

10.2

Qualitative research: interviews

HL

Learning outcomes

- Evaluate semi-structured, focus, group and narrative interviews
- Discuss considerations involved before, during, and after an interview (e.g. sampling method, data recording, traditional versus postmodern transcription, debriefing)
- Explain how researchers use inductive content analysis (thematic analysis) on interview transcripts

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research in psychology, according to Willig (2001). One reason for this is that interview data from semi-structured interviews can be analysed using several theoretical approaches.

The semi-structured interview involves the preparation of an interview guide that lists themes that should be explored during the interview. This guide serves as a checklist during the interview, and helps to ensure that the same information is obtained from all the participants in the study. However, there is a great deal of flexibility in that the order of the questions and the actual wording of the questions are not determined in advance. Furthermore, the interview guide allows the interviewer to pursue questions on the list in more depth.

This kind of interview uses closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions trigger the participants to talk in a focused way, and the open-ended questions give the participant an opportunity to respond more freely. Most of the questions posed to the participants in the semi-structured interview are open-ended and non-directive, because the purpose of the interview is to get insight into people's personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The interview will often appear to be informal and rather conversational, because the semi-structured interview encourages two-way communication.

The interview may take place as a face-to-face interview, but there are many other ways to collect data—for example, via the telephone. Sometimes the data from the interview are supplemented with diaries or other pieces of writing that can be used in the analysis.

Strengths of the semi-structured interview

- On socially sensitive issues, it is better for acquiring data because the researcher can ask the interviewee to elaborate on his or her answers.
- Less biased by the researcher's preconceptions.

- Has the flexibility of open-ended approaches, as well as the advantages of a structural approach. It enables the researcher to make interventions, asking participants either to clarify or to expand on areas of interest.
- Allows for analysis in a variety of ways because it is compatible with many methods of data analysis.
- The interview guide sets out the themes to explore, but does not allow for pursuing themes that have not been prepared in advance.

Limitations of the semi-structured interview

- The focus on individual processes—the one-to-one situation is somewhat artificial and this could bring issues such as ecological validity into question.
- Data analysis is very time-consuming.

Focus groups

Focus groups were originally used within communication and market research. It is a popular method to assess health education messages and to examine public understanding of health behaviours. Focus groups are gaining in popularity in psychology, especially within health psychology, where it has become an alternative to semi-structured interviewing—for example, in research on people's experiences of disease and health services.

The idea behind a focus groups is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be difficult to achieve in one-to-one interviews. Group discussions are particularly suitable if the researcher uses open-ended questions that encourage the participants to explore the issues of importance to them. This enables the participants to talk freely and to generate their own questions.

A focus group normally consists of around 6 to 10 people. If there are more, it may be difficult for everyone to participate actively. The members of a focus group often have a common characteristic which is relevant for the topic of investigation, which is why purposive sampling is often used.

Participants in a focus group are supposed to interact with each other as they would do outside of the research context. This is more likely to happen if participants already know each other. The researcher has the role of facilitator—that is, someone in charge of making progress in the group. The facilitator introduces the group members to each other, establishes the topic of the research, and monitors the group discussion—for example, bringing the group back on track, asking group members to respond to issues raised by others, or identifying agreements and disagreements among group members. It is also the facilitator who sets the time limits for the discussion.

In the focus group, participants respond to and comment on each other's contribution to the discussion. Statements may be challenged or extended in ways that generate rich data for the researcher.

Focus groups may be:

- **homogeneous**
(participants share key features) or
- **heterogeneous**
(participants are different)
- pre-existing (e.g. a group of colleagues) or new
- concerned (where participants have a direct interest or commitment) or naive (they do not have a commitment).

In focus groups, the participants use everyday interpersonal communication patterns—that is, arguments and jokes. This has made focus groups an important data collection technique in cross-cultural research, because the method does not discriminate against people who cannot read or write. It is believed that everyday forms of communication may reveal more about what people know and experience than answers to questions in interviews.

Strengths of the focus group

- A quick and convenient way to collect data from several individuals simultaneously.
- Provides a **setting** that is **natural**, so it can be argued that it has higher ecological validity than the one-to-one interview.
- Particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences because it can be used to gain insight into *what* they think, *how* they think, and *why* they think that way. This includes the way people talk about the problem under investigation—for example, the words they use. It can also highlight cultural values or group norms.

