Chapter 10

Collecting primary data using semi-structured, in-depth and group interviews

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be:

- able to classify research interviews in order to help you to understand the purpose of each type;
- aware of research situations favouring the use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and the logical and resource issues that affect their use;
- able to analyse potential data quality issues and evaluate how to overcome these;
- able to consider the development of your competence to undertake semi-structured and in-depth interviews;
- aware of the advantages and disadvantages of using one-to-one and group interviews, including focus groups, in particular contexts;
- aware of the issues and advantages of conducting interviews by telephone and via the Internet.

10.1 Introduction

The **research interview** is a purposeful conversation between two or more people, requiring the interviewer to establish rapport and ask concise and unambiguous questions, to which the interviewee is willing to respond, and to listen attentively. Essentially it is about asking purposeful questions and carefully listening to the answers to be able to explore these further. The use of interviews can help you to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to your research question(s) and objectives. Interviews can also be used to help you refine your ideas where you have not yet fully formulated a research question and objectives.

We considered how objective and subjective perspectives inform opposing views about the nature of reality (Section 4.2). This distinction may be applied to approaches to interviewing. An objective approach sees the interview as a method to collect data from interviewees who are treated as witnesses to a reality that exists independently from them. This approach has

historical roots in research which used interviews to obtain answers to questions that were largely treated as being factual. In this way, the interview was seen as being fairly unproblematic and an effective means to gather data, providing that access to appropriate respondents could be gained. The problem with this approach is that it only seeks responses rather than trying to understand the views and culture of interviewees, as social actors who interact with,

Interviews are occurring constantly. Every day there is scope to read about, listen to and watch interviews. These include interviews given by business leaders in quality newspapers, those with celebrities on television and radio programmes and those about news events on a range of media. Every time an event happens, those who witness it, those who are involved in it and those who have some expertise associated with it will be interviewed. However, despite the seeming ease with which interviews may be conducted, using the interview to collect research data requires considerable skill.

One profession that relies on good-quality interviewing skills is journalism. The BBC College of Journalism outlines a number of key interviewing skills on its website. Interviewers need to think clearly about the purpose of each interview and to be aware that their first question will set the direction of an interview and establish its style. Think of the interview style of a 'hard' interviewer you have seen or heard and contrast that with the style of a 'friendly, inviting' interviewer! Interviewers also need to be clear in the way they ask questions and not to be obscure or to use jargon. One key way to realise clarity is to achieve simplicity. This means finding ways to ask questions about complex issues that are simple and direct. Interviewers should also ask questions that are appropriate. Open questions invite interviewees to describe or explain, or to develop a previous answer. Closed questions seek straightforward answers, like 'yes' or 'no'. In journalism, this type of question can be used to get to the heart of a particular matter and for this reason it is often called the 'killer' question. Where an interviewee wants to avoid directly answering such a question, its use will expose this reluctance to give a straightforward answer. The use of a 'killer' question isn't likely to be appropriate in business and management research interviewing, but the skills outlined on the BBC College of Journalism website (2014) are likely to be helpful to business and management researchers. This website contains video guides that you can access to watch highly skilled journalists demonstrating a range of interviewing skills.

create and interpret their social world. A subjective approach is linked to the perspective that views about the social world are socially constructed. This approach sees interview data as being socially constructed; co-produced on the one hand by the views and interpretations of the participant and on the other hand by the interviewer, who asks questions, responds to the participant's views and interprets the resulting data during data analysis (Denzin 2001; Heyl 2005). It recognises the central role of the interviewer in the process of constructing meaning and the need for reflexivity, to reflect on and evaluate his or her approach to interviewing. These two approaches to interviewing indicate a distinct contrast in philosophy, purpose and style.

The research interview is a general term for several types of interview. This is important, since the nature of any interview should be consistent with your research question(s) and objectives, the purpose of your research and the research strategy that you have adopted. We provide an overview of types of interview in the next section (Section 10.2) and show how each type is related to a research purpose. Our main focus in this chapter is on semi-structured, in-depth and group interviews, with structured interviews (interviewer-completed questionnaires) being discussed in Chapter 11.

Section 10.3 considers situations favouring the use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Section 10.4 identifies data quality issues associated with their use and discusses how to overcome these. Section 10.5 discusses preparing for semi-structured and in-depth interviews and Section 10.6 their conduct. Section 10.7 considers logistical and resource issues and how to manage these. Section 10.8 considers the particular advantages and issues associated with the use of group interviews and focus groups. Finally, Section 10.9 explores the advantages and issues associated with telephone and Internet-mediated (electronic) interviews.

10.2 Types of interview and their link to the purpose of research and research strategy

Types of interview

Interviews may be highly formalised and structured, using standardised questions for each research participant (Section 11.2), or they may be informal and unstructured conversations. In between there are intermediate positions depending on the level of formality and structure used. For example, an interview may contain some highly structured sections and some unstructured parts, depending on its purpose. One typology that is commonly used relates to these levels of formality and structure, where interviews are categorised as either:

- structured interviews;
- semi-structured interviews;
- unstructured or in-depth interviews.

Another commonly used typology differentiates between:

- standardised interviews;
- non-standardised interviews.

A different typology was suggested by Powney and Watts (1987):

- respondent interviews;
- informant interviews.

There is overlap between these different typologies, although consideration of each typology adds to our overall understanding of the nature of research interviews.

Structured interviews use questionnaires based on a predetermined and 'standardised' or identical set of questions and we refer to them as interviewer-completed questionnaires (Section 11.2). You would read out each question and then record the response on a standardised schedule, usually with pre-coded answers (Sections 11.4 and 12.2). While there is social interaction between you and the respondent, such as the preliminary explanations that you will need to provide, the questions should be asked exactly as written and in the same tone of voice so that you do not indicate any bias. As structured interviews are used to collect quantifiable data they are also referred to as 'quantitative research interviews'.

By comparison, semi-structured and in-depth (unstructured) interviews are 'non-standardised'. These are often referred to as qualitative research interviews. In **semi-structured interviews** the researcher has a list of themes and possibly some key questions to be covered, although their use may vary from interview to interview. This means that you may omit some questions in particular interviews, given a specific organisational context that is encountered in relation to the research topic. The order of questions may also be varied depending on the flow of the conversation. On the other hand, additional questions may be required to explore your research question and objectives given the nature of events within particular organisations. The nature of the questions and the ensuing discussion mean that data will be captured by audio-recording the conversation or perhaps note taking (Section 10.5). Apart from containing the list of themes and questions to be covered, the **interview schedule** for this type of interview will also be likely to contain some comments to open the discussion, a possible list of prompts to promote and further discussion, and some comments to close it. These are discussed in more detail later.

Unstructured interviews are informal. You would use these to explore in depth a general area in which you are interested. We therefore refer to these as 'in-depth interviews' in this chapter and elsewhere in this book. There is no predetermined list of questions to ask in this situation, although you need to have a clear idea about the aspect or aspects that you want to explore. The interviewee is given the opportunity to talk freely about events, behaviour and beliefs in relation to the topic area, so that this type of interaction is sometimes called non-directive. It has been labelled as an **informant interview** since it is the interviewee's perceptions that guide the conduct of the interview and the topics discussed. In comparison, a **respondent interview** is one where the interviewer exercises greater direction over the interview while allowing the interviewee's opinions to emerge as he or she responds to the questions of the researcher.

The context of the unstructured interview may also be important to consider. While unstructured interviews are informal, in some research designs they will be pre-arranged so that the interviewer and interviewee agree to meet in a particular place at the specific time for an agreed period. This suggests a formal arrangement to an informal process. In other research designs, such as those involving an Action Research or ethnographic strategy, 'interviews' may be more opportunistic as well as informal. In this way, the researcher may listen to talk, engage in talk and have informal conversations, as well as pre-arrange interviews. Where you use an Action Research or ethnographic research strategy, you should be able to benefit from this immersion in the research setting and ability to witness and participate in natural, authentic conversations.

We can also differentiate types of interview according to the number of participants. Interviews may be conducted on a one-to-one basis, between you and a single participant. Such interviews are most commonly conducted by meeting your participant 'face-to-face', but there may be some situations where you conduct an interview by telephone

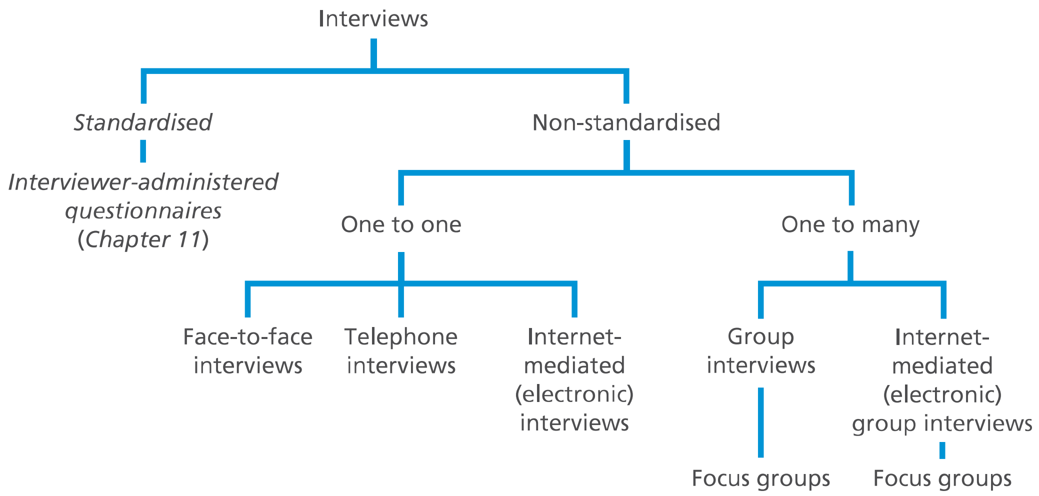

Figure 10.1 Forms of interview

or using the Internet. There may be other situations where you conduct a semi-structured or in-depth interview on a group basis, where you meet with a small number of participants to explore an aspect of your research through a group discussion that you facilitate. These forms of interview are summarised in Figure 10.1. The discussion throughout most of this chapter applies to each of these forms. However, the final two sections (10.8 and 10.9) include specific consideration of the issues and advantages related to the use of one-to-many group interviews and focus groups, and to the use of telephone and Internet-mediated interviews as an alternative to a 'face-to-face' meeting, respectively.

Links to the purpose of research and research strategy

Each form of interview outlined above has a distinct purpose. Structured, standardised interviews are normally used to gather data which will then be the subject of quantitative analysis (Chapter 12), for example as part of a survey strategy. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews are used to gather data which are normally analysed qualitatively (Chapter 13), for example as part of a case study or Grounded Theory strategy. These data are likely to be used not only to understand the 'what' and the 'how' but also to place more emphasis on 'why'.

In Chapter 5 we outlined how the purpose of your research may be classified as either exploratory, descriptive, explanatory or evaluative (Section 5.4). Different types of interview may be used to gather data for each kind of study:

- In an exploratory study, in-depth interviews can be very helpful to find out what is happening and to understand the context. Semi-structured interviews may also be used in an exploratory study. Both of these types of interview may provide important background or contextual material for your study. You will find it helpful to conduct exploratory, qualitative interviews where your research design adopts an inductive approach, such as in the development of grounded theory (Sections 4.3 and 5.5).
- In a descriptive study, structured interviews (Section 11.2) can be used as a means to identify general patterns. You may find it helpful to conduct structured interviews where your research design uses a deductive approach to test a theory, as the standardised nature of the data will make it easier to test statistical propositions or hypotheses (Chapter 12).

Table 10.1 Uses of different types of interview for each research purpose

	Exploratory	Descriptive	Explanatory	Evaluative
Structured		✓✓	✓	✓
Semi-structured	✓		✓✓	✓✓
Unstructured	✓✓			✓

✓✓ = more frequent, ✓ = less frequent

- In an explanatory study, semi-structured interviews may be used in order to understand the relationships between variables, such as those revealed from a descriptive study (Section 5.4). Structured interviews may also be used in relation to an explanatory study, in a statistical sense (Section 12.5). Research interviews used for an explanatory purpose may be useful in both inductive and deductive approaches because of the intention to explain why relationships exist (Section 2.4).
- In an evaluative study, you may find it useful to use one type of interview, or a combination of types, depending on the nature of your study. In many cases, semi-structured interviews may be used to understand the relationships between your evaluation or effectiveness criteria. Research interviews used for an evaluative purpose may be useful in either an inductive or deductive approach (Section 2.4).

This is summarised in Table 10.1.

Your research may incorporate more than one type of interview, as in multiple methods (Section 5.3). As part of a survey strategy, for example, you may decide to use in-depth or semi-structured interviews initially to help identify the questions that should be asked in a questionnaire completed as a structured interview. The data that you gather from such exploratory interviews will be used in the design of your structured interview. Alternatively, semi-structured interviews may be used as part of a mixed methods design to explore, explain or validate themes that have emerged from the use of a questionnaire (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). Different types of interview question may be also used within one interview. For example, one section of an interview may be composed of a set of questions with pre-coded responses, while another section may use semi-structured questions to explore responses.

We can therefore see that the various types of interview have a number of potentially valuable uses in terms of undertaking your research project. The key is to ensure consistency between your research question(s) and objectives, the strategy you will employ and the methods of data collection you will use.

