one of us took prime responsibility for asking questions and ensuring that the discussion moved at an appropriate pace so that all topics were covered by the end of the agreed time. The other took prime responsibility for monitoring and, where necessary, managing the group dynamics. This included ensuring that everyone had a chance to speak and that no one dominated the discussion or was victimized for what they said, monitoring the participants' comfort or discomfort with the discussion and taking any necessary action if a participant showed signs of distress (which did not arise).

Bite-sized summary 3

We have now considered one of the trickiest areas of interviewing to conceptualize and to plan for: the interactional dynamic that the interviewer creates with and for the interviewee. We have touched on the different kinds of dynamics that are possible within research interviews and how they might serve the ultimate function of the interview: to generate rich and detailed data. Anyone planning to conduct individual interviews or focus group discussions should carefully consider the kind of dynamic that they need to foster with the participants and, as part of their practical preparation, should seek guidance and training as appropriate.

The interview procedure

In this chapter, I have focused on some of the basic principles and skills involved in interviews and interviewing. However, the fact that there are whole books on the subject (for example, Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013) shows that there are many other important considerations that need to be taken into account but that cannot be dealt with adequately within a single chapter.

Ethical issues in interviewing individuals and facilitating focus groups are of crucial importance. In Chapter 3 in this volume, Edith Maria Steffen engages with the ethical dimension of qualitative research and gives specific consideration to 'interviewing and debriefing'. Moreover, in the present chapter (and particularly in the section on the interview dynamic), we have been paying consistent attention to ethical issues such as how to engage constructively and respectfully with interviewees and focus group participants.

There are also important practical issues that deserve attention. For example, there is the question of where interviews and focus group discussions should take place, how they should be recorded and options for transcribing audio-recordings of interviews and discussions (because recordings of interviews and focus groups need to be transcribed so that the data can be analysed). I have termed these practical aspects as the 'interview procedure', and in this section I will consider the question of interview locations. This will include decision-making about whether to conduct individual interviews and focus group

discussions online or offline.

Regarding transcription, different qualitative research methods tend to be associated with different levels of transcription. The most basic level of transcription is the verbatim style. Here the transcriber types out every word heard in the audio file, including false starts, self-corrections, filler words such as ‘umm’, and repetitions. This style of transcription is the one that is most commonly employed with the analytic approaches covered in this book and it can be seen in the two interview transcripts in Appendix 1. When transcribing, the researcher may be tempted to ‘tidy up’ the talk, to make people more eloquent or even just more grammatical on paper than they are in real life. Resist those temptations: just transcribe what you hear. If you want to get an informed sense of how challenging it can be to transcribe a spoken recording, try the exercise in Box 4.5.

Box 4.5 Practising transcription

Go to YouTube and search for ‘interview with’. That will identify a selection of interviews, usually between an interviewer and a well-known person, although some news interviews might also appear. Choose one that you find interesting but that does not appear to be a highly scripted or rehearsed interview. Alternatively, find a vlog that interests you but again look for one in which the vlogger appears to be speaking naturally to the camera rather than speaking from a script.

Your task is to transcribe two minutes of that interview or vlog. Before you start, look at the transcripts in Appendix 1 in this volume and note how they are formatted. Each line of text is numbered, the speakers are clearly identified and there is a space between one speaking turn and the next. Use the same conventions in your transcript. (If you are using a Word document, click on ‘Layout’ and you will see options for automatic line numbering.) Find a useful starting point in your chosen video or vlog. If it is a journalistic interview, you might start from the interviewer’s first question.

Then transcribe what is being said, playing and pausing the video as necessary. See how long it takes you to transcribe two minutes of recorded speech. Generally, it takes between six and eight hours to transcribe one hour of recorded speech – and possibly longer if you have not done it before. If you are feeling really adventurous, find a video in which a group of people are discussing something. Try to transcribe some of that. That may show you how much more difficult it usually is to transcribe focus group discussions, where people may be interrupting or talking over one another, than individual interviews.

Interview location

Turning to the core concern of this section, there are a few related issues that need to be taken into consideration when planning where to conduct your interview or focus group discussion. These include the comfort and safety of the interviewee/participants and interviewer, the need for a sufficient degree of privacy and minimal risk of disruption, and the impact of the location on the

quality of the recording of the interview. It should seem obvious to suggest that interviews should be conducted in locations where both parties feel at ease and able to talk. For student projects, that might mean using bookable spaces in libraries or learning zones. For funded research, it might involve booking meeting rooms in public places, such as in libraries, hotels or bookable office spaces or, perhaps more likely, in the interviewee's own home (but see Box 4.6 for a more radical alternative location).

