

Qualitative Interview

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- Interviews of all sorts are ubiquitous in all aspects of modern society.
- The qualitative interview is a common tool in psychology and social sciences research. It has potential for most forms of qualitative data analysis though it may not yield the natural conversation that researchers in some fields of qualitative research would seek.
- Typically a distinction is drawn between the open and the closed interview or the structured and the semi-/unstructured interview or the quantitative and the qualitative interview. Open-ended, semi-structured interviewing characterises qualitative data collection.
- Early examples of interviewing can be seen in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War (about 400 BC). However, interviewing as a social sciences research tool emerged with the work of the Victorian philanthropist Charles Booth in the late 1800s, when he began his research on poverty amongst Londoners. Freud, Piaget and Dichter are among the influential psychologists whose work was founded on interviewing.
- The use of sound recordings of interviews was accepted and fairly common by the mid-1950s.
- During qualitative interviewing the researcher needs to take the stance of an active listener, aware of the detail of what is said while steering the research along the pathways demanded by the research question.
- An interview guide is prepared to provide clarity as to the areas or questions to be covered. The 'guide' is an aid rather than something to be read out verbatim during the interview.
- It is important to consider the qualitative interview as a process which begins prior to the interviews and continues into the interview and beyond. A great deal of preparation goes into planning an interview and a great deal of skill

goes into the successful execution of an interview. Aspects of the research need active management by the researcher if the interview is to proceed to its maximum effect.

- It is possible to discern the use of more conversational styles of interviewing in some forms of qualitative research where the interactional nature of the interview is evident. This may be appropriate where the interview is to be analysed more or less as if it is conversation but less appropriate where, for example, the researcher is seeking to obtain a narrative life history. Views differ as to the suitability of interviews as the preferred kind of data as opposed to recordings of real-life conversation - discourse analysts have debated this issue, for example.
- Qualitative interviewing is a key aspect of interpretative phenomenological analysis. However, other analysis methods such as thematic analysis, grounded theory and discourse analysis may be used to effectively analyse qualitative interview data.
- Narrative analysis has its own preferred protocol (see Chapter 12) for interviewing so general advice about interviewing applies here too.

Qualitative research interviews may superficially have much in common with these other forms of interview but they have their own distinctive features and their own requirements.

Qualitative interviewing is a common qualitative data collection method though it is not a completely standardised approach. It characteristically involves questions and probes by the interviewer designed to encourage the interviewee to talk freely and extensively about the topic(s) defined by the researcher.

Success is not guaranteed as factors such as the skills of the interviewer, the topic and interviewee's potential to provide good qualitative data have a part to play.

The objectives of the research interview are not the same as, say, those of a journalistic interview and the contexts are very different. For example, (a) the qualitative researcher is bound to adhere to the values and ethics of research and

(b) the researcher has a responsibility to help develop theory out of the interview data – things which other forms of interviewing lack.

Of course, it is perfectly possible to carry out qualitative analyses of journalistic interviews if the research question allows this. Qualitative research is very flexible in terms of the data it uses.

Interviews are often described as varying between the structured and the unstructured.

In general, structured interviewing achieves the following:

The interviewer ensures that participants are chosen for the study who have the required characteristics to fulfil sampling requirements (i.e. a quota sampling procedure is being employed). Furthermore, since the interviewer actively recruits research participants at the time of the interview, reasonably large samples can be obtained and speedily.

Such interviews can be fairly alienating for the participants who may feel it impossible to effectively communicate their position. Equally, such methods effectively distance the researchers from the subject matter of their research. The use of a list of a limited number of reply alternatives (i.e. the multiple choice pre-coded answer format) allows for the data to be quickly transferred to a computer for analysis.

Provided that the necessary infrastructure is in place, the structured interview may be implemented as soon as the questionnaire design and general research plan are completed. The infrastructure would include a team of interviewers and data entry assistants as well as responsible researchers.

A research report can be delivered to commissioning clients in a matter of a few weeks or even days.

Qualitative interviews are time consuming for everyone involved and are more complex in terms of planning and recruiting suitable participants than structured interviews. Often qualitative interviews are referred to as semistructured.

In theory there is also the unstructured interview which lacks any preplanned structure. It is not usual for qualitative researchers to choose to collect their data using unstructured interviews as they are something of a oxymoron. Is it really possible to conduct an interviewing with no preplanning?