10.3 When to use semi-structured and in-depth interviews

There are many situations in which collecting data using a semi-structured or in-depth research interview may be advantageous. These situations can be grouped into four categories:

- the purpose of the research;
- the importance of establishing personal contact;
- the nature of the data collection questions;
- length of time required and completeness of the process.

We examine each of these in turn.

The purpose of the research

Where you are undertaking an exploratory study, or a study that includes an exploratory element, it is likely that you will include in-depth or semi-structured research interviews in your design. Similarly, an explanatory study is also likely to include interviews in order for the researcher to be able to infer causal relationships between variables (Sections 2.4 and 11.4). Where it is necessary for you to understand the reasons for the decisions that your research participants have taken, or to understand the reasons for their attitudes and opinions, you are likely to need to conduct an in-depth or semi-structured interview.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews also provide you with the opportunity to 'probe' answers, where you want your interviewees to explain, or build on, their responses. This is important if, for example, you are adopting an interpretivist philosophy, where you will be concerned to understand the meanings that participants ascribe to various phenomena (Section 4.4). Interviewees may use words or ideas in a particular way, and the opportunity to probe these meanings will add significance and depth to the data you obtain. They may also lead the discussion into areas that you had not previously considered but which are significant for your understanding, and which help you to address your research question and objectives, or indeed help you formulate such a question. Interviews also afford each interviewee an opportunity to hear herself or himself 'thinking aloud' about things she or he may not have previously thought about. The result should be that you are able to collect a rich and detailed set of data. However, you need to be aware that the manner in which you interact with your interviewees and ask questions will impact on the data you collect.

The importance of establishing personal contact

We have found that managers are more likely to agree to be interviewed, rather than complete a questionnaire, especially where the interview topic is seen to be interesting and relevant to their current work. An interview provides them with an opportunity to reflect on events without needing to write anything down. This situation also provides the opportunity for interviewees to receive feedback and personal assurance about the way in which information will be used (Sections 6.2 and 6.5).

Potential research participants who receive a questionnaire via the Internet or through the post may be reluctant to complete it for a number of reasons. They may feel that it is not appropriate to provide sensitive and confidential information to someone they have never met. They may also not completely trust the way in which the information is to be used. They may be reluctant to spend time providing written explanatory answers, where these are requested, especially if the meaning of any question is not entirely clear. The use of personal interviews, where appropriate, may therefore achieve a higher response rate than using questionnaires (Sections 7.2 and 7.3). Where a questionnaire is received by a manager who is not inclined to complete it, it may also be passed to another person to complete, which will adversely affect your control over those whom you wish to answer your questions and also possibly the reliability of the data that you receive.

The nature of the data collection questions

An in-depth or semi-structured interview is likely to be the most advantageous approach to attempt to obtain data in the following circumstances:

- where there are a large number of questions to be answered;
- where the questions are either complex or open ended;
- where the order and logic of questioning may need to be varied (Box 10.1).

Box 10.1 Focus on student research

The need to vary the order and logic of questioning

Val undertook a series of semi-structured interviews into the approach used to manage public relations (PR) activities in 30 organisations. It soon became evident that it would not be meaningful to ask exactly the same questions in each organisation. For example, some organisations had centralised PR as part of the marketing function, whereas in other organisations it was devolved to individual business units. Another significant variable was associated with the public-relations styles adopted. Some organisations adopted a 'press agency' approach where the main focus was to get the organisation or product mentioned in the media as often as possible, the nature of the mention being of secondary importance. Others adopted a 'public information' approach where the main aim was to get media exposure for the organisation or product.

The impact of these and other variables meant that it was not sensible to ask exactly the same questions at each interview, even though many questions remained applicable in all cases and the underlying intention was to ensure consistency between interviews. It was not until each interview had started that Val was able to learn which of these different variables operated within the particular organisation. Fortunately, the flexibility offered by the use of semi-structured interviews enabled her to do this.

Length of time required and completeness of the process

Often the complexity of issues to be covered or their number and variety mean that an interview is the best or only means of collecting data. In our experience, where expectations have been established clearly about the length of time required and participants understand and agree with the objectives of the research interview, they have generally been willing to agree to be interviewed. Some negotiation is, in any case, possible and the interview can be arranged at a time when the interviewee will be under least pressure.

We have found that our participants tend to be generous with their time, and sometimes when interviews have been organised to start at mid-morning they will arrange for lunch, which can allow the discussion and exploration of issues to continue. However, for those of you who fancy a free lunch, we do not want to raise your expectations falsely, and the start time for an interview should not be set with this in mind!

Your aim will be to obtain data to enable you to answer all your research questions, allowing for the right of participants to decline to respond to any question you ask. Where you conduct the interaction skilfully an interview is more likely to achieve this than the use of a self-completed or interviewer-completed questionnaire. Where your participant does not provide an answer to a particular question or questions in an in-depth or semi-structured interview, you are likely to have some idea why a response was not provided. This may even lead you to modify the question or to compose another where this would be appropriate. Section 6.6 considers the ethical issues associated with seeking to obtain answers.

Situations are likely to occur where you will consider the choice between using research interviews and other qualitative methods such as observation (Chapter 9). In this regard, a distinction has been made between contrived and natural data. **Natural** or naturally occurring **data** are those observed from real conversations that

Box 10.2 Checklist

To help you decide whether to use in-depth or semi-structured interviews

- ✔ Is your research exploratory or explanatory?
- ✔ Will it help to be able to probe interviewees' responses to build on or seek explanation of their answers and meanings?
- ✔ Will it help to seek personal contact in terms of gaining access to participants and their data?
- ✔ Are your data collection questions large in number, complex or open-ended?
- ✔ Will there be a need to vary the order and logic of questioning?
- ✔ Will the data collection process with each individual involve a relatively lengthy period?
- ✔ Will interviews allow you to reveal and explore social phenomena that you would not be able to observe in action?

take place in everyday, authentic situations. **Contrived data** are those that result from a researcher organising an experiment, interview or survey (Speer 2008). One type of data is not necessarily superior to the other, but where it is possible, data collected naturally may be more authentic and reliable. Speer (2008) recognises that for some research topics there are reasons why it is not possible to collect observed, natural data. These reasons relate to the taken-for-granted assumptions, sensitivity and hidden nature of some social phenomena (such as in personal relationships) that mean it is difficult to gain access to and observe these in action. Using interviews to explore such phenomena means that you are able to gain access to authentic accounts that you would not be able to observe in action. As a result, the distinction between natural and contrived data may be too rigid (Speer 2008). It should, however, help you to think about the nature of your research topic and then to consider how best to attempt to gain access to your informants' (Chapter 9), participants' or respondents' (Chapter 11) data.

Box 10.2 provides a checklist to help you in your deliberations about whether or not to use in-depth or semi-structured interviews.

10.4 Data quality issues associated with semi-structured and in-depth interviews

Data quality issues

Before discussing how to prepare for and conduct semi-structured or in-depth interviews we consider data quality issues associated with these types of research interview. This is because your preparation for and conduct of these interviews will be influenced by the need to ensure data quality. This was introduced in Section 5.8 and the issues we discuss here that impact on semi-structured and in-depth interviews are related to:

- reliability/dependability;
- forms of bias;
- cultural differences;
- generalisability/transferability;
- validity/credibility.

The lack of standardisation in semi-structured and in-depth interviews can lead to concerns about reliability/dependability (Section 5.8 and in particular Table 5.5). In relation to qualitative research, this is concerned with whether alternative researchers would reveal similar information. The concern about reliability/dependability in these types of interview is also related to issues of bias. There are three types of potential bias to consider. The first of these is related to **interviewer bias**. This is where the comments, tone or non-verbal behaviour of the interviewer creates bias in the way that interviewees respond to the questions being asked. This may be because you attempt to impose your own beliefs and frame of reference through the questions that you ask. It is also possible that you will demonstrate bias in the way you interpret responses. Where you are unable to gain interviewees' trust, or perhaps where your personal credibility is seen to be lacking, the value of the data given may also be limited, raising doubts about its validity and reliability.

Related to this is **interviewee** or **response bias**. This type of bias can be caused by interviewees' perceptions about the interviewer, or perceived interviewer bias. However, the cause of this type of bias may not be linked to perceptions of the interviewer. Taking part in an interview is an intrusive process. This is especially true in the case of in-depth or semi-structured interviews, where your aim will be to explore events or to seek explanations. An interviewee may, in principle, be willing to participate but still be sensitive to the unstructured exploration of certain themes. Interviewees may therefore choose not to reveal and discuss an aspect of a topic that you wish to explore, because this would lead to probing questions that would intrude on sensitive information that they do not wish, or are not empowered, to discuss with you. The outcome of this may be that the interviewee provides only a partial 'picture' of the situation that casts himself or herself in a 'socially desirable' role, or the organisation for which they work in a positive or even negative fashion.

Bias may also result from the nature of the individuals or organisational participants who agree to be interviewed (Box 10.3). This is called **participation bias**. The amount of time required for an interview may result in a reduction in willingness to take part by some. This may bias your sample from whom data are collected. This is an issue that you will need to consider carefully and attempt to overcome through the approach taken to sampling (Sections 7.2 and 7.3).

Further concerns may arise from cultural differences between the interviewer and intended interviewees. Gobo (2011) sees the research interview as the product of individualistic societies, which may not be so well suited to societies and participants with

Box 10.3 Focus on student research

Willingness (or otherwise) to be interviewed

Saffron's research project involved her interviewing people about their perceptions of the real benefits of different hair products. She decided that the best way to conduct these interviews was, with the permission of the owner, to interview customers at her local hairdresser. Saffron discovered that although some of the customers were willing to be interviewed, others were not. A minority of customers, often smartly dressed in business suits, refused outright, saying that they had insufficient time. In contrast, others, particularly pensioners, were happy to answer her questions in considerable detail and appeared to wish to prolong the interview.

a different cultural orientation. He argues that the research interview makes certain assumptions:

- that it is acceptable to discuss issues with outsiders;
- that issues may be considered public and able to be discussed rather than being kept private and restricted;
- that it is permissible for a person to hold independent views and to speak as an individual.

Gobo also refers to societies where there may be a tendency to respond to an interviewer's questions by only being positive or by agreeing.

The cultural differences that an interviewer has to cope with may be more subtle. Court and Abbas (2013) provide an account of a cross-cultural interview they conducted with two Israeli Druze women. One of the researchers is a Canadian woman, living in Israel, who speaks English and Hebrew; the other researcher is an Israeli Druze woman, who speaks Hebrew and Arabic. The interview they conducted yielded valuable data for their research, but their reflections about it reveal issues related to language and cultural nuances. Because one of the researchers shared a similar cultural background to that of the participants, she was able to interact with them and develop a rapport that helped to facilitate the interview to a greater extent than the other researcher. Cultural differences may affect what the interviewee is willing to say, how the researcher interprets the interviewee's words and meanings, or fails to understand these, and influence the questions that the interviewer asks. Although this research is not related to business and management, it emphasises how cultural differences can impact on the scope to collect data and the implications of operating as either a cultural insider or outsider.

An issue is often raised about the generalisability/transferability of findings from qualitative research interviews, although the validity/credibility of the data they produce is generally seen to be less of an issue (Section 5.8 and in particular Table 5.5). Generalisability/transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a research study are applicable to other settings. This may be questioned in relation to the statistical generalisability of qualitative research studies where these are based on a small sample. However, this should not be interpreted as meaning that a qualitative study is intrinsically less valuable than a quantitative study. As we noted in Section 10.2, such studies are more likely to be used to explore and explain and provide insights that can be used to develop theory, rather than to provide statistical generalisations. Validity/credibility refers to the extent to which the researcher has gained access to a participant's knowledge and experience, and is able to infer meanings that the participant intends from the language used by that person. The scope to explore meanings during a semi-structured or in-depth interview may help to enhance the validity/credibility of the data collected, although forms of bias and cultural differences may impair this outcome.

Overcoming data quality issues

Reliability/dependability

One response to the issue of reliability/dependability (Section 5.8 and in particular Table 5.5) in relation to findings derived from using in-depth or semi-structured interviews is that these are not necessarily intended to be repeatable since they reflect reality at the time they were collected, in a situation which may be subject to change. The assumption behind this type of research is that the circumstances to be explored are complex and dynamic. The value of using in-depth or semi-structured interviews is derived from the flexibility that you may use to explore the complexity of the topic. Therefore, an attempt to ensure that qualitative, non-standardised research could be replicated by other researchers would not be realistic or feasible without undermining the strength of this type of research.

However, where you use this approach you should explain your research design, the reasons underpinning the choice of strategy and methods, and how the data were obtained. This will be referred to by others, to help understand the processes you used, and your research findings. The use of in-depth or semi-structured interviews should not lead to a lack of rigour in relation to the research process – rather there is a need to use a rigorous design and ensure your explanation of how the data were obtained and analysed provides sufficient detail to show your findings are dependable.

Interviewer and interviewee bias

Overcoming these forms of bias is related to the ways in which these types of interview are prepared for (Section 10.5 and Box 10.6) and conducted (Section 10.6 and Box 10.11).

Cultural reflexivity and participatory research

As we discussed earlier, where your research involves interviewing participants from a different culture, whether this is in a cross-national or multicultural setting, you will need to ensure that you minimise any form of bias or threat to reliability. Cultural reflexivity may be helpful in your preparation. As we noted in Section 2.1, the foundation of reflexivity involves reflecting critically on your role as researcher – for example, what motivates you to research a particular topic; why have you chosen your research strategy and methods to collect data; evaluating how can you conduct your research project in an unbiased and meaningful way; how you interact with your participants (Lincoln et al. 2011).