Consider carefully the effect of the location on the interview dynamic. How public or private is the space? And how might that affect the openness of the interviewee? A glass-walled meeting room in a busy university library may not feel like a particularly private place in which to discuss an interview topic that is sensitive. Similarly, an interviewee might feel comfortable in their own home, but it is a location loaded with meanings, associations and responsibilities that might in subtle ways affect what the interviewee feels able to say. It will make certain aspects of their identity more salient and their answers might vary accordingly. For example, if you were to interview a man in his home about his experiences of having a child with a chronic health condition, then his status as a father would be salient and his answers are likely to come from that perspective. Interviewing in people's own homes or offices also carries a risk of disruption. For example, telephones can ring, children can come home from school, or the interviewee's curious mother can call round to see if the dog needs to be taken for a walk. All these things will affect the flow of the interview and potentially the quality of the data.

Box 4.6
Walking interviews

A walking interview is just that: an interview conducted while walking. Places – whether homes, workplaces or cities – carry many associations and meanings for those who inhabit them. In research where place is an important consideration, interviewing people while they are in or moving through those places can often generate richer research data than a sit-down interview. Walking interviews are particularly useful if the activity of walking or the area in which the walk will take place is closely connected to the topic of the research. For example, Adekoya and Guse (2020) conducted walking interviews with older adults who were living with dementia and who exhibited wandering behaviour. The research aimed to examine participants’ perceptions and understandings of their own walking and wandering behaviour. Hocking et al. (2018) used a combination of GPS tracking and walking interviews to examine how Protestant and Catholic residents related to particular areas of Belfast (a city that has a long history of segregation on the basis of religion/culture which endures in some areas today) and how these relationships with, and aversions to, particular neighbourhoods gave rise to informal patterns of segregation. Clark and Emmel (2010) identify a number of benefits of conducting walking interviews. These include the level of control that the interviewee has over what gets talked about and the role that the environment plays in helping the interviewee to articulate their ideas and in prompting new topics and possibilities for discussion based on what and who are seen in the course of the walk. There are, however, several issues to consider before deciding to use walking interviews to generate data in a study in which place is an important consideration. The interview schedule needs to be fitted to the topic and the activity: Clark and Emmel (2010) provide a good example of a walking interview schedule. There are also practical considerations, including the equipment needed to record outside, having to accept that you will be recording in an environment that is noisier than an indoor room, with consequent implications for the quality of the recording, and the potential for encountering and talking to people known to the interviewee and the implications this has for the interviewee’s confidentiality. While clearly not suitable for all research topics (and a standard sit-down interview can also be valuable in research on place: see May and Lewis, 2020), walking interviews present an interesting and valuable means of generating rich data on some topics.

Interviewing in an interviewee’s home is also the riskiest proposition for the researcher. Researcher safety must be taken into consideration, potential hazards need to be identified and plans for their management put in place. The likelihood of anything happening to an interviewer while in an interviewee’s home is usually low but, if something were to happen, the consequences would be potentially very serious. To take an example of managing this risk in my own supervisory experience, in an interview-based PhD project on the experiences of families of children with epilepsy where the interviews did take place in private homes, we adopted a policy of ensuring that one or other of the PhD student’s

two supervisors and the postgraduate office were given the address where the interview would take place, the interviewee's contact details and the time frame in which the interview was expected to occur. (The interviewee was made aware that this would happen and their permission was obtained.) The PhD student would send a text to the supervisor and the office before the interview began and again when they left the interviewee's home. That way, we knew where the interviewer was, who she was with and that she was safe.