Limitations of the focus group

- Not appropriate for all research questions. If the research deals with sensitive matters and the participants are supposed to talk about their personal experiences, it is not guaranteed that people will disclose information.
- The presence of other participants may result in group dynamics such as conformity.
- Focus groups can be a problem when the participants are not free—for example, in nursing homes or prisons. This raises ethical issues.

Narrative interviews

The narrative approach to psychology is based on the assumption that human beings are *storytellers*, and that the researcher's task is to explore the different stories being told (Murray 2003). Apparently, it is a universal human activity to tell stories about past events, and it can be seen as a way in which "knowing" is translated into "telling". For human beings, constructing narratives becomes a way of understanding the world and oneself. According to Parker (2005), a narrative is the way the self constructs a story of identity in relation to other people and the sociocultural context in which they live. However, narratives should not be seen as true representations of the world, but rather as individual *interpretations* of it.

According to Bruner (2006), the principal way in which people's minds—or "realities"—are shaped to the patterns of daily life is through the stories they tell, listen to, and read. These stories can be true or fictional, but it is through these stories—the narratives—that people make sense of what is happening around them. People construct their realities on these narratives and come to live in a world fashioned by them. The narratives are often constructed like real stories, with an opening, a middle, and an ending.

Example of interview questions in the narrative interview

- I would like you to tell me about yourself—where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school, and so on. You should just tell me as much as possible about yourself.
- I would like you to tell me what you thought when you received the diagnosis, and how you coped with it.

The purpose of narrative interviewing is to see how people impose a kind of order on their experiences so as to make sense of events in their lives. The narratives are representations of an individual's life—a mix of facts and interpretations—and they help to create identities and construct meanings in individual lives. Narrative interviewing can also help in understanding how individual lives relate to the historical and cultural context in which people live. One example of this could be the way feminist psychology in the western world has changed women's narratives about what women can and cannot do.

A narrative interview can take different forms. The life-story interview is the most extended form of a narrative interview. Another form focuses on how an individual experiences a particular situation, both personally and in relation to the social world. Overall, the researcher will always be interested in integrating the personal narrative into the broader cultural narrative.

Murray (2002) investigated how women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer integrated the disease into their everyday lives. The researcher wanted to find out what meaning they gave the illness, using the narrative interview. He found that there were striking similarities in the narratives. They were all constructed around a beginning (life before the cancer diagnosis), a middle (diagnosis, treatment, own reaction, and reaction of family and friends), and an end (looking back on how the disease disrupted life, and a redefinition of identity as a survivor of cancer, as well as a change in life expectancies).

Be reflective

Do you think that the narrative approach would be appropriate if you were to conduct a study on what it is like to be a new student at an your school? Why or why not?

Strengths of the narrative interview

- Valuable means of exploring the complexity of individual experiences, as well as how these relate to wider social and cultural contexts, because narratives provide an in-depth understanding of how people construct meaning in their lives.
- Narrative interviews can be used with all people because they can use everyday language and talk freely.

Limitations of the narrative interview

- Narrative interview results in an enormous amount of data and it can be time-consuming to transcribe and analyse.

Considerations before, during, and after an interview

There is quite a lot of planning involved in conducting an interview. The researchers should consider relevant *sampling methods*. In most qualitative research, small samples are used, and the sample will often have particular characteristics in common. In that case, a purposive sample will be adequate. You can read more about these considerations in Chapter 10.1.

Training of the interviewer is important in order to avoid **interviewer effects**—that is, effects caused by the presence of a particular interviewer. People are good at reading non-verbal signs, and this can have a profound effect on the way they respond. An

unconscious non-verbal sign, such as the interviewer frowning, could make participants change their answers, or upset them. Therefore, interviewers must be trained so that they do not react in ways that may intimidate the participants and jeopardize the interview.

Choice of interviewer may also be an issue. People are known to respond differently to male interviewers than to female interviewers. Generally, it is appropriate to consider how interviewer effects can be counterbalanced by varying age, gender, and ethnicity in interviewers conducting research.

The interviewer should plan the interview carefully and establish an *interview guide*. The interview guide is a kind of script for how to conduct the interview. It is based on previous literature in the field and the aims of the actual research. The interviewer must also carefully consider ethical issues that could arise from the interview. This is particularly relevant if the research is about sensitive topics. In qualitative research, the interview guide should be used flexibly, and should include a relatively small number of open-ended questions that allow the researcher to identify the respondent's own ideas and terms in the interview, so that questions become more relevant to the respondent.

