Sue Jones

DEPTH INTERVIEWING


In characterising what they do, I have heard different researchers use the label ‘depth interview’ to cover many different approaches. These have ranged from the supposedly totally ‘non-directive’ to that where the main difference from the formal questionnaire interview seems to be that the interviewer does not have a typed sheet of paper, varies the exact wording of the questions and perhaps asks more ‘probe’ questions than is usual in a formal questionnaire. Between these two extremes is an abyss of practice and therefore theory about the purpose and nature of the qualitative interview.

There is, of course, a considerable literature on the theoretical bases for qualitative methodology to which justice cannot be done here. To summarise my own theoretical starting point: it comes from a particular ‘model of man’ which sees human beings not as organisms responding, Pavlovian fashion, to some external stimulus, nor inexorably driven by internal needs and instincts, nor as ‘cultural dopes’, but as persons, who construct the meaning and significance of their realities. They do so by bringing to bear upon events a complex personal framework of beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives to categorise, characterise, explain and predict the events in their worlds. It is a framework which, in a social world, is shared in some parts with some others but one in which the points of commonality cannot be assumed as self-evidently, non-problematically, ‘given’. In order to understand why persons act as they do we need to understand the meaning and significance they give to their actions. The depth interview is one way – not the only way and often used most appropriately in conjunction with other ways – of
doing so. For to understand other persons’ constructions of reality we would do well to ask them (rather than assume we can know merely by observing their overt behaviour) and to ask them in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings (rather than through isolated fragments squeezed onto a few lines of paper).

Structure and ambiguity

The above leads naturally to consideration of one central issue in the conduct of depth interviews, that of the degree of structure in the interview. It is an issue I have found to be of recurring concern among those just starting to do qualitative research, reflected in such questions as: How non-directive can I, ought I to be? Do I always ask open-ended questions? Can I never disagree with the respondents? Qualitative research methodologies seek to learn about the social world in ways which do not rigidly structure the direction of enquiry and learning within simplifying, a-contextual, a priori definitions. Thus, interviews in which interviewees have prepared a long list of questions which they are determined to ask, come what may, over a period of say an hour and a half, are not depth interviews. This is so even if the researchers are contingent enough to allow the exact wording and order of the questions and even if the questions all centre around the same broad topic. For in this way the interviewees have already predicted, in detail, what is relevant and meaningful to their respondents about the research topic; and in doing this they have significantly prestructured the direction of enquiry within their own frame of reference in ways that give little time and space for their respondents to elaborate their own. They are additionally likely to be so anxious to cover all their questions that even if they hear something they know they ought to follow up, they do not. Often they will not hear such crucial clues anyway.

Yet the issue of structure is not straightforward. There is no such thing as a totally unstructured interview and the term is over-used and often carelessly used...

... The crucial point is that there is no such thing as presuppositionless research...

... The process of interviewing is one in which researchers are continually making choices, based on their research interests and prior theories, about which data they want to pick up and explore further with respondents and those which they do not. The making of these choices is the imposition of some structure. Yet although we are tied to our own frameworks, we are not totally tied up by them. If we ask more questions arising from what we hear at the time than we have predetermined we will ask, if we hold on to, modify, elaborate and sometimes abandon our prior schemes in a contingent response to what our respondents are telling us is significant in the research topic, then we are some way to achieving the complex balance between restricting structure and restricting ambiguity.

The problem of ambiguity is illustrated by the ‘non-directive’ style of interviewing, where researchers encourage interviewees to ramble in any direction they choose and give no indication of what they themselves are interested in. ‘Non-directive’ interviews are anything but non-directive. What one person will say to another depends on what he or she assumes the other is ‘up to’ in the situation. If the respondents have no clear idea of what the researchers’ interests and intentions are, they are less likely to feel unconstrained than constrained by the need to put energy into guessing what these are. Furthermore, the level of ambiguity means not only that the interviewees do not know ‘what questions the researchers are asking’ but also, and therefore, that the researchers do not know what questions the respondents are answering. In short, researchers are more likely to get good data, and know what data they are getting, if the interviewees are told at the outset what the research topic is, even if initially in relatively broad terms, and why the topic is of interest.