Cultural reflexivity will involve you reflecting on the nature of the relationship between you and your intended participants and how differing and similar cultural customs may affect your interactions (Court and Abbas 2013). Prior to your interviews, you may wish to visit a workplace and observe, listen or participate in informal conversations so that you become more familiar with the research setting. Such understandings will help you to develop rapport with those whom you wish to interview and to gain their acceptance.

Cultural reflexivity will also involve you considering how to engage your participants and involve them. This is likely to include evaluating how best to conduct interviews: whether to conduct these individually or on a group basis; choosing the most appropriate level of structure and formality to use; and whether to attempt to gather data in a single interview or in more than one to develop rapport and understanding. It may also be appropriate to use an informal conversational approach, rather than too many interviewer-led questions. A series of discussions may be helpful to develop rapport, understanding and to involve your participants in the process of interpreting, exploring, confirming and analysing data and meanings in a cultural context. Adopting a culturally reflexive approach may help to overcome cultural differences that affect what is discussed and not discussed, clarify what is important and what is not, and reveal what should be followed up and explored.

One way to achieve cultural contact is, where feasible, to engage in participatory forms of research. In Section 5.5 we outlined two such participatory strategies: ethnography and Action Research. Ethnography involves participation by a researcher in the research setting over time in order to begin to understand the context, develop rapport and be accepted into that community. Using this strategy to immerse yourself in a cultural context may help you to achieve greater acceptance and access to meanings, in comparison to the realist interviewer who seeks to rush in, collect some data and leave with whatever she or he expected to find, irrespective of the expectations of those being interviewed! Action research is an emergent and iterative process of inquiry designed to develop solutions to real organisational problems through a participative and collaborative approach (Section 5.5). Neither of these research strategies may be appropriate to your research project, although both suggest that participation in the research setting may help to alleviate cultural differences.

Generalisability/transferability

Earlier we stated that a concern may be raised about the generalisability of findings from qualitative research using only one case or a small number of cases. A number of different responses may be made in relation to this concern.

The first of these involves examining the nature of the single case or limited number of cases being used. Although you may be basing your research in a single case study, such as your employing organisation, within this case you may be planning to interview a wide cross-section of participants. This allows you to collect data from a representative sample of those who work in this setting. Alternatively, using a single case may also encompass a number of settings; where for example it involves a study in a large organisation with sites across the country, or even around the world. A well-planned and rigorous qualitative case study may therefore be just as likely to produce valuable findings.

A second response to questions of generalisability is based on the ability of qualitative research to be used to test existing theory, or for an emergent theory to be subsequently discussed in relation to a pre-existing theory. Where you are able to relate your research project to existing theory you will be in a position to demonstrate that your findings have a broader theoretical significance than the case or cases that form the basis of your work. It will be up to you to establish how the findings from your particular case or cases are related to existing theory in order to be able to demonstrate their broader significance. This should allow you to test the applicability of existing theory to the setting(s) that you are examining and where this is found wanting to suggest why. It will also allow theoretical propositions to be advanced that can then be tested in another context.

A third argument focuses on the transferability of a research design, using the definition we outlined of this concept in Table 5.5. In this table, transferability was defined as the need to provide a full description of the research questions, design, context, findings and resulting interpretations in the project report. This allows another researcher to design a similar research project to be used in a different, although suitable, research setting.

However, in seeking to counter arguments about the generalisability/transferability of qualitative research studies using semi-structured or in-depth interviews, it is important to recognise that such studies cannot be used to make statistical generalisations about an entire population (whatever this may be in the context of the research topic) where your data are from a small non-probability sample.

Validity/credibility

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews can achieve a high level of validity/credibility (Section 5.8 and in particular Table 5.5) where conducted carefully using clarifying questions, probing meanings and by exploring responses from a variety of angles. The use of questioning in such interviews is discussed in detail in Section 10.6. In Table 5.5 in Section 5.8 we outlined further ways in which credibility may be achieved through using qualitative interviews. Their use should help you to build trust and rapport, collect sufficient data and provide you with the opportunity to ask participants to check these data. Credibility may also be achieved by accounting for negative cases (those that are counter to other cases) during analysis in the explanations you develop and being reflective and reflexive about your research.

10.5 Preparing for semi-structured or in-depth interviews

Like all research methods, the key to a successful interview is careful preparation. When using in-depth or semi-structured interviews, the 'five Ps' will be useful to remember: prior planning prevents poor performance. In particular, we believe it is crucial that you plan precisely how you are going to demonstrate your competence and credibility to obtain the confidence of your interviewees.

In order to avoid data quality issues when you conduct in-depth or semi-structured interviews, we consider some key measures that your preparations will need to include. These are:

- Your level of knowledge.
- Developing interview themes and supplying information to the interviewee before the interview.
- The appropriateness of the intended interview location.

We discuss these in turn.

Your level of knowledge

You need to be knowledgeable about the research topic and organisational or situational context in which the interview is to take place. In addition to your literature review, a prior search in your university library (Sections 3.4 and 3.5) may reveal articles written by senior employees of the organisation that is participating in your research. There may also be other material about the organisation on the Internet, in the 'trade' press and the quality newspapers. This is likely to include company annual reports and other publications, as well as financial data relating to the organisation. The ability to draw on this type of information in the interview will help to demonstrate your credibility, allow you to assess the accuracy of responses and encourage the interviewee to offer a more detailed account of the topic under discussion. As you undertake later interviews, you will also be able to draw on the initial analysis that you make of data previously collected.

Successfully interviewing participants from different cultures requires some knowledge about those cultures. Without adequate preparation, there may be misinterpretation because of the cultural differences between the interviewee and the interviewer. An in-depth interview offers the opportunity to explore meanings, including those that may be culturally specific, but you will need to be aware of cultural differences and their implications (see our earlier discussion). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) highlight some of the verbal and non-verbal cues that may have contrary or different meanings between cultures. For example, answering 'yes' to a question may indicate agreement in some cultures, but in others it may be a way of telling the interviewer that the question has been understood, or in others to recognise its importance. A nod of the head indicates agreement in some cultures but in others it may mean something else. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) note the importance of being aware of social conventions in a culture in order to understand the way answers are constructed and also not to cause offence. Cultural differences exist not only between countries but between groups, social classes and organisations and some prior knowledge about those you wish to interview will invariably be helpful.

Developing interview themes and supplying information to the interviewee before the interview

Credibility may also be promoted through the supply of relevant information to participants before the interview. Providing participants with a list of the interview themes before the event, where this is appropriate, should help this. This list of themes (Box 10.4) may help to promote validity and reliability because it informs the interviewee about the information you are interested in and provides them with the opportunity to prepare for the interview by assembling supporting organisational documentation from their files. We can testify to this approach and the value of allowing participants to prepare themselves for the discussion in which they are to engage. Access to organisational documentation also allows for triangulation of the data provided (Sections 8.2 and 8.3). Our experience is that participants are generally willing to supply a photocopy or a PDF file of such material, although of course it will be necessary to conceal any confidential or personal details in the research report.

Interview themes may be derived from the literature that you read, the theories that you consider, your experience of a particular topic, common sense and discussions with co-workers, fellow students, tutors and research participants, or a combination of these approaches. You will need to have some idea of the theme or themes that you wish to discuss with your participants even if you intend to commence with exploratory, in-depth interviews as part of a Grounded Theory strategy to your research project (Section 5.5).

Without at least some focus, your interview will lack a sense of direction and purpose. You should therefore start with a set of themes that reflect the variables being studied, or at least one or more general questions related to your research topic that you could use to start your interview. These can be incorporated into your interview guide (Box 10.5). This lists topics that you intend to cover in the interview along with initial questions and

Box 10.4 Focus on student research

Developing interview themes

Karl was interested in understanding why some employees in his organisation used the IT Help Desk while others did not. This subject was felt to be important in relation to perceptions about service-level agreements, service relationships and service quality. He decided to provide his interviewees with a list of themes that he wished to explore during interviews. After some deliberation and reading of the academic literature he came up with the following list of themes:

- the extent to which employees feel they know when and how to use the IT Help Desk;
- the nature of support employees feel they are receiving;
- the services employees feel the IT Help Desk should be providing;
- the nature of employees' knowledge of service-level agreements;
- the extent to which the IT Help Desk is meeting employees' needs.

He subsequently used this list of themes to develop his interview guide (Box 10.5).

Box 10.5
Focus on student research

Extract from an interview guide

Karl was interested in understanding why some employees in his organisation used the IT Help Desk while others did not. Using his interview themes (Box 10.4), he began to develop his guide:

Help Desk Support

- To what extent does the IT Help Desk meet your needs?
    - *Probe*: In what ways? [ask for real-life examples]
    - *Probe*: Can you give me an example (if possible) of when you received good support from the IT Help Desk?
    - *Probe*: Can you give me an example (if possible) of when you received insufficient support from the IT Help Desk?
- Do you consider you have enough support from the IT Help Desk?
    - *Probe*: How is this support provided (e.g. telephone, face-to-face)?
    - *Probe*: What else (if anything) could usefully be done?

probes that may be used to follow up initial responses and obtain greater detail from your participants. When creating your guide, you need to try to ensure that the order of questions is likely to be logical to your participants and that the language you use will be comprehensible. Using your guide, you will be able to develop and/or explore research themes through the in-depth or semi-structured interviews that you conduct to see whether you can identify and test relationships between them (Chapter 13).

Appropriateness of the intended interview location

It is possible that the location where you conduct your interviews will influence the data you collect. As we discussed in Section 6.6, you should choose the location for your interviews with regard to your own personal safety. You should also think about the impact that the location may have upon your participants and the way they respond (Box 10.6). The location should be convenient for your participants, where they will feel comfortable and where the interview is unlikely to be disturbed. Your research interviews may be

Box 10.6
Focus on student research

Choosing an appropriate location

Anne was pleased that the manufacturing company in which she was undertaking her research had arranged for her to use a room in the Human Resources Department. The room contained a low table and chairs, and she had been provided with bottled water and glasses as well. However, after her third interview she was beginning to doubt her own interviewing skills. Her participants, the company's production line workers, seemed unwilling to be open in their responses. She began to wonder if something was wrong with the interview location and decided to ask the next participant about this. At the end of that interview she had her answer. Her participants were unhappy with the interview location. Prior to being interviewed by Anne, the only time they or their colleagues had visited the Human Resources Department was to receive a reprimand. The location was, therefore, inappropriate!

Box 10.7 Checklist

To help you prepare for your semi-structured or in-depth interview

- ✔ What level of knowledge about your research topic will be required in order to demonstrate your competence and credibility to gain the confidence of your interviewees?
- ✔ What level of knowledge about the research context will be required in order to demonstrate your competence and credibility to gain the confidence of your interviewees?
- ✔ What level of knowledge about the culture of your interviewees will be required in order to gain their confidence before they are willing to share data?
- ✔ What will be the broad focus of your in-depth interview, or what are the themes that you wish to explore or seek explanations for during a semi-structured interview?
- ✔ What type of information, if any, will it be useful to send to your interviewee prior to the interview?
- ✔ What did you agree to supply to your interviewee when you arranged the interview? Has this been supplied?
- ✔ Have you considered the impact that your interview location may have on participants' responses and on your own personal safety?

hosted by an organisation which has granted you access to undertake your research and you will be able to discuss these requirements about safety, convenience, neutrality of the space and not being overheard when talking normally, with the person who makes the arrangements for your interviews (Box 10.6).

You also need to choose a place that is quiet so that outside noise will not reduce the quality of your audio-recording of the interview. Each of us has experienced situations when conducting interviews where noise from outside the building or even from within it has been disruptive. In particular, Mark recalls an interview in a room where noise from building work outside meant that although he was able to hear the participant's responses clearly while the interview was taking place, much of the audio-recording of this interview was unintelligible due to the sound of a very loud pneumatic drill!

In many cases, the interview location will be arranged by those whom you interview. When you interview organisational participants such as managers in their offices, this has the advantage that they are able to find documents which support points they are making.

Box 10.7 provides a checklist of the key points considered in this section to help you to prepare for semi-structured or in-depth interviews.

10.6 Conducting semi-structured or in-depth interviews

This section is about actually conducting semi-structured or in-depth interviews. The aspects we discuss here are intended to avoid forms of bias that would affect the reliability and validity of the data produced. These aspects relate to the:

- appropriateness of your appearance at the interview;
- nature of your comments to open the interview;
- approach to questioning;
- appropriate use of different types of questions;

- nature and impact of your behaviour during the interview;
- demonstration of attentive listening skills;
- scope to summarise and test understanding;
- dealing with difficult participants;
- approach to recording data.

We discuss these in turn. Key points are summarised as a checklist at the end of this section (Box 10.12).

Appropriateness of your appearance at the interview

Your appearance may affect the perception of the interviewee. Where this has an adverse effect on your credibility in the view of interviewees, or results in a failure to gain their confidence, the resulting bias may affect the reliability of the information provided. Where appropriate you should consider wearing a similar style of clothing to those to be interviewed, although this may not always be appropriate. For example, your interviewees would not expect you to wear the same work wear that they need to put on to work on the production line. Essentially, this means that you will need to wear clothing that will be generally acceptable for the setting within which the interview is to occur (Box 10.8).