Questions can be:

- **descriptive questions**, which invite the participant to give a general account of something ("What happened?" or "What does it feel like to be a mother?")
- **structural questions**, which invite the participant to identify structures and meanings to use to make sense of the world ("What does it mean to your life to suffer from AIDS?")
- **contrast questions**, which allow the participant to compare events and experiences ("Did you prefer being in that school or the other one?")
- **evaluative questions**, which ask about the respondent's feelings about someone or something ("Did you feel afraid when you had the HIV test?").

Data recording must be considered in the preparation of the interview. Taking notes during the interview interferes with eye contact and non-verbal communication, but in some situations it may be the only solution. Today, researchers often use tape or video recording. However, taping the interview may also affect the situation and the participant may feel uncomfortable about being recorded. It is therefore important to ask the participant in advance and explain why the recording is being made and how it is going to be used. It is also a good idea to offer the respondent a copy of the transcript of the interview, if possible. This information should be part of the briefing that takes place before the interview.

Transcription of the data—that is, how to change the interview into a written text that can be used for analysis—should be decided in advance. Researchers often use professional transcribers because transcription is a time-consuming job, but they will have to decide



The sex of the researcher is an important issue to consider in qualitative research; in some cultures, women are not allowed to talk to unknown males

which method of transcription to use. Most qualitative methods of analysis require that the material is transcribed **verbatim** (i.e. word by word), and this is generally enough for thematic analysis. However, some researchers may find it important to include features such as pauses, interruptions, intonation, volume of speech, incomplete sentences, false starts, and laughter. It all depends on the research question and the method of analysis chosen. Transcriptions that include these features are called **postmodern transcripts**.

Finally, the researcher should inform the participant about the research and ask him or her to sign an informed consent before the research begins. This *briefing* should be extensive and should include the goal of the study, methods used, and any inconvenience that may occur.

During the interview, it is important to establish a **rapport** (i.e. a trusting and open relationship) between the interviewer and the participant. It is very important that the interviewer demonstrates ethical conduct. Even though there may be a relaxed atmosphere during the interview, the interviewer should never abuse the informal ambience to make the respondent reveal more than he or she is comfortable with after the interview.

If the interview is being recorded, the interviewer needs to make sure that the recorder is placed in a position where it will record clearly, and that the interviewer retains eye contact with the participant.

The interviewer should use the interview guide flexibly, but ensure that all important themes are addressed. It is a good idea to use an **active listening technique**—that is, restate the participant's comments and integrate them in later questions in order to show that the interviewer is listening. Generally, the interviewer should be a good listener, empathic, and non-judgmental, and should encourage the participants to develop their viewpoints in their own words.

Most people like to be cooperative in a face-to-face situation. This can affect their answers—for example, if they think that the researcher is expecting a particular answer, or if they conform to the answers that other people give in focus groups. It is important to be aware that people may adjust their responses according to what they consider to be relevant. Participant expectancy effects of this kind need to be taken into consideration in any interview study.

After the interview, the participant must be debriefed. This includes information about the way the results are going to be used, and reassuring the participants that ethical considerations such as confidentiality and anonymity will be observed. It could also include

I: So you're saying there's a difference between a crown court and a magistrates' court?

R: Yeah. I mean the magistrates' court's sort of very just like skirty issues really, it just looks at getting things through quickly because it has such a build up of cases to get through.

I: Do you think they're effective in the way they work?

R: I think the magistrates' is the least effective. I think it's hard to expect sort of it to operate when it has somebody with not much legal training making decisions on law. I mean you wouldn't get that in the crown court say because they value the legal training of the judge in those places... so you have like a lesser court so it's just like an appointed position that anyone can have. There's obviously going to be less justice there.

Part of a transcription from an interview

the researcher asking the participant to read the transcripts of the interview and give feedback on them. The post-interview situation is an important part of the research process and should ensure that the participant is fully informed and feels confident. If the participant has revealed very sensitive information during the interview and feels uncomfortable about having done so when reading the transcript, the researcher must accept that the participant has the right to withdraw the information.

Use of inductive content analysis (thematic analysis) on interview transcripts

Data analysis: interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

A common practice in analysis of qualitative data is the identification of key themes, concepts, and categories. There are several examples of thematic analysis—for example, grounded theory, which was invented for studying social processes in sociology. It involves **coding**—that is, finding specific categories in the data material. In the first stage of analysis, descriptive labels are given to discrete instances of phenomena. From here, new *low-level categories* emerge, and as the coding process continues, *higher-level categories* emerge where the lower-level categories are integrated into meaningful units. This way of analysing data identifies and integrates categories of meaning from the data, with the aim of generating new theory based on the data. It is not the same as traditional content analysis, where the categories are defined before the analysis begins, since the categories emerge from the data material in grounded theory.