Interviewer bias?

The issue of structure is closely related to that of ‘interviewer bias’. Many of those who come to qualitative methods in policy-related research come from a quantitative tradition in which the need to avoid interviewer bias is usually regarded as crucial. It is a concern bound to ideas, for example, of reliability and replication. In qualitative research the notion of some kind of impersonal, machine-like investigator is recognised as a chimera. An interview is a complicated, shifting, social process occurring between two individual human beings, which can never be exactly replicated. We cannot get at some ‘objective truth’ that would be there if only the effects of interpersonal interaction could be removed...

There cannot be definitive rules about the use of open-ended questions, leading and loaded questions, disagreement with respondents, and so on. Such choices must depend on the understanding researchers have of the person they are with and the kind of relationship they have developed in the encounter. Some relationships may allow, without destroying trust and comfort, much more of the to-and-fro of debate and discussion between two human beings than others. What is crucial is that researchers choose their actions with a self-conscious awareness of why they are making them, what the effects are likely to be upon that relationship — and indeed whether their own theories and values are getting in the way of understanding those of the respondents.

A social interaction...

... If we as researchers want to obtain good data it would be better that the persons we are interviewing trust us enough to believe that we will not use the data against them, or that we will not regard their opinions as foolish; that they are not trying very hard to please; or are not so untouched by us as individuals and the process of being interviewed that they produce a well-rehearsed script that tells very little about what actually concerns and moves them; or that they do not see an opportunity to manipulate us to suit certain personal ends of which we are unaware and so on. Thus, the stress in much that is said about interviewing is on the need to assure respondents of confidentiality, on using and developing the social skills (verbal and non-verbal) which we have all used at some time or other to
convince others that we want to hear what they have to say, take it seriously, and are indeed hearing them.

We do need to pay attention to the crucial non-verbal data – of posture, gesture, voice intonation, facial expression, eye contact, and so on – by which we can communicate, for example, interest, encouragement, warmth and caring, on the one hand, or boredom, disapproval, coldness and indifference on the other. We need not only to ask questions in such a way that the others are encouraged to answer and elaborate further, in their terms, but also to give them enough time and space to do so. We also of course do need to listen – to hear what seems to be significant to the respondents in the research topic and explore this further, to be aware of the data that tell us we have misread significance and should change the line of probing. We need to know how to judge when we are getting data that are off the track of what we are interested in, be very sure that we are not just making this judgement on the basis of our own preconceptions and missing data that are relevant to the research topic as construed by the respondents; and then how to bring them back gently. We need to check meaning when we are not sure that we have understood, and not assume too quickly that we have understood. And just as we need to think very carefully about the types of people we are going to interview, the likely range of their experiences and possible responses, and adapt our approach and self-presentation appropriately, so we need to adapt our style to the particular person we are with (that is, the individual, not the 'type') and to the shifts and developments during the interaction.

These are essential skills that have to be thought about and practised, and if researchers do not develop such skills the likelihood of overcoming some of the problems outlined earlier is significantly reduced.

I shall argue in this chapter that social science researchers' awareness of those aspects of interviewing which are 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' from the viewpoint of inclusion in research reports reflect their embeddedness in a particular research protocol. This protocol assumes a predominantly masculine model of sociology and society. The relative undervaluation of women's models has led to an unreal theoretical characterisation of the interview as a means of gathering sociological data which cannot and does not work in practice. This lack of fit between the theory and practice of interviewing is especially likely to come to the fore when a feminist interviewer is interviewing women (who may or may not be feminists).

Interviewing: a masculine paradigm?

... The paradigm of the social research interview prompted in the methodology textbooks emphasises: (a) its status as a mechanical instrument of data-collection; (b) its function as a specialised form of conversation in which one person asks the questions and another gives the answers; (c) its characterisation of interviewees as essentially passive individuals, and (d) its reduction of interviewers to a question asking and rapport-promoting role. Actually, two separate typifications of the interviewer are prominent in the literature, though the disjunction between the two is

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**Ann Oakley (and a subsequent exchange with Joanna Malseed)**

**INTERVIEWING WOMEN**

A contradiction in terms

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