The final issue affecting the location of the interview is the level of background noise and the quality of the recording device that you are using. It is tempting to imagine that interviews can be conducted in public places such as coffee shops, cafés and pubs. The fact that they are public places does mitigate concerns about researcher safety and people do sit and talk in those places of their own volition. They might seem like natural places in which to have a conversation with someone. However, a problem often arises with the quality of a recording made in a public place and hence the amount and quality of usable data that can be obtained from such a recording. In all but the noisiest environments, the human brain is adept at filtering out background noise to allow us to focus on our interactional partner. Sadly, even the very best digital audio recorders and microphones are not nearly so adept. To put it simply, everything that the microphone 'hears' will be recorded, subject to the type of microphone used, its effective range and angle of pick-up, and the use of any automatic gain control (AGC) on the recording device. AGC is a function on some digital audio recorders that ensures a constant volume on the recording even if the sounds being recorded become quieter or louder. So, while an interview location might have seemed quiet during the interview, it may nonetheless be difficult to pick out the interviewee's talk against the background hubbub of an otherwise 'quiet' café or against the sound of a cooling or heating fan operating in a meeting room (which you may not have noticed during the actual interview but which can be surprisingly noisy on a recording). Such matters may seem obvious but many researchers fail to take these things into consideration, with the result that the recording of the interview is so noisy that it is hard to tell what the interviewee is saying. At best, this will result in longer-than-normal transcription times; at worst, it can result in the recordings being unusable. Failure to consider such things can result in wasted time and effort for the interviewer and interviewee alike.

Online interviews and focus groups

All of the above assumes that research interviews and focus group discussions take place in person, with the interviewer and interviewee in the same physical place at the same time. While it is still the norm for interviews and focus groups to be conducted in this way, there have long been other options used when it has not been possible or feasible to interview participants in the same physical space as the interviewer. This has primarily involved telephone interviews. Due to the absence of visual cues in the building of rapport and in monitoring interviewees' responses, telephone interviews tend to be thought of as something to be used

only when a face-to-face approach cannot be adopted for some reason. However, telephone interviews may be particularly appropriate in some research contexts and for some research topics (see Trier-Bieniek, 2012).

Nowadays, another option has become available for interviews and focus groups where the interviewer and interviewees cannot be physically present with each other. These can now be carried out online. In the literature on conducting qualitative research online, the distinction is typically made between ‘asynchronous’ and ‘synchronous’ settings, a distinction that largely results from the technologies available at the time of writing. (See Salmons, 2016, and Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017, for more detailed accounts of synchronous and asynchronous online interviews and focus groups.) The older form of online interviews or focus groups is asynchronous in the sense that there is no requirement for all parties to be online and in interaction at the same time. They are primarily textual and can be conducted over email or through an online discussion forum (the latter works well for online focus groups) with interviewers and facilitators posting questions to which interviewees or focus group participants can respond in their own time.

With the development of VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol)-based apps such as Skype, Zoom and Teams, the potential for conducting research interviews and focus group discussions online has increased significantly. In contrast to text-based asynchronous interviews, these interviews can be synchronous with the interviewee and interviewer being present in the meeting or call at the same time and able to see and hear each other; they are much closer to the standard in-person interview or focus group. For that reason, what follows relates primarily to synchronous online interviews and focus groups. There are, however, a few pros and cons that need to be considered when deciding whether to conduct individual interviews or focus group discussions online or offline. The main issues relate to the accessibility of the target population(s), the resource constraints of the project and the expertise of the research team.

If the target population(s) for your interviews or focus group discussions are geographically diverse (for example, in different parts of the same country or in different countries), online interviews or discussions may be more practical than offline ones. The ability to bring together people from diverse backgrounds, locations and cultures has obvious implications for the heterogeneity of a focus group. That will be important if you are seeking a diverse range of perspectives on a global issue: for example, climate change or the management of global pandemics. Online interviews and focus groups may also be more accessible than offline ones for people with physical disabilities or sensory impairments or for people who might otherwise find it difficult to travel to a physical setting. Similarly, small or hard-to-reach populations taking part in studies on sensitive topics might also appreciate the greater anonymity that can be offered by a voice-only online interview or focus group. Hence you could make your project more inclusive and accessible by taking it online. Having said that, it is important to consider your target population’s access to and familiarity with the technologies you might want to use for your online interview or focus group. If the interviewees or focus group participants have low connection speeds, it

might result in a low-quality call and a compromised, if not ruined, interview or focus group. Or, if they are not familiar with making video calls or with the social conventions of online group calls, they might struggle to contribute fully to the interview or focus group.

Conducting in-person interviews and focus group discussions is an expensive and time-consuming business. You (or your research funder) may have to pay travel costs for researchers and participants, hire locations and provide refreshments. Conducting synchronous interviews or focus groups online can reduce some of those costs. You and the research participants do not need to travel and can take part from anywhere with a good internet connection. That said, the concerns that were expressed earlier about location, disruptions and background noise also apply to online settings. For example, it would still be inadvisable for a participant to join an online interview or focus group from their local café. Not all platforms that enable video connections between people are suitable for research interviews as they differ in how secure they are. Researchers need to check that the security offered by any platform they wish to use is sufficient to allow them to guarantee privacy and confidentiality to interviewees. That may mean avoiding some free-to-use platforms or free-to-use options within platforms.