According to Willig (2001), grounded theory enables the researcher to study social processes, but interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) allows the researcher to gain an insider's view of how individual participants make sense of the world. This is the reason why psychologists are now increasingly using this approach. IPA is based on the same principles of identification of themes and organizing them hierarchically as grounded theory. It is now used in health psychology—for example, in research investigating how people cope with serious illness.

The goal of IPA is to gain insight into how an individual perceives and explains a phenomenon. The data for analysis come from qualitative sources, such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, diaries, or narrative interviews. The researcher works on the basis of texts—mostly transcripts—which are studied extensively in order to extract themes relevant to the research question. This means that data collection and analysis are not based on an existing theory or prior assumptions. The answer to the research question will emerge from the data themselves, so the IPA takes an inductive approach and supports the view that theory can emerge from the data. However, Grigoriou (2004) argues that it may sometimes be helpful to introduce theory in the analytic process.

Be a researcher

- What would you have to consider if you were to conduct research interviews in relation to coping with AIDS cross-culturally?
- How could you prepare for the interviews?

Thinking about knowledge and ways of knowing

The IPA approach is linked to philosophy—phenomenology—which is concerned with the way things appear to us via experience. In psychology, phenomenology refers to the conscious subjective experiences (e.g. perceptions, emotions, cognitions, behaviour) of individuals within their particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. These experiences are only accessible to the individual; they cannot be directly observed by other people, but they can be shared via language. The IPA acknowledges that it is impossible to gain direct access to a research participant's understanding of the world. It can only happen through texts (e.g. diaries) and transcripts of interviews.

This **idiographic approach** (related to the unique or particular) is central to IPA. The method is based on the assumption that cognitions are important in understanding people's subjective world. Smith (1996) argues that there is a relationship between what people think (cognition), say (account), and do (behaviour), and he has developed IPA based on these ideas.

IPA is also linked to **hermeneutics**—that is, the theory of interpretation and **symbolic interactionism**—which claims that the meanings individuals ascribe to events are of central concern, but these meanings are obtained through a process of social interaction and social interpretation.

Analysis is based on an *interpretation* of the participant's experience, but interpretation derives from paying close attention to the presented phenomenon rather than one imported from outside (Smith 2004). IPA is interested in the diversity of human experience, and looks for divergence and convergence in the themes which become apparent in the analysis of texts. The researcher can only make an *interpretation* of these texts in order to get insight into the lived experience of the participants, and it is not possible to determine whether this interpretation really reflects the lived experience of the participants.

Analysis involves a systematic search for themes in the first reading. Subsequent readings will try to connect the themes in meaningful ways in order to establish superordinate (or higher-order) themes and subthemes. In the research report, the researcher will use the elicited themes to draw conclusions, and these will be supported by verbatim extracts (quotations) from the participants—that is, rich-thick descriptions.

IPA works with transcripts of semi-structured interviews. Willig (2001) outlines the following stages as analytic strategy in IPA.

- 1 **Reading and rereading of the transcripts** in order to become familiar with each participant's account. The researcher produces notes about initial thoughts and observations that could be useful for analysis—for example, key phrases, preliminary interpretations, connections, contradictions, language use, summary statements. One way to do this is to note the comments in the left-hand margin of the text.
- 2 **Identification of emergent themes** that characterize each section of the text. The themes spring out of the text and are assumed to capture something essential about it. These themes can be noted in the right-hand margin. The researcher may or may not use psychological terminology at this point. The emerging themes from this first reading could be called "raw data themes".
- 3 **Structuring emergent themes.** The researcher will typically list all the emergent themes and see if they relate to each other in clusters and hierarchies. Clusters are then given labels that capture the essence of the theme. These could be *in vivo* terms used by the participants, brief quotations, or descriptive labels. One example

could be a “childhood cluster”, which includes themes such as “relationship with friends” and “relationship with family”. This childhood cluster could be termed “when I was a child” (*in vivo*/quote) or “early years” (descriptive). The themes can be organized in higher-order themes and subordinate themes. The clustering of themes should make sense in relation to the original data, so the researcher needs to check the source material again and again to be sure that the interpretation can be supported by the data.