Nature of your comments to open the interview

Where the interviewee has not met you before, the first few minutes of conversation will have a significant impact on the outcome of the interview – again related to the issue of your credibility and the level of the interviewee's confidence. Often such interviews occur in a setting that is unfamiliar to you. Despite this, it is your responsibility to shape the start of the conversation. You will need to explain your research to the participant and, hopefully, gain consent (Section 6.6). As part of this you will need to establish your credibility and gain the interviewee's confidence. During these initial discussions we have found that the interviewee often has some uncertainties about sharing information,

Box 10.8
Focus on student research

Checking out the dress code

Mal arranged to visit the administration centre of a large insurance company on a Friday to conduct a group interview with staff drawn from one of its telephone sales divisions and two one-to-one interviews with senior managers. He felt that it was appropriate to wear fairly 'formal' clothes to match what he thought would be the dress code of the organisation. Indeed, for four days of the working week this assumption would have been appropriate. However, the organisation had recently introduced the practice of not wearing such formal work clothes on Fridays. Thus he found himself the only one dressed formally in the organisation on the day of his visit. Taking lunch proved to be a memorable experience, as he mingled with everyone else dressed in jeans and tee shirts, etc. His 'mistake' proved to be an amusing opening at the start of each interview rather than a barrier to gaining access to participants' data. Indeed, it might not have been appropriate for him to match the 'dress-down' style of participants too closely. Nevertheless, it does provide a useful example of the way in which expectations about appearance are likely to be noticed.

and about the manner in which these data may be used. Alternatively, she or he may still need clarification about the exact nature of the data that you wish to obtain. We have found that a pre-prepared participant information sheet (Section 6.6, Box 6.15) and consent form (Box 6.16) are both extremely helpful in reducing such anxieties. There may also be a degree of curiosity on the part of the interviewee and probably a genuine level of interest in the research, related to the reason why the request to participate was accepted. This curiosity and interest will offer an opening for both parties to start a conversation, probably before the 'intended discussion' commences. You may find it appropriate to follow the initial discussion by demonstrating interest in the interviewee by asking about her or his role within the host organisation. However, you need to make sure that these opening moves to demonstrate credibility and friendliness, and to relax and develop a positive relationship, are not overstated, so that too much time is used and the interviewee starts to become bored or restive.

The start of the interview needs to be shaped by you. It is your opportunity to allay, wherever possible, the interviewee's uncertainties about providing data, establish the participant's rights and, based upon this, hopefully, obtain informed consent. Box 10.9 provides a structure that you can adapt for starting your interviews.

An assurance from you that confidential information is not being sought should make interviewees more relaxed and open about the data that they are willing to provide you. Combined with assurances about anonymity, this should increase the level of confidence in your trustworthiness and reduce the possibility of interviewee or response bias. You can also demonstrate your commitment to confidentiality by not naming other individuals or organisations that have participated in your research, or by talking about the data you obtained from them.

Box 10.9 Focus on student research

Opening a semi-structured interview

As part of her research project, Beth undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with freelance consultants working for a range of organisations. She covered the following points at the start of each interview:

- The participant was thanked for considering the request for access and for agreeing to the meeting.
- The purpose of the research and its progress to date were outlined briefly. As part of this, the participant was given an information sheet to keep.
- The previously agreed right to confidentiality and anonymity was reiterated by stating that nothing said by the participant would be attributed to him/her without first seeking and obtaining permission.
- The participant's right not to answer any question was emphasised and that the interview would be stopped if the participant wished.
- The participant was told about the nature of the outputs to which the research was intended to lead and what would happen to the data collected during and after the project.
- The offer to provide a summary of the research findings to the interviewee was also restated and the participant was told when this would happen.
- The request to record the interview electronically was restated and, where agreed, this was used subsequently.
- Before the substantive discussion started, Beth again requested permission to undertake the interview, summarised the themes to be covered, confirmed the amount of time available and requested that the participant read and signed the informed consent form.

All of these points were dealt with within the first few minutes of the interview.

Approach to questioning

When conducted appropriately, your approach to questioning should reduce the scope for bias during the interview and increase the reliability of the information obtained. Your questions need to be phrased clearly, so that the interviewee can understand them, and you should ask them in a neutral tone of voice. The use of open questions should help to avoid bias. These can then be followed up by the use of appropriately worded probing questions. The use of these types of question will help you to explore the topic and to produce a fuller account. These types of questions are discussed more fully in the following sub-section.

Conversely, questions that seek to lead the interviewee or which indicate bias on your part should be avoided. Perceived interviewer bias may well lead to interviewee or response bias. Long questions or those that are really made up of two or more questions (known as double-barrel questions) should also be avoided if you are to obtain a response to each aspect that you are interested to explore.

Questions should also avoid too many theoretical concepts or jargon since your understanding of such terms may vary from that of your interviewees. Where theoretical concepts or specific terminology need to be used, you will have to ensure that both you and the interviewee have the same understanding (Box 10.10).

When asking questions it is important that, wherever possible, these are grounded in the real-life experiences of your participants rather than being discussed as abstract concepts. One approach to questioning which makes use of key participant experiences is the **critical incident technique**, in which participants are asked to describe in detail a critical incident or number of incidents that are relevant to the research question. A **critical incident** is defined as an activity or event where the consequences were so clear that the participant has a definite idea regarding the effects (Keaveney 1995).

It will also be important to consider when to ask sensitive questions. Leaving these until near the end of an interview will provide your participant with some time to build up trust and confidence in you and to allay any doubts about your intentions, as Box 10.11 illustrates. This will also affect the nature of the questions that you may ask during the early part of an interview, as you attempt to build trust and gain your participant's confidence.

Once this position of trust has been reached and you wish to ask potentially sensitive questions, the wording of these deserves very particular attention in order to avoid any negative inferences related to, for example, responsibility for failure or error. Care taken over the exploration of sensitive questions should help towards the compilation of a fuller and more reliable account.

Box 10.10
Focus on student research

(Mis)understanding terminology

Sven was conducting an interview with the European sales manager of a large multinational corporation. Throughout the interview the sales manager referred to the European Division. Sven assumed that the sales manager meant continental Europe. However, by chance, later questions revealed that, for this organisation, Europe extended into parts of Asia, including Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Israel. Until this point in the interview, Sven had assumed that these countries were the responsibility of another sales manager!

Box 10.11 Focus on student research

Establishing trust and asking sensitive questions

Sam recalls an occasion when her treatment by her participants altered as her group interview progressed. For the first hour of a two-hour interview it appeared to her that the participants were convinced that she was really there to sell them a consultancy service. When they accepted that she was not going to try to sell them something, the mood of the interview changed and they became much more relaxed and responsive to the questions that Sam wished to ask. It was at this point that she was able to ask and pursue more sensitive questions that could have led to the interview being terminated during the period when the participants mistrusted her motives.

Appropriate use of different types of questions

Formulating appropriate questions to explore areas in which you are interested is critical to achieving success in semi-structured or in-depth interviews. It is also important to word your questions in a factual way, avoiding emotional language. We now discuss the types of question that you can use during semi-structured and in-depth interviews:

Open questions

The use of **open questions** allows participants to define and describe a situation or event. An open question is designed to encourage the interviewee to provide an extensive and developmental answer, and can be used to reveal attitudes or obtain facts. It encourages the interviewee to reply as they wish. An open question is likely to start with, or include, one of the following words: ‘what’, ‘how’ or ‘why’. Examples of open questions include:

> ‘Why did the organisation introduce its marketing strategy?’
> ‘What methods have been used to make employees redundant?’
> ‘How has corporate strategy changed over the past five years?’

Probing questions

Probing questions are be used to explore responses further that are of significance to the research topic. They may be worded like open questions but request a particular focus or direction. Examples of this type of question include:

> ‘How would you evaluate the success of this new marketing strategy?’
> ‘Why did you choose a compulsory method to make redundancies?’
> ‘What external factors caused the corporate strategy to change?’

These questions may be prefaced with, for example, ‘That’s interesting . . .’ or ‘Tell me more about. . .’.

Probing questions can also be used to seek an explanation where you do not understand the interviewee’s meaning or where the response does not reveal the reasoning involved. Examples include:

> ‘What do you mean by “bumping” as a means to help to secure volunteers for redundancy?’
> ‘What is the relationship between the new statutory requirements that you referred to and the organisation’s decision to set up its corporate affairs department?’

The use of reflection may also help you to probe a theme. This is where you will 'reflect' a statement made by the interviewee by paraphrasing their words. For example:

'Why don't you think that the employees understand the need for advertising?'

The intention will be to encourage exploration of the point made without offering a view or judgement on your part.

Where an open question does not reveal a relevant response, you may also probe further using a supplementary question that rephrases the original question.

Specific and closed questions

These types of question may be used as introductory questions when you commence questioning about a particular interview theme. Examples of this might be:

'Could you tell me about the change to the pricing policy' or
'Can you describe the production process?'

They can also be used to obtain specific information or to confirm a fact or opinion (Section 11.4):

'How many people responded to the customer survey?'
'Has the old Central Region been merged with the Southern Region?'
'Do you prefer the new training programme?'

Other means to further your questioning

There are a number of ways of prompting further answers to a question you have asked. These include:

- follow-up expressions, such as: 'Ah', 'Oh' or 'Um';
- short follow-up statements, such as: 'That's interesting' or 'Really!';
- short follow-up questions, such as: 'Will you please tell me more?', 'When did that happen?' or 'What happened then?';
- short reflective questions where you rephrase what you have just been told to reflect it back, such as: 'So that was when . . .?' or 'They felt the investment had been worthwhile?';
- interpretation and extension questions, where you seek to explore the implications of an answer, such as: 'Because they have diversified into Internet sales, does that mean that they are also going to build new distribution centres?';
- silence, where the participant is effectively invited to fill this by offering more information;
- using these devices in combination to explore a theme, but you will need to be very careful if you use this approach as it may be interpreted as being overbearing, stressful and confrontational. It will be more productive and ethical to maintain an even pace and respectful stance when asking questions.

Types of question to avoid

In phrasing questions, remember that you should avoid using leading or proposing types of question in order to control any bias that may result from their use (Section 11.4).

Nature and impact of your behaviour during the interview

Appropriate behaviour by the researcher should also reduce the scope for bias during the interview. Comments or non-verbal behaviour, such as gestures, which indicate any bias in your thinking, should be avoided. Rather, a neutral (but not an uninterested) response to the interviewee's answers should be used to ensure your own opinions do not bias responses. You should enjoy the interview opportunity, or at least appear to do so; any appearance of boredom on your part is hardly likely to encourage your interviewee!

Your posture and tone of voice may also encourage or inhibit the flow of the discussion. You should sit slightly inclined towards the interviewee and adopt an open posture, avoiding folded arms. This should provide a signal of attentiveness to your interviewee. Tone of voice can also provide a signal to the interviewee. You need to project interest and enthusiasm through your voice, avoiding any impression of anxiety, disbelief, astonishment or other negative signal.

Demonstration of attentive listening skills

The purpose of a semi-structured or in-depth interview will be to understand your participant's explanations and meanings. This type of interaction will not be typical of many of the conversations that you normally engage in, where those involved often compete to speak rather than concentrate on listening. You therefore need to recognise that different skills will be emphasised in this kind of interaction. Attentive listening will involve you attending to and being sensitive to your participants by spending the time needed to listen to them to build your understanding. You will need to hold back your own thoughts where these would compete with those of your participant(s), or stray from the theme being explored.

It will be necessary for you to explore and probe explanations and meanings, but you must also provide the interviewee with reasonable time to develop their responses, and you must avoid projecting your own views.

Scope to summarise and test understanding

You may test your understanding by summarising responses provided by the interviewee. This will allow your participant to tell you whether your summary is adequate and to add points to this to further or correct your understanding where appropriate. This can be a powerful tool for avoiding a biased or incomplete interpretation. It may also act as a means to explore and probe the interviewee's responses further.

In addition you may also ask the interviewee to read through the factual account that you produce of the interview (Section 5.8). Where the interviewee is prepared to undertake this, it will provide a further opportunity for you to test your understanding and for the interviewee to add any further points of relevance that may not previously have been apparent.

Dealing with difficult participants

Inevitably, during the course of your interviews you will meet some participants who are difficult to interview. In such circumstances it is imperative that you remain polite and do not show any irritation. Although it is impossible for us to highlight all the possible variations, the most common difficulties are summarised in Table 10.2, along with suggestions about how you might attempt to deal with them. However, while reading

Table 10.2 Difficult interview participants and suggestions on how to address them

Recognised difficulty	Suggestion
Participant appears willing only to give monosyllabic answers, these being little more than 'yes' or 'no'	Reasons for this are varied If it is due to limited time, or worries about anonymity, then this can be minimised by careful opening of the interview (Box 10.9) If the participant gives these answers despite such precautions, try phrasing your questions in as open a way as possible; also use long pauses to signify that you want to hear more
Participant repeatedly provides long answers which digress from the focus of your interview	Although some digression should be tolerated, as it can lead to aspects in which you are interested, you will need to impose more direction This must be done subtly so as not to cause offence, such as by referring back to an earlier relevant point and asking them to tell you more, or requesting that they pause so you can note down what they have just said
Participant starts interviewing you	This can suggest that you have created rapport. However, you need to stress that you are interested in their opinions and that, if they wish, they can ask you questions at the end
Participant is proud of their status relative to you and wants to show off their knowledge, criticising what you do	This is extremely difficult and at times like this you will have to listen attentively and be respectful Remember that you are also likely to be knowledgeable about the research topic, so be confident and prepared to justify your research and the research design you have chosen
Participant becomes noticeably upset during the interview and, perhaps, starts to cry	Another difficult one for you You need to give your participant time to answer your question and, in particular, do not do anything to suggest that you are feeling impatient If your participant starts crying or is obviously very distressed, it is probably a good idea to explain that the question does not have to be answered Do not end the interview straight away as this is likely to make the participant even more upset

Source: King (2004); authors' experiences

Table 10.2 will give you some ideas of what to do, the best advice we can give is to undertake practice interviews in which a colleague introduces one or more of these 'difficulties' and you have to deal with them!