Finally, there is the issue of researcher expertise. As I have already stressed, conducting individual interviews and facilitating focus groups can be considered crafts, requiring skills and abilities developed over time and through experience. Despite that, a researcher experienced in facilitating offline in-person focus groups might not be familiar or competent with the technologies required for online research. Similarly, a digital native who has been participating in group video calls with family and friends for as long as they can remember might struggle to create the necessary rapport with people whom they meet for the first time online to conduct research interviews. A lack of experience with any aspect of the interview dynamic or procedure could reduce the potential or undermine the quality of the interaction. It is therefore essential, when deciding whether to conduct interviews and focus groups online or offline, that you consider the strengths and limitations of the researcher's skills and experience and, if necessary, identify training needs to address any limitations. In their article on online health research with hard-to-reach populations, Wilkerson et al. (2014) provide a helpful checklist to guide decision-making about whether to conduct research online or offline.

Bite-sized summary 4

An overview of some of the practical considerations of conducting qualitative research interviews has been provided, centred on issues relevant to the location of in-person individual interviews and focus group discussions and decision-making about whether to conduct interviews and focus groups online or offline. Note the degree to which ethical considerations – such as prioritizing participant comfort, ensuring researcher safety and making research participation accessible and inclusive – are once again woven into our coverage.

Chapter summary

We have covered quite an amount of ground in this lengthy chapter, beginning at the start of the research process where research aims are translated into research questions and then – if individual interviews or focus group discussions are deemed an appropriate means of data generation – into interview questions. We considered the practicalities of creating good interview questions and then examined the factors within interviews and focus groups that can influence how successful those questions are in creating rich, high-quality data. Some of these factors are very practical, such as where interviews and focus group discussions take place, including whether they take place offline or online. Others are interpersonal and relational, such as the establishment and maintenance of rapport between interviewers and interviewees and the monitoring and management of group dynamics in focus group discussions. Our brief consideration of recording and transcribing interviews took us to the point where the interview or focus group data are ready to undergo analysis, although some would rightly maintain that the painstaking process of transcribing interview recordings gives an intimate familiarity with the data and is actually a first or preliminary stage of any analysis. Despite that coverage, there are many important and interesting issues that were beyond the scope of this chapter. For example, conducting interviews with particular groups can require adjustments to standard interviewing practice. Such situations include interviewing young children (Prior, 2016), interviewing people with intellectual disabilities (Hollomotz, 2018) and using interpreters when interviewing people whose language you do not share (Chiumento et al., 2018). Nonetheless, I hope I have managed to demystify the interviewing process for you, offer you some useful guidance for your own interviewing practice and provide you with an informed basis from which to explore other, more specific resources on interviewing to extend and deepen your knowledge. When you have done enough preparatory reading, the best way to learn how to conduct effective interviews or focus groups is to do them and then to reflect, on your own and with others, on your practice. You will make mistakes and you will always be able to think of ways in which you could have done things better in any particular interview. That is how learning happens: through informed action, critical reflection on that action, and the development of new strategies for future action. My sincere hope is that, in this process, you will also be able to enjoy the privilege that is always involved in interviewing as you are invited to share in other people's worlds.

Further reading

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) provide an exhaustive overview of the theory and craft of interviewing, while Stewart and Shamdasani (2015) provide a similarly comprehensive account of focus group discussions. For a good example of how standard interviewing practice might be modified to accommodate the needs of a specific group of interviewees, see Cridland et al.'s (2016) reflections and

advice on conducting in-depth interviews with people with dementia.

Salmons (2016) probably offers the most complete account of conducting qualitative research online. Her book contains some discussion of online interviewing and of ethical issues arising from online research. Finally, Wilkerson et al. (2014) provide a very useful account of the decision-making processes underlying the use of interviews or focus group discussions in online and offline contexts; Davies et al. (2020) present a review of the relative strengths and weaknesses of online and face-to-face interviews on health and illness experiences; and Deakin and Wakefield (2014) offer interesting reflections on conducting interviews by Skype in their PhD work.