- 4 Summary table of the structured themes and relevant quotations that illustrate each theme.** This table should only include the themes that capture the essentials of the participant’s experience in relation to the research question. Other themes should be excluded. The summary table includes cluster labels with their subordinate theme labels, brief quotations, and references to where relevant extracts may be found in the interview transcript, with reference to page and line numbers.

Qualitative researchers analyse the data until they reach a point where they can find no new information. This is called **data saturation**.

Research in psychology

A qualitative research study on relationships (Grigoriou 2004)

Grigoriou (2004) examined close friendships between gay men and heterosexual women. The participants were eight pairs of gay men and heterosexual women who were close friends. The sample consisted of British men and women. She used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to gather data. The interview schedule started with demographic questions, which were followed by questions regarding initiation, maintenance, and qualities of their friendships. Participants were then asked questions about the roles of their friends and families, as well as their feelings towards them. The schedule asked questions about the perception of others in their social network about their friendship. The participants who were single were asked to reflect on their previous partner’s conception of this friendship. Finally, the participants were asked to compare friendships between gay men and heterosexual women with other forms of friendship they might have.

The transcripts were verbatim and were submitted to IPA analysis because this was considered to be the most appropriate way to gain an insight into the individual participant’s own understanding of his or her friendship. The analytic strategy in this study followed the description outlined in the section on IPA in this chapter.

In terms of *reflexivity*, the researcher revealed that her interest in the topic came from being a heterosexual woman herself involved in a friendship with a gay man. She also considered whether she might have influenced the participants’ accounts in that they were aware of her motivation to conduct the study—for example, the fact that the gay men described their female friends very positively.

The same could be the case for the heterosexual women, who did not report any negative feelings towards gay men or heterosexual women in any respect. The researcher reported that some gay men did report drawbacks and problems in relation to friendships with other gay men in a way that they probably would not have done if they had been interviewed by a gay man.

As for a credibility check, the researcher checked with other researchers to confirm that her analysis was grounded in the data.

Data analysis eventually revealed the following predominant themes and subthemes.

- 1 **Defining the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women** with the following subthemes:
 - a *a close friendship, a different friendship, a complete friendship, a friendship for sad and happy times, a friendship free from pressure, a friendship that is defined with kinship terms.*
- 2 **Friends as family**
 - a *subthemes for gay men*
 - i functions of family choice
 - a fun family
 - a supportive family
 - ii she is like a sister bud
 - iii friends or family as friends?
 - b *subthemes for heterosexual women*
 - i different use of kinship terminology for gay men and heterosexual women.

3 Valued characteristics of the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women, with the following subthemes for both:

- a openness
- b trust
- c social support
- d having fun
- e *subtheme for gay men*
 - i feeling more rounded
- f *subthemes for heterosexual women*
 - i being valued for their personality and not their sexuality
 - ii gay male friends as substitutes for heterosexual men.

4 Comparing this friendship to other friendships, with the following subthemes:

- a gay men: compare this friendship with gay male friends and with heterosexual men.
- b heterosexual women: compare this friendship with heterosexual women and with heterosexual men.

5 Participants' understanding of their social network's perception of the friendship between them, with the following subthemes:

- a the family's perception of friends
- b partner's perception of the friendship

The report consists of the analysis supported by quotes from the transcripts (e.g. page 14).

Similarly, when male participants were asked to draw similarities between their friendships with heterosexual women and other forms of friendship they had, their reaction was often a quite strong assertion that their friendship with heterosexual women was a different sort of friendship. For example, when Mike was asked if his friendship with Lucy was similar to his friendships with other gay men, he replied:

"Erm, how is it similar? I think it is different because I would rather talk to Lucy and ask her advice on really very-very personal things that I wouldn't actually ask gay men for."

(Grigoriou 2004: 14)

In conclusion, the research found that the participants were satisfied with their friendships for a number of reasons. For women, the lack of an underlying sexual agenda contributed to positive self-esteem, because they were valued for their personality and not their sexuality. The men expressed disappointment and lack of trust with the gay community and said that they trusted their female friends because they could rely on them. This last conclusion is contrary to previous research on the issue, but the researcher says her sample was small and only represents the people in the sample.

Methodological considerations

- 1 What could be the reason for choosing a thematic analysis of the interviews?
- 2 What is the advantage of making a verbatim transcript?
- 3 Why do you think the researcher revealed in the research report that she was a heterosexual woman who had a friendship with a gay man?
- 4 How did the researcher address issues of credibility?
- 5 How did the researcher address issues of trustworthiness?
- 6 Is it possible to generalize the findings from this study? Why or why not?