Approach to recording data

Where possible we believe it is beneficial to audio-record an interview and also make notes as it progresses. Using both methods to record interview data has a number of advantages. Notes provide a backup if the audio-recording does not work. Making notes can help you to maintain your concentration, formulate points to summarise back to the interviewee to test your understanding and devise follow-up probing questions. Note taking demonstrates to your interviewee that her or his responses are important to you. It also allows you to record your own thoughts and any events that would not be evident from the audio-recording. For example, if you think there may be a relationship between two variables that you wish to explore later, if your interviewer uses a facial expression or provides another non-verbal cue, or if someone enters the room, you can make a note about each of these. Most people have their own means of making notes, which may range from an attempt to create a verbatim account to a diagrammatic style that records key words and phrases, perhaps using mind mapping (Section 2.3).

The task of note making in this situation will be a demanding one. As you seek to test your understanding of what your interviewee has told you, this will allow some time to complete your notes concurrently in relation to the particular aspect being discussed. Most interviewees recognise the demands of the task and act accordingly. For example, Adrian recalls one particular interviewee who paused at the end of the main part of each of his answers to allow notes of this to be completed before adding some supplementary data which could also be noted down. However, the actual interview is not the occasion to perfect your interviewing skills, and we advise you to practise in a simulated situation: for example, by watching an interview on television and attempting to produce a set of notes.

To optimise the value from the interview you should compile a full record of the interview, including contextual data. If you cannot do this immediately after the interview, this should be done as soon as possible. Where you do not do this, the detailed understanding of what was said may be lost as well as general points of value. There is also the possibility that you may mix up data from different interviews, where you carry out several of these within a short period of time and you do not complete a record of each one at the time it takes place. Either situation will clearly lead to an issue about the trustworthiness of any data. You therefore need to allocate time to complete a full set of notes soon after the event. In addition to your notes from the actual interview, you should also record the following **contextual data:**

- the location of the interview (e.g. the organisation, the place);
- the date and time;
- the setting of the interview (e.g. was the room quiet or noisy, could you be overheard, were you interrupted?);
- background information about the participant (e.g. role, post title, gender);
- your immediate impression of how well (or badly) the interview went (e.g. was the participant reticent, were there aspects about which you felt you did not obtain answers in sufficient depth?).

You may be wondering how, if you are recording both of these types of data, you can still ensure the anonymity of your participants where this has been promised. As we outlined in Section 6.6, the best course of action is to ensure that your data are completely and genuinely anonymised. To help to achieve this you should store the contextual data separately from your interview transcripts. We suggest that you should only be able to link these two sets of data by using a 'key', such as an impersonal code number. Where it is absolutely necessary to retain a 'key' that allows participants to be linked to their data using their real name, this 'key' should be kept securely and separately, not by those who control the data.

Audio-recording your data where permission is given, making notes, compiling a full record of the interview immediately or soon after it has occurred and producing a set of contextual data and related memos (Chapter 13) are all means to control bias and produce reliable data. Most interviewers audio-record their interviews, where permission is given. Audio-recording interviews has both advantages and disadvantages and these are summarised in Table 10.3.

Permission should always be sought to audio-record an interview. You should also explain why you believe it would be beneficial to use an audio-recorder and to offer guarantees about your participant's rights over its use. Where it is likely to have a detrimental effect, it is better not to use a recorder. However, most interviewees adapt quickly to the use of the recorder. It is more ethical to allow your interviewee to maintain

Table 10.3 Advantages and disadvantages of audio-recording the interview

Advantages	Disadvantages
Allows the interviewer to concentrate on questioning and listening	May adversely affect the relationship between interviewee and interviewer (possibility of 'focusing' on the audio-recorder rather than the interview process)
Allows questions formulated at an interview to be accurately recorded for use in later interviews where appropriate	May inhibit some interviewee responses and reduce reliability
Can re-listen to the interview, especially during data analysis	Possibility of a technical problem
Accurate and unbiased record provided	Time required to transcribe the audio-recording (Section 13.4)
Allows direct quotes to be used	
Permanent record for others to use	

Source: authors' experience

Box 10.12 Checklist

To help you conduct your semi-structured or in-depth interview

Appearance at the interview

- ✔ How will your appearance at the interview affect the willingness of the interviewee to share data?

Opening the interview

- ✔ How will you open the interview to gain the confidence of your interviewee?
- ✔ What will you tell your interviewee about yourself, the purpose of your research, its funding and your progress?
- ✔ What concerns, or need for clarification, may your interviewee have?
- ✔ How will you seek to overcome these concerns or provide this clarification?
- ✔ In particular, how do you intend to use the data to which you are given access, ensuring, where appropriate, its confidentiality and your interviewee's anonymity?
- ✔ What will you tell your interviewee about their right not to answer particular questions and to end the interview should they wish?
- ✔ How will you explain the structure of the interview?

Asking questions and behaviour during the interview

- ✔ How will you use appropriate language and tone of voice, and avoid jargon when asking questions or discussing themes?
- ✔ How will you word open questions appropriately to obtain relevant data?
- ✔ How will you word probing questions to build on, clarify or explain your interviewee's responses?
- ✔ How will you avoid asking leading questions that may introduce forms of bias?
- ✔ Have you devised an appropriate order for your questions to avoid asking sensitive questions too early where this may introduce interviewee bias?
- ✔ How will you maintain a check on the interview themes that you intend to cover and to steer the discussion where appropriate to raise and explore these aspects?
- ✔ How will you avoid overzealously asking questions and pressing your interviewee for a response where it should be clear that they do not wish to provide one?
- ✔ How will you avoid projecting your own views or feelings through your actions or comments?
- ✔ How might you identify actions and comments made by your interviewee that indicate an aspect of the discussion that should be explored in order to reveal the reason for the response?
- ✔ How will you listen attentively and demonstrate this to your interviewee?

Box 10.12 Checklist (*continued*)

To help you conduct your semi-structured or in-depth interview

- ✔ How will you summarise and test your understanding of the data that are shared with you in order to ensure accuracy in your interpretation?
- ✔ Where appropriate, how will you deal with difficult participants while remaining polite?

Recording data during the interview

- ✔ How will you record the data that are revealed to you during the interview? Where this involves using an audio-recorder, have you raised this as a request and provided a reason why it would help you to use this technique?
- ✔ How will you allow your interviewee to maintain control over the use of an audio-recorder, where used, if they wish to do this?
- ✔ Have you practised to ensure you can carry out a number of tasks at the same time, including listening, note taking and identifying where you need to probe further?

Closing the interview

- ✔ How will you draw the interview to a close within the agreed time limit and thank the interviewee for their time and the data they have shared with you?

control over the recorder so that if you ask a question that they are prepared to respond to, but only if their words are not audio-recorded, they have the option to switch it off (Section 6.6). It will inevitably be necessary to make notes in this situation.

10.7 Managing logistical and resource issues

Issues

Time

Interviewing is a time-consuming process. Where the purpose of the interview is to explore themes or to explain findings, the process may call for a fairly lengthy discussion. In such cases the time required to obtain data is unlikely to be less than one hour and could easily exceed this, perhaps taking two hours or longer. This may have an adverse impact on the number and representativeness of those who are willing to be interview participants, as we discussed earlier. Where managers or other potential participants receive frequent requests to participate in research projects, they will clearly need to consider how much of their time they may be willing to devote to such activities. It will therefore be important for you to establish credibility with, and to engender the interest of, potential interviewees.

Cost and other resources

Your decision to collect data through interviewing will have particular resource issues. Conducting interviews may become a costly process where it is necessary to travel to the location of participants, although this can be kept to a minimum by cluster sampling (Section 7.2) or using the Internet (Section 10.9). Interviews are almost certainly likely to be more expensive than using self-completed or telephone questionnaires to collect data. Choice of method should be determined primarily by the nature of the research question and objectives rather than by cost considerations. This highlights the need to examine the feasibility of the proposed question and research strategy in relation to resource constraints, including time available and expense, before proceeding to the collection of data.

Logistics

Where your research question and objectives require you to undertake semi-structured or in-depth interviews, you need to consider the logistics of scheduling interviews. Thought needs to be given to the number of interviews to be arranged within a given period, and to the time required to compose notes and/or transcribe audio-recordings of each one, and undertake an initial analysis of the data collected (Section 13.4).

Management

Time management

In the preceding sub-section, the issue of time required to collect data through interviewing was raised. You need to consider very carefully the amount of time that will be required to conduct an interview. In our experience, the time required to undertake qualitative research interviews is usually underestimated. The likely time required should be referred to clearly in any initial contact, and it may be better to suggest that interviews are envisaged to last up to, say, one, one and a half, or two hours, so that a willing participant sets aside sufficient time. Some negotiation is in any case possible with an interested participant who feels unable to agree to a request for, say, two hours but who is prepared to agree to a briefer meeting. The interview can also be arranged at a time when the interviewee will be under least pressure.

Interview scheduling

Another possible strategy is to arrange two or more shorter interviews in order to explore a topic thoroughly. This might have the added advantage of allowing participants to reflect on the themes raised and questions being asked, and therefore to provide a fuller account and more accurate set of data. In order to establish this option, it may be beneficial to arrange an initial meeting with a potential participant to discuss this request, where you will be able to establish your credibility. A series of exploratory interviews may then be agreed. Consideration also needs to be given to the number of interviews that may be undertaken in a given period. It is easy to overestimate what is practically possible (Box 10.13).

These are all factors that need to be considered in the scheduling of semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Where you are undertaking interviews at one establishment, it may be more practical to undertake a number of interviews in one day, although there is still a need to maintain concentration, make notes and write up information, and to conduct your initial analysis. Even in this situation, conducting more than three interviews per day is likely to be challenging.

Interview management

The nature of semi-structured or in-depth interviews also has implications for the management of the time available during the meeting. The use of open-ended questions and reliance on participant responses means that, while you must remain responsive to the objectives of the interview and the time constraint, interviewees need the opportunity to

Box 10.13
Focus on student research

Calculating the number of in-depth interviews to be undertaken in one day

Feroz arranged two interviews in a capital city during the course of a day, which involved travelling some miles across the city during the lunch hour. Two interviews appeared to be a reasonable target. However, a number of logistical issues were experienced even in relation to the plan to undertake two such interviews in one day. These issues included the following: the total travelling time to and from the city; the time to find the appropriate buildings; the transfer time during a busy period; the time to conduct the interviews; the need to maintain concentration, to probe responses, to make initial notes and then to write these up without too much time elapsing. Because of his experience, Feroz took a decision not to conduct more than one interview per day where significant travel was involved, even though this necessitated more journeys and greater expense.

provide full answers. You should avoid making frequent interruptions but will need to cover the themes and questions indicated and probe responses in the time available. The intensive nature of the discussion and the need to be clear about your understanding of what has been revealed means that time must be found to write up notes as soon as possible after an interview.

Recording and transcription

Where an audio-recorder has been used (Section 10.6), you will need to decide whether to work directly from the recording or to produce a transcription of all or parts of the recording. This decision will depend on your research strategy and the way in which you intend to analyse your qualitative data (Chapter 13). For example, using a Grounded Theory strategy (Sections 5.5 and 13.9) is likely to mean that you will need to transcribe the whole of each interview. Each hour of recording is likely to take at least seven hours to transcribe or to process ready for entry into computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, unless you are a very competent audio-typist, or you know one who will undertake this task for you! Use of software to assist the transcription of audio-recordings may also be helpful.

In some cases it may not only be necessary to transcribe an audio-recording but also to translate it from the one language to another. Translations require care to ensure that the meanings contained in the original or source language are reproduced authentically in the translated language. We consider potential problems associated with translations in Section 11.4 and outline different translation techniques in Table 11.4, together with their respective advantages and disadvantages.

10.8 Group interviews and focus groups

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews may also be conducted on a group basis, where the interviewer asks questions to a group of participants. Figure 10.1 summarised forms of interview earlier in this chapter. A variety of terms are used interchangeably to describe group interviews, which are often assumed to have equivalent meanings (Boddy 2005). These include focus group, group interview, group discussion and various combinations of these words! In this section we use **group interview** as a general

Box 10.14 Focus on management research

Using group interviews in research about pay

Hakonen, Maaniemi and Hakanen (2011) undertook a study of perceptions about group-based pay published in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Their data collection was based on the use of semi-structured group interviews. The three researchers conducted a total of 29 group interviews with 88 employees drawn from six public-sector organisations.

They report that each interview took 45 to 60 minutes to conduct. Each interview commenced with a short briefing about its purpose and to provide assurances about confidentiality. An interview guide was designed to conduct each interview. The use of the interview guide also helped to ensure some level of consistency between the conduct of different interviews, as each was conducted by either researcher working alone. The interview guide included a list of research themes and participants were encouraged to discuss these through the course of the interview. A particular focus for researcher intervention related to asking participants to provide reasons for their perceptions about the pay system.

Participants agreed for the interviews to be audio-recorded and these were then transcribed in their entirety before being checked and analysed.

term to describe all semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted with two or more interviewees. In contrast, and as suggested by Figure 10.1, the term **focus group** is used to refer to those group interviews where the topic is defined clearly and precisely and there is a focus on enabling and recording interactive discussion between participants (Carson et al. 2001; Krueger and Casey 2009; Box 10.14).

Typically group interviews (and focus groups) involve between 4 and 12 participants, the precise number depending upon the nature of the participants, the topic matter and the skill of the interviewer. Inevitably, the more complex the subject matter the smaller the number of interviewees. Participants are normally chosen using non-probability sampling, often with a specific purpose in mind (Section 7.3), such as they are typical of the group being researched or they represent those who are critical to a particular operation. For many group interviews the underlying reason is that you believe you will learn a great deal from these specific individuals. Krueger and Casey (2009: 21) refer to such participants as being 'information rich'.

If you are thinking about using group interviews, or specifically focus groups, consideration of the following issues may help.

- Where your research project (or part of it) occurs within an organisation the request to participate in a group interview may be received by individuals as an instruction rather than allowing them a choice about whether to take part. This may be the case where an organisation is acting as a host for your research and the request is sent in the name of a manager, or because of your own position in the organisation. Where this is the case it is likely to lead to some level of non-attendance, or to unreliable data. In our experience, participants often welcome the chance to 'have their say'. However, where any request may be perceived as indicating lack of choice, to gain their confidence and participation you will need to exercise care over the wording to be used in the request that is sent to them to take part. You will also need to exercise similar care in your introduction to the group when the interview occurs in order to provide a clear assurance about confidentiality.

- Once your sample has been selected, participants should be grouped so as not to inhibit each individual's possible contribution. This may be related to lack of trust, to perceptions about status differences or because of the dominance of certain individuals. The nature and selection of each group will affect the first two elements. We would advise using a series of horizontal slices through an organisation so that, within each group, participants have a similar status and similar work experiences. (Using a vertical slice would introduce perceptions about status differences and variations in work experience.) In this way, group interviews can be conducted at a number of levels within an organisation. A reference may be made about the nature of the group to provide reassurance, and you may consider asking people to introduce themselves by their first name only without referring to their exact job.
- To realise the benefits of a group interview, it is important to encourage every person in a group to participate. This commences when you ask each person to introduce himself or herself. You may also need to encourage contributions by drawing group members into the discussion, particularly where some appear reluctant to take part. This needs to be managed sensitively and participation may increase naturally as group members become more familiar with each other. Occasions may occur during a group interview when participants talk over one another and you will need to manage the flow of contributions while ensuring that each participant has an opportunity to offer her or his contribution. Where one or two people dominate the discussion, you should seek to reduce their contributions by encouraging others. This may be attempted in a specific way:

  'What do you think, Yuksel?'
  'How does Emma's point relate to the one that you raised, Kristie?'

  A question posed more generally to other group members should also have the effect of inhibiting the contribution of a dominant member:

  'What do other people think about this?'
  'What do you think about Johan's suggestion?'

  The interviewer may also seek to manage the flow of the discussion through using non-verbal signals. You may try to reduce the contribution of a dominant member by temporarily minimising eye contact with him or her and draw others into the discussion by looking or gesturing in their direction. You will need to remain attentive throughout the interview, appearing friendly and relaxed in your approach but also purposeful and interested, encouraging each member to take part and providing opportunities to listen to and discuss contributions.
- You will need to ensure that participants understand each other's contributions and that you develop an accurate understanding of the points being made. Asking a participant to clarify the meaning of a particular contribution, where it has not been understood, and testing understanding through summarising should help to ensure this.
- You will need to consider the location and setting for a group interview. It is advisable to conduct the interview in a neutral setting rather than, say, in a manager's office, where participants may not feel relaxed. There should be no likelihood of interruption or being overheard. You should consider the layout of the seating in the room where the interview is to be held. Where possible, arrange the seating in a circular fashion so that everyone will be facing inward and so that they will be an equal distance from the central point of this circle.

- Finally, students often ask, 'When will I know that I have undertaken sufficient group interviews or focus groups?' Writing about focus groups, Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest that you should plan to undertake three or four group interviews with any one type of participant. If after the third or fourth group interview you are no longer receiving new information you will have reached **saturation**, in which case you will have heard the full range of ideas.

The demands of conducting all types of group interview, including focus groups, and the potential wealth of ideas that may flow from them mean that it is likely to be difficult to manage the process and note key points at the same time. We have managed to overcome this in two ways: by audio-recording group interviews or using two interviewers. Where two interviewers are used, one person facilitates the discussion and the other person makes notes. We would recommend that you use two interviewers, even if you are audio-recording the group interview, as it will allow one interviewer to concentrate fully on managing the process while the other ensures the data are recorded. Where you cannot audio-record the group interview, you will need to write up any notes immediately afterwards. As with one-to-one interviews, your research will benefit from the making of notes about the nature of the interactions that occur in the group interviews that you conduct. We would not advise you to undertake more than one group interview in a day on your own because of the danger of losing or confusing data.

Group interviews

In a group interview your role will be to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to state their points of view in answer to your questions, and to record the resulting data. This type of interview can range from being structured to unstructured, although it tends to be relatively unstructured and fairly free-flowing in terms of both breadth and depth of topics. The onus will be placed firmly on you to explain the interview's purpose, to encourage participants to relax, and to initiate, encourage and direct the discussion. The use of this method is likely to necessitate a balance between encouraging participants to provide answers to a particular question or questions that you introduce, and allowing them to range more freely in discussion where this may reveal data that provide you with important insights. Thus once you have opened the interview (Box 10.9) and the discussion is established, it will need to be managed carefully.

Group interactions may lead to a highly productive discussion as interviewees respond to your questions and evaluate points made by the group. However, as the opportunity to develop an individual level of rapport with each participant is less (compared with a one-to-one interview), there may also emerge a group effect where certain participants effectively try to dominate the interview while others may feel inhibited. This may result in some participants publicly agreeing with the views of others, while privately disagreeing. As a consequence a reported consensus may, in reality, be a view that nobody wholly endorses and nobody disagrees with (Stokes and Bergin 2006). You will therefore need to test the validity of emergent views by trying to encourage involvement of all group members and pursuing the interview's exploratory purpose through the use of open and probing questions. A high level of skill will be required in order for you to be able to conduct this type of discussion successfully, as well as to try to record its outcomes.

Despite this reference to the potential difficulties of using group interviews, there are distinct advantages arising from their use. Because of the presence of several participants, this type of situation allows a breadth of points of view to emerge and for the group to respond to these views. A dynamic group can generate or respond to a number of ideas and evaluate them, thus helping you to explore or explain concepts. You are also likely to benefit from the opportunity that this method provides in terms of allowing your participants to consider points raised by other group members and to challenge one another's views. In one-to-one interviews, discussion is of course limited to the interviewer and interviewee. Stokes and Bergin (2006) highlight that while group interviews, and in particular focus groups, are able to identify principal issues accurately, they are not able to provide the depth and detail in relation to specific issues that can be obtained from individual interviews.

The use of group interviews may also provide an efficient way for you to interview a larger number of individuals than would be possible through the use of one-to-one interview. Linked to this point, their use may allow you to adopt an interview-based strategy that can more easily be related to a representative sample, particularly where the research project is being conducted within a specific organisation or in relation to a clearly defined population. This may help to establish the credibility of this research where an attempt is made to overcome issues of bias associated with interviews in general and this type in particular.

Group interviews can also help to identify key themes that will be used to develop items that are included in a questionnaire. This particular use of group interviews may inform subsequent parts of your data collection, providing a clearer focus. For example, the initial use of group interviews can lead to a 'bottom-up' generation of concerns and issues, which subsequently inform a questionnaire's content.

Focus groups

Focus groups are well known because of the way they have been used by political parties to test voter reactions to particular policies and election strategies, and in market research to test reactions to products, as well as being used in academic research (Macnaghten and Myers 2007). A **focus group**, sometimes called a 'focus group interview', is a group interview that focuses upon a particular issue, product, service or topic by encouraging discussion among participants and the sharing of perceptions in an open and tolerant environment (Krueger and Casey 2009). Participant interaction is a key feature of focus group design, although this focus on enabling interactive discussion is used for two distinct purposes.

Positivist or critical realist researchers use the focus group to encourage interactions between participants as an effective means to articulate pre-held views about a particular issue or topic. The aim of using focus groups in this way is to reveal these preheld views. Interpretivist researchers use focus groups as a means to construct meanings through social interactions and sense making about a topic. The aim of using focus groups for this purpose relates to the ability to analyse how participant interactions and group dynamics lead to the construction of shared meanings (Belzile and Oberg 2012).

If you are running a focus group, you will probably be referred to as the **moderator** or 'facilitator'. These labels emphasise the dual role of the person running the focus group, namely to:

- keep the group within the boundaries of the topic being discussed;
- generate interest in the topic and encourage discussion, while at the same time not leading the group towards certain opinions.

The purpose of a focus group is likely to affect the level of interviewer-led structure and intervention that is required. Focus groups used to reveal participants' views are likely to be associated with greater structure; those used to study how participants interact are likely to be associated with less structure. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that are relevant to the topic being discussed. Discussions may be conducted several times, with similar participants, to enable trends and patterns to be identified. The size of a focus group may vary according to the nature of the topic. A focus group designed to obtain views about a product is likely to be larger than one that explores a topic related to a more emotionally involved or sensitive construct, such as attitudes to performance-related pay or the way in which employees rate their treatment by management. You may also choose to design smaller groups as you seek to develop your competence in relation to the use of this interviewing technique to collect qualitative data.

10.9 Telephone and Internet-mediated interviews

Most semi-structured or in-depth interviews occur on a face-to-face basis. Qualitative interviews may also be conducted by telephone, using a voice/listening-only mode of interviewing (Box 10.15). Developments in video telephony are also opening up new possibilities to conduct interviews through use of a video calling service. This means that interviews may be conducted by mobile phone using a particular software application or electronically via the Internet. In the next sub-section, we discuss potential advantages and disadvantages of using telephone interviews. However, the research methods literature has not yet caught up with the use of video telephony as opposed to voice-only, traditional telephony, so you will need to evaluate your own experience of access to and use of video chat apps such as Skype™ or Facetime™ when you consider how you might seek to conduct qualitative interviews. In the following sub-section, we consider Internet-mediated interviewing.

Telephone interviews

Conducting semi-structured or in-depth interviews by telephone can offer advantages associated with access, speed and lower cost. In particular you may be able to interview participants with whom it would otherwise be impractical to do so due to the distance and prohibitive costs involved and time required. Even where ‘long-distance’ access is not an issue, conducting interviews by telephone may still offer advantages associated with speed of data collection and lower cost. In other words, this approach may be seen as more convenient.

There are, however, potential disadvantages to the use of telephone interviews to collect qualitative data. We have already discussed the importance of establishing personal contact in this type of interviewing. The intention of semi-structured or in-depth interviewing is to be able to explore participants’ responses and meanings. This is likely to become more feasible once rapport and trust have been established. Establishing rapport and trust will be particularly important where you wish to conduct interviews that ask your participants to be reflective and to provide you with richly detailed and in-depth accounts. Conducting this type of exploratory discussion by telephone will be difficult if your participants are uncomfortable with this mode of interviewing. This may lead to issues of (reduced) reliability where your participants are reluctant to engage in this type of exploratory discussion by telephone, or even a refusal to take part.

In spite of this concern, researchers conducting semi-structured and in-depth qualitative interviews by telephone report successful outcomes. For example, Holt (2010) reports using telephone interviews to collect narrative accounts. These interviews produced a rich set of qualitative data, with each one lasting on average an hour. Trier-Bieniek (2012) conducted 39 telephone interviews to produce a rich set of qualitative data. The reported advantages of using telephone interviews in these research projects go beyond those related to access, speed and lower cost. Both Holt (2010) and Trier-Bieniek (2012) report that the fact that they did not meet their participants actually helped in terms of producing open and full accounts. There are a number of reasons for this outcome. The anonymity of a voice/listening-only mode of interviewing helped to reduce participants' inhibitions in providing accounts about very personal matters. This suggests that exploring sensitive issues by telephone interview may in some contexts be advantageous. The use of the telephone also facilitated participation, by allowing participants to chose a suitable time of day to be interviewed, to stop an interview in progress when this became unavoidable and to rearrange a time for it to continue, and to move around their environment when necessary to avoid being overheard. Participants also reported to Holt (2010) and Trier-Bieniek (2012) that they had enjoyed this mode of participation and many would not have found it so easy to take part in a face-to-face interview.

It is important to note that in both of these projects there were contextual factors which helped to facilitate the research. Both researchers found empathy with their participants and developed rapport with them; some participants expressed enjoyment and gratitude at being able to take part and for the opportunity to express their views. This indicates a positive outcome for researchers and participants but you may not be so fortunate in terms of your own research topic and intended participants. Choice of research method and participant consent will be contingent on a range of contextual factors related to your research.

There are also practical issues that need to be managed when using telephone interviews. These include your ability to control the pace of a telephone interview and to record data. Conducting an interview by telephone and taking notes is a difficult and demanding process. In addition, the normal visual cues that allow your participant to control the flow of the data that they share with you would be absent in a voice-only telephone interview. In this type of interview you lose the opportunity to witness the non-verbal behaviour of your participant, which may adversely affect your interpretation of how far to pursue a particular line of questioning. Your participant may be less willing to provide you with as much time to talk to them in comparison with a face-to-face interview. You may also encounter difficulties in developing more complex questions in comparison with a face-to-face interview situation (Box 10.15). Finally, attempting to gain access through a telephone call may lead to ethical issues (Section 6.6).

There are strategies that may help you to overcome some of these practical issues when you use telephone interviews. You can audio-record a (voice-only) telephone interview with your participant's consent. You will find it helpful to reflect on a telephone interview after it ends and make notes about it. Your reflections and notes may help you to improve your approach to your next telephone interview. You should also find it helpful to write a number of interview questions and to revise these to make sure they are clear and succinct before undertaking interviews (Box 10.15). You may also find it helpful to practise conducting a telephone interview (about another topic) with a friend.

As noted, developments in video telephony are opening up new possibilities to conduct interviews through use of a video calling service. Conducting an interview by mobile phone or another supported device may overcome some of the potential disadvantages of using voice-only telephony. Using this technology may help to build rapport and trust, while the ability for you and your participant to see each other and to interact visually should provide both of you with some contextual cues, even if these are limited by the screen frame. Using a screen-recording application with your participant's consent will provide you with a recording of the interview. You will need to ensure that you and your

Box 10.15 Focus on management research

Comparing the nature of spoken interactions in telephone interviews with those in face-to-face interviews

Irvine et al. (2012) compared the nature of spoken interactions in two sets of semi-structured, qualitative interviews: one set conducted by telephone and the other carried out face-to-face, in a study published in *Qualitative Research*. Both sets of interviews had originally been conducted by Irvine (2008) for a study on mental health and employment.

Six interviews had been conducted by telephone and five face-to-face. All 11 were conducted by the same researcher and carried out before the idea to compare them was devised, with choice of interview mode being determined by geographical distance rather than interviewee preference. The authors believe that these factors reduced any bias and threats to reliability in their findings.

The aim of the study was to evaluate the impact of interview mode on the nature of spoken interactions, based on actual data that had been transcribed systematically to facilitate detailed analysis. Their analysis revealed five areas where interactional differences were evident between interview modes (face-to-face versus telephone).

In face-to-face interviews, the researcher was more likely to interact with the interviewee during an answer, say by helping an interviewee find an appropriate word or by summarising the answer to show understanding. Possible explanations suggested for this may be because greater rapport was developed during face-to-face interviews, and because during telephone interviews the interviewer needed to concentrate on listening given the absence of non-verbal prompts or signals.

Also in face-to-face interviews, the researcher used verbal acknowledgements (e.g. by saying 'Yeah', 'Ah', 'Oh', 'Um', etc.) to the interviewee more frequently than in telephone interviews. This is surprising because use of verbal acknowledgements may be expected to be more frequently used in telephone interviews to compensate for the lack of visual contact. Possible explanations suggested for this lesser frequency during telephone interviews may be because of the need to concentrate on listening and also because the researcher used the lack of visual contact to concentrate on taking notes.

In telephone interviews, interviewees were slightly more likely to ask the researcher to clarify or repeat her questions. This did not mean that interviewees experienced difficulty in their understanding; instead this may be explained by the quality of the phone connection, the effort and concentration required in a listening-only mode of interview and resulting fatigue, and the need for interview questions to be phrased clearly and succinctly.

Also in telephone interviews, interviewees were more likely to ask if their responses were adequate. Possible explanations suggested for this may be related to lack of visual cues and the reduced scope to discuss the purpose of the research at the start of the interview with regard to the lesser rapport developed in telephone interviews and greater level of task orientation in this interview mode.

Finally telephone interviews were shorter than face-to-face ones. Possible explanations suggested for this relate to lesser rapport developed and greater effort required, with the implication that telephone interviews may be less suitable for research studies that are designed to rely on richly detailed and in-depth accounts. However, Irvine et al. (2012) also note that this comparative study of interactional differences was small scale and that further research in this area would be beneficial.

participant both have access to a supported and compatible platform before considering using this technology.

Developments in technology therefore add to ways in which you may be able to conduct interviews. In addition to face-to-face interviews, you may consider using telephone interviews based on voice-only or video telephony. In the next sub-section we also consider choice of other types of electronic interview. In considering the choice open to you, you will need to focus on the preferences of your intended participants and the need to be guided by ethical principles. You will need to be aware of any cultural norms related to the nature and conduct of telephone conversations.

Internet-mediated interviewing

Interviews can be conducted using mobile and computing technologies via the Internet. These are collectively referred to as **electronic interviews**. A distinction is often made between electronic interviews conducted in real time (**synchronous**) and those not conducted in real time (**asynchronous**). An asynchronous electronic interview will be conducted through exchanges of text and can involve gaps in time between the interviewer asking a question and the participant providing an answer. In this way it is sometimes partly undertaken offline. Figure 10.2 shows the main ways in which electronic interviews are conducted: by email, instant messaging and web conferencing. The nature of these forms of electronic interview varies and each is associated with different advantages and disadvantages. Electronic interviews are being used in a wider range of applications (Box 10.16).

An email interview is generally described as an asynchronous form because of the nature of the technology used and because it is not necessary to ask questions and answer these sequentially without any time gaps. However, it may be possible to conduct an email interview in one period, where the interviewee responds immediately to each question and emails continue to be exchanged until the interviewer draws it to a close and thanks the interviewee for her/his participation. This may be after a pre-arranged period has been reached. We return to consider synchronous text-based interviewing later in this section.

An **email interview** therefore consists of a series of emails each containing a question or small number of questions and the replies to these. Although you can send one email containing a series of questions, this would really be an Internet questionnaire (Sections 11.2 and 11.5). After making contact and obtaining agreement to participate, you initially email a question or small number of questions, or introduce a topic to which the participant will (hopefully) reply. You then need to respond to each reply, asking further questions, raising points of clarification and pursuing ideas that are of further interest. Email interviews may last for some time where there is a delay between each question being asked and an answer being received. This may be advantageous in terms of allowing time for reflection on the part of the interviewer, in forming appropriate questions, and the participant, in terms of providing a considered response, but it may also mean that the interviewee may lose focus and interest so that the email interview ends without all questions being answered. Another advantage related to all forms of text-based electronic interview is that data are recorded as they are typed in, thereby removing problems associated with other forms of recording and transcription such as cost, accuracy and participants' apprehension.

An electronic interview conducted by text-based instant messaging is described as a synchronous form because the technology uses real-time transmission. However, there

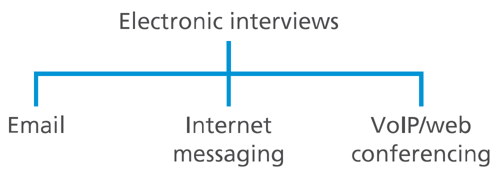

Figure 10.2 Forms of electronic interview

Box 10.16 Focus on research in the news

The avatar will see you now: interviewers go virtual

By Andrew Bounds

Jobseekers may no longer have to leave the comfort of home as a British software developer introduces interview by avatar.

Shortlister.com uses lifelike avatars to pose scripted questions over the Internet while candidates answer through their computer camera.

The system is believed to be the first in the world to use avatars to conduct interviews and is aimed at saving time and money for companies that recruit heavily, such as retailers and restaurants.

Shortlister.com was founded by David Dewey and is based at York St John University's creative incubator.

Mr Dewey said: "The advances in video conferencing and call technology in recent years have led to a dramatic increase in the use of video devices in every aspect of our lives, and recruiters are now taking advantage of these benefits."

Research by Shortlister.com shows that 58 per cent of working people between the ages of 18 and 50 in the UK now use video calling at work or home, and that figure rises to 64 per cent within the 18–24 age group.

"By using an avatar to conduct the interview, our software ensures that the process is professional and consistent while also enabling the recruiting company to hire higher-quality candidates as a result of using this innovative technology," said Mr Dewey.

"For candidates, it makes the experience as natural as possible, simulating interaction with a real person and allowing them to focus on effectively answering the interview questions and presenting themselves professionally."

He said it could reduce the average cost by almost half.

Shortlister.com also cuts out scheduling hassles and ensures consistency by asking all candidates the same set of questions, speeding up the screening process. The prerecorded interviews can then be easily scored and shared with colleagues at a convenient time and every candidate can be notified after the interview as to whether or not they have been successful.

FT *Source:* Extracts from 'The avatar will see you now: interviewers go virtual', Andrew Bounds, *Financial Times*, 23 February 2014.

may be time gaps between the interviewer asking a question and the interviewee providing a response and this type of electronic interview may extend over several periods when both are online. Instant messaging originally developed as a synchronous text service. The technologies which support electronic communication have been advancing rapidly and as a result, instant messaging now supports synchronous text, visual and aural services. We consider electronic interviews using web conferencing later in this section.

Pearce et al. (2014) evaluate the use of electronic interviews using synchronous text-based instant messaging. They intentionally chose this means to conduct electronic interviews because of the sensitive nature of their research topic. They conclude that for research topics where the researcher wishes to ask personal or sensitive questions, the anonymity offered by the interviewer and interviewee typing synchronously to each other is likely to produce reliable and useful data. For these types of research topic the lack of face-to-face contact may prove to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

Electronic interviews featuring vision and sound may be conducted using a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) or web conferencing service. There are a multitude of these types of service, providing proprietary software. Services such as Skype™ allow users to conduct electronic interviews in real time. In addition to one-to-one video facilities, this technology facilitates video-conferencing between several users. Skype™ also provides other facilities through which to conduct electronic interviews such as instant messaging. This type of software also facilitates file transfers. As with video telephony discussed earlier, software can be used to produce an audio-visual recording of the interview, providing that the research participant consents to this. Hanna (2012) provides a favourable evaluation of using Skype for research interviewing, referring to advantages associated with access, ability to interact visually, and those discussed earlier in relation to telephone interviews. Hanna also makes the point that use of such an interview mode allows both researcher and participant to remain in their own familiar and safe locations.

Using this technology has significant advantages where the population you wish to interview are geographically dispersed. Using this approach, you may be able to build up rapport with an interviewee during an online interview where you have carefully prepared for this, including sending pre-interview information to your participant, taking into account any cultural differences and practising with this technology. However, as you will remember from Sections 6.5 and 6.6, electronic interviews have their own set of ethical issues that you will need to consider.

10.10 Summary

- The use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews should allow you to collect a rich and detailed set of data, although you will need to develop a sufficient level of competence to conduct these and to be able to gain access to the type of data associated with their use.
- Interviews can be differentiated according to the level of structure and standardisation adopted.
- Semi-structured and in-depth research interviews can be used to explore topics and explain findings.
- There are situations favouring semi-structured and in-depth interviews that will lead you to use either or both of these to collect data. Apart from the purpose of your research, these are related to the significance of establishing personal contact, the nature of your data collection questions, and the length of time required from those who provide data.
- Your research design may incorporate more than one type of interview.
- Semi-structured and in-depth interviews can be used in a variety of research strategies.
- Data quality issues related to reliability/dependability, forms of bias, cultural differences and generalisability/transferability may be overcome by considering why you have chosen to use interviews, recognising that all research methods have limitations and through careful preparation to conduct interviews to avoid bias that would threaten the reliability/dependability and validity/credibility of your data.
- The conduct of semi-structured and in-depth interviews will be affected by the appropriateness of the researcher's appearance, opening comments when the interview

commences, approach to questioning, appropriate use of different types of question, nature of the interviewer's behaviour during the interview, demonstration of attentive listening skills, scope to summarise and test understanding, ability to deal with difficult participants and ability to record data accurately and fully.

- Logistical and resource matters will need to be considered and managed when you use in-depth and semi-structured interviews.
- Apart from one-to-one interviews conducted on a face-to-face basis, you may consider conducting such interviews by telephone or electronically.
- You may consider using group interviews or focus group interviews. There may be particular advantages associated with group interviews, but these are considerably more difficult to manage than one-to-one interviews.

Self-check questions

Help with these questions is available at the end of the chapter.

10.1 What type of interview would you use in each of the following situations:

- **a** a market research project?
- **b** a research project seeking to understand whether attitudes to working from home have changed?
- **c** following the analysis of a questionnaire?

10.2 What are the advantages of using semi-structured and in-depth interviews?

10.3 During a presentation of your proposal to undertake a research project, which will be based on semi-structured or in-depth interviews, you feel that you have dealt well with the relationship between the purpose of the research and the proposed methodology when one of the panel leans forward and asks you to discuss the trustworthiness and usefulness of your work for other researchers. This is clearly a challenge to see whether you can defend such an approach. How do you respond?

10.4 Having quizzed you about the trustworthiness and usefulness of your work for other researchers, the panel member decides that one more testing question is in order. He explains that interviews are not an easy option. 'It is not an easier alternative for those who want to avoid statistics', he says. 'How can we be sure that you're competent to get involved in interview work, especially where the external credibility of this organisation may be affected by the impression that you create in the field?' How will you respond to this concern?

10.5 What are the key issues to consider when planning to use semi-structured or in-depth interviews?

10.6 What are the key areas of competence that you need to develop in order to conduct an interview successfully?

Review and discussion questions

10.7 Watch and, if possible, record a television interview such as one that is part of a chat show or a documentary. It does not matter if you record an interview of only 10 to 15 minutes' duration.

- **a** As you watch the interview, make notes about what the participant is telling the interviewer. After the interview, review your notes. How much of what was being said did you manage to record?

  - **b** If you were able to record the television interview, watch it again and compare your notes with what was actually said. What other information would you like to add to your notes?
  - **c** Either watch the interview again or another television interview that is part of a chat show or a documentary. This time pay careful attention to the questioning techniques used by the interviewer. How many of the different types of question discussed in Section 10.5 can you identify?
  - **d** How important do you think the non-verbal cues given by the interviewer and the interviewee are in understanding the meaning of what is being said?

10.8 With a friend, each decide on a topic about which you think it would be interesting to interview the other person. Separately develop your interview themes and prepare an interview guide for a semi-structured interview. At the same time, decide which one of the 'difficult' participants in Table 10.2 you would like to role-play when being interviewed.

  - **a** Conduct both interviews and, if possible, make a recording. If this is not possible either audio-record or ensure the interviewer takes notes.
  - **b** Watch each of the recordings – what aspects of your interviewing technique do you each need to improve?
  - **c** If you were not able to record the interview, how good a record of each interview do you consider the notes to be? How could you improve your interviewing technique further?
  - **d** As an interviewer, ask your friend an open question about the topic. As your friend answers the question, note down her/his answer. Summarise this answer back to your friend. Then ask your friend to assess whether you have summarised their answer accurately and understood what s/he meant.

10.9 Obtain a transcript of an interview that has already been undertaken. If your university subscribes to online newspapers such as ft.com, these are a good source of business-related transcripts. Alternatively, typing 'interview transcript' into a search engine such as Google or Bing will generate numerous possibilities on a vast range of topics!

  - **a** Examine the transcript, paying careful attention to the questioning techniques used by the interviewer. To what extent do you think that certain questions have led the interviewee to certain answers?
  - **b** Now look at the responses given by the interviewer. To what extent do you think these are the actual verbatim responses given by the interviewee? Why do you think this?

Progressing your research project

Using semi-structured, in-depth or group interviews in your research

- Review your research question(s) and objectives. How appropriate would it be to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews to collect data? Where it is appropriate, explain the relationship between your research question(s) and objectives, and the use of such interviews. Where this type of interviewing is not appropriate, justify your decision.
- If you decide that semi-structured or in-depth interviews are appropriate, what practical problems do you foresee? How might you attempt to overcome these practical problems?
- Think about how your interviews are likely to be analysed before you conduct them. This will guide your preparation of the list of interview themes as well as the conduct of your subsequent interviews and data transcription (Chapter 13).

- What threats to the trustworthiness of the data collected are you likely to encounter? How might you overcome these?
- Draft a list of interview themes to be explored and compare these thoroughly with your research question(s) and objectives.
- Ask your project tutor to comment on your judgement about the use of non-standardised (qualitative) interviews, the issues and threats that you have identified, your suggestions to overcome these, and the fit between your interview themes and your research question(s) and objectives.
- Use the questions in Box 1.4 to guide your reflective diary entry.

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Further reading

Brinkmann, S. and Kvale, S. (2015) *InterViews* (3rd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This provides a useful general guide to interviewing skills.

Court, D. and Abbas, R. (2013) 'Whose interview is it, anyway? Methodological and ethical challenges of insider-outsider research, multiple languages, and dual-researcher cooperation', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 480–8. This is a helpful account to understand how cultural differences may impact on the scope to collect data and the implications of operating as either a cultural insider or outsider.

Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. (2009) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (3rd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This provides a useful source for those considering the use of this method of group interviewing.

Symon, G. and Cassell, C. (eds) (2012) *Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and Current Challenges*. London: Sage. This edited work contains a helpful range of contributions related to qualitative data collection including interviews and focus groups.

Case 10
How do you network in your SME?

This transcript is an anonymised extract from an audio-recorded focus group that lasted for just over two hours. The views expressed are those of the participants and are entirely independent of the authors and the publisher. The full transcript of over 13,000 words comprised 31 word-processed A4 pages.

Within the transcript the following transcription conventions have been used:

(.) A dot in between brackets indicates a gap between utterances, the greater the number of dots, the greater the gap.

() Empty brackets indicate the transcriber's inability to hear what was said.

(()) Double brackets indicate the transcriber's descriptions of what is happening, rather than a transcription.

] Single right square bracket denotes point at which utterance part terminated by another.

[Single left square bracket denotes point of start of utterance overlap.

We join the focus group near the start. Jemma, the researcher and Focus Group Moderator (FGM) has introduced herself, outlined the aim of her research and summarised her research questions. These relate to the advantages and disadvantage for SMEs from using both offline (traditional networking) and online (social media) activities to generate social capital and the reasons for this.

All focus group participants have read the information sheet and consented to take part. They have all signed a consent form and have just finished introducing themselves to each other.

The participants are:

FGM – Jemma, researcher and Focus Group Moderator
M1 – Chris, owner of an SME providing debt recovery services
F1 – Lucy, owner of an SME selling hair care products
M2 – Harry, owner of an SME providing training to companies
F2 – Nandita, owner of an SME importing Indian foods

FGM:
So which social media if any, do you make use of for growing your business?

M1:
LinkedIn and Twitter for me (. . .)

FGM:
tell a bit more how you go about using them?

M1:
LinkedIn basically everybody that I meet fullstop and I look for them on LinkedIn and I'll make a point of connecting with them, um, that's always my first point of call, establish who I am –
((chuckling))
and um, and they actually get a face and they actually work out what I do; I can then work out what I do so when I then tried to find them, they bring everything obviously build up a relationship, they can see the () that I make, they can see what I do, how I do it and then basically when they have a problem (..) basically they look through their connections, type in 'debt' and then fingers crossed they might see what I do.

FGM:
OK, um, in terms of Twitter (.)

M1:
post maybe once every couple of weeks only purely based on stuff that's ()

FGM:
right (..)

M1:
and so for example today I did a post about the courts about thinking about filming the inside of court proceedings, um, and then sort of (..) there's always a sly comment which says something like for example, 'Well I'm waiting to see the first superstar lawyers and the reality programmes that follow' with a link to the actual (. . .) item.

FGM:
So do you have any evidence that social media have been valuable to you?

M1:
Oh yes (..) very much so, especially with LinkedIn, LinkedIn is, is the main thing that we draw on to people to meet probably much more than our website (. . .) you can be active, you can be seen, I log in to LinkedIn every single day, when I log on that's one of the first things that I do, I log on, I check my messages, um, and then I, I pull up a screen that's got LinkedIn and Twitter there so that's one of the first things I do so um, it, it's very important to me because I think what it does, it validates what you do and in terms of debt recovery, I don't know about anybody else's in this group but in terms of that can mean I need that validation because a lot of people involved in debt recovery are very shady people so I have to then come out with that and say well I'm different, I'm an ethical debt recovery person, this is how I act and you can find me, you can ask me a question.

FGM:
Thank you, that's very clear. Anybody else?

M2:
LinkedIn primarily looking at and communicating within groups (. . .)

FGM:
Can you tell us a bit more about that?

M2:
I mean you, you, you've got a whole series of special interest groups where people raise issues, ask questions, um, and then get comments back from other members of that particular group, um, and that I see as a good way of, of really building the image out there, um, I haven't posed many questions yet, um, there are some people who pose them practically daily and sometimes several times a day which I think is counter-productive (..)

FGM:
slightly irritating?
yes it is, um, but, I mean it's really only been a year where I've been really doing this regularly on a daily basis, um, and it's- it's difficult to see what that means directly in revenue because the route will be to go to my website and then come to me.

FGM:
Great (. . . .) Is it linked into the website?

M2:
Yes (..) that's right, um, I mean commonly if it's appropriate in terms of response I'll put a link from the response to my website to provide more information so that does pull them to the website (. . .)

FGM:
Are you doing the same sort of thing Chris with yours? Linking it in to the website?

M1:
Yes definitely and every time I do a- an email or a letter, that's the email with the LinkedIn is quoted so to me that adds validity (. . .) you bring me this letter, they can click on the LinkedIn profile effectively, my wife does exactly the same thing actually and (..) people can click on there and say, 'OK this person's genuine, they're real' (. . .) I think LinkedIn has done that to a certain extent in terms of business whereas sort of Facebook has sort degenerated in- slightly into a bit of chaos but it's still a good marketing tool if you've got a product, say you've got five flavours of biscuits and you say, 'Choose your favourite flavour of biscuit' you know, I think Facebook is fantastic for that.

F1:
My personal favourite's Facebook but I'm more sociable so I like to just put stuff like that up on there and I get a lot of engagement but I've got a lot of friends and family on there as well, but personally I like Facebook and you know, my personal favourite is Facebook, I always check that every day. LinkedIn not so much, so, just because I find its just ask questions and stuff which when I'm in like, my industry its like bookkeeping (..) but at the end of the day I don't necessarily want to interact with them when they're having a moan, bitching about that kind of thing, I might jump into this (..) and say, 'You need to get yourself']

[((people laughing))

F1:
– yes, yes so you have to be careful I find in LinkedIn to get too involved in the discussions because that's not helping me find clients or anything like that so you know, I prefer Facebook clubs but I think it's stickier in that kind of sense so you know, I update my status and um tell people to inbox me (. . .)

FGM:
to, to what? (..) Inbox]

F1:
[inbox me (. . . .])so like, say- say you wanted to raise money, it's like, has anyone got any money, inbox me! ((laughs)) Or whatever, you know!

F2:
Well, I think Jemma was trying to get the definition of inbox]

F1:
[oh inbox yes, that means send me a private message so it's not on my walls for the whole world to see.

Questions

1 How would you describe Jemma's approach to questioning?
2 Based on the extract, what issues appear to be arising in this focus group?
3 If you were the moderator, how would you attempt to shape the conduct of this focus group interview?

Additional case studies relating to material covered in this chapter are available via the book's companion website: **www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders**.

They are:

- Equal opportunities in the publishing industry.
- The practices and styles of public relations practitioners.
- Students' use of work-based learning in their studies.
- Students' and former students' debt problems.
- Organisations in a flash?

Self-check answers

10.1 The type of interview that is likely to be used in each of these situations is as follows:

a A standardised and structured interview where the aim is to develop response patterns from the views of people. The interview schedule might be designed to combine styles so that comments made by interviewees in relation to specific questions could also be recorded.

b The situation outlined suggests an exploratory approach to research, and therefore an in-depth interview would be most appropriate.

c The situation outlined here suggests that an explanatory approach is required in relation to the data collected, and in this case a semi-structured interview is likely to be appropriate.

10.2 Reasons that suggest the use of interviews include:

- the exploratory or explanatory nature of your research;
- situations where it will be significant to establish personal contact, in relation to interviewee sensitivity about the nature of the information to be provided and the use to be made of this;
- situations where the researcher needs to exercise control over the nature of those who will supply data;
- situations where there are a large number of questions to be answered;
- situations where questions are complex or open-ended;
- situations where the order and logic of questioning may need to be varied.

10.3 Certainly politely! Your response needs to show that you are aware of the issues relating to reliability/dependability, bias and generalisability/transferability that might arise. It would be useful to discuss how these might be overcome through the following: the design of the research; the keeping of records or a diary in relation to the processes and key incidents of the research project as well as the recording of data collected; attempts to control bias through the process of collecting data; the relationship of the research to theory.

10.4 Perhaps it will be wise to say that you understand his position. You realise that any approach to research calls for particular types of competence. Your previous answer touching on interviewee bias has highlighted the need to establish credibility and to gain the interviewee's confidence. While competence will need to be developed over a period of time, allowing for any classroom simulations and dry runs with colleagues, probably the best approach will be your level of preparation before embarking on interview work. This relates first to the nature of the approach made to those whom you would like to participate in the research project and the information supplied to them, second to your intellectual preparation related to the topic to be explored and the particular context of the organisations participating in the research, and third to your ability to conduct an interview. You also recognise that piloting the interview themes will be a crucial element in building your competence.

10.5 Key issues to consider include the following:

- planning to minimise the occurrence of forms of bias where these are within your control, related to interviewer bias, interviewee bias and sampling bias;
- considering your aim in requesting the research interview and how you can seek to prepare yourself in order to gain access to the data that you hope your participants will be able to share with you;
- devising interview themes that you wish to explore or seek explanations for during the interview;
- sending a list of your interview themes to your interviewee prior to the interview, where this is considered appropriate;
- requesting permission and providing a reason where you would like to use an audio-recorder during the interview;
- making sure that your level of preparation and knowledge (in relation to the research context and your research question and objectives) is satisfactory in order to establish your credibility when you meet your interviewee;
- considering how your intended appearance during the interview will affect the willingness of the interviewee to share data.

10.6 There are several areas where you need to develop and demonstrate competence in relation to the conduct of semi-structured and in-depth research interviews.
These areas are:

- opening the interview;
- using appropriate language;
- questioning;
- listening;
- testing and summarising understanding;
- behavioural cues;
- recording data.

Get ahead using resources on the companion website at: **www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders.**

- Improve your IBM SPSS Statistics and NVivo research analysis with practice tutorials.
- Save time researching on the Internet with the Smarter Online Searching Guide.
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- Follow live links to useful websites.