However, the semi-structured interview can vary enormously in terms of the amount of pre-structuring. The whole point of the qualitative interview is that it generally generates extensive and rich data from participants in the study

the qualitative interview is built on the principle that the interviewee does most of the talking – the researcher merely steers and guides the interviewee, probes for more information and interjects in other ways when necessary. It is not generally expected that the interviewer will answer questions – that is the role of the interviewee.

Equally, the interviewee does not ask the interviewer personal questions of the sort that the interviewer is free to pose. That is not in the ‘rules’ of the interview. The interviewee can be asked to talk at some length about matters that are difficult for them – perhaps because they have not thought about the issue, perhaps because the topic of the interview is embarrassing, and so forth. The task of the interviewer is also a demanding one.

This information has to be absorbed and retained so that probes using this new information can be inserted wherever necessary.

Although a sound recorder is important to most qualitative interviewers, this does not lighten the burden of absorbing, understanding and reflecting upon what the interviewee has to say during the course of the interview.

The qualitative interview, like all forms of research methods, requires the researcher to develop understanding of the method, experience of using the method, and familiarity with analysing the data gathered using the method. Some researchers have remarked on the conversational nature of the qualitative interview. Burgess (1984, p. 102) referred to them as 'conversations with a purpose'. This, although a common view, is questionable. It is wrong to imagine that qualitative interviewing is easy in the sense that conversation is easy.

TABLE 3.1 A comparison of structured versus qualitative interviewing

Structured interview	Qualitative interview
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The interview uses a pre-written list of 'closed' questions which is not usually departed from and the questions are asked in a standard fashion.2. Answers are usually selected from a pre-specified list given to the participant or, alternatively, the interviewer classifies the answer according to a pre-specified scheme.3. The structured interview facilitates a quantitative analysis.4. Structured interviews are relatively short as well as being fairly predictable in duration.5. Structured interviews are not normally recorded.6. The high degree of structuring facilitates reliability, validity and similar assessments.7. The interviewer in the structured interview is basically a question asker and answer recorder.8. The structured interview is driven by the researcher's agenda and is based on prior knowledge and theory. That is, the structured interview is not generally exploratory.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Although the researcher usually has a list of 'areas' to explore through questioning, there is no rigid structure and flexibility is vital.2. The researcher wishes to encourage 'open' answers in which the interviewee provides elaborate and detailed answers.3. The qualitative interview normally does not lend itself to quantitative analysis methods.4. Qualitative interviewers encourage 'rich' detailed replies leading to lengthy interviews of a somewhat unpredictable duration.5. Some form of tape or digital recording is virtually essential for most qualitative interviews.6. The assessment of the reliability and validity of a qualitative interview is a complex issue and not easily addressed. However, see Box 3.1.7. The qualitative interview requires the interviewer to be an active listener concentrating on what the interviewee says while formulating questions to help the interviewee expand on and clarify what has already been said.8. The qualitative interview is largely steered by the responses of the interviewee which the interviewer may explore further with the use of careful questioning. The qualitative interview seeks to explore the thinking of the interviewee.

- 9. Interviewees have little choice other than to keep to the agenda as set by the researcher. There is limited or no scope for idiosyncratic responses to be made. There may be a somewhat token opportunity for the interviewee to ask the interviewer questions or to express additional thoughts.
- 10. Standardisation of the questions asked and the possible answers is a characteristic of structured interviewing.
- 11. Inflexible.
- 12. The interviewer is often a 'hired assistant' rather than someone involved in the planning of the research.
- 13. Some would suggest that structured interviews can best be used for hypothesis testing purposes.
- 14. Repeat interviewing is uncommon in structured interviews except for longitudinal studies.

Explore the framing of the interview.

- 9. Sometimes it is suggested that qualitative interviewing encourages 'rambling' answers which may provide a wider perspective on the subject matter of the interview.
- 10. A lack of standardisation is inevitable in qualitative interviews and the interviewer expects to rephrase questions, generate new questions in response to the interviewee's answers, probe the meaning of what the interviewee says, and so forth.
- 11. Flexible.
- 12. In many cases it is ideal if the qualitative interview is conducted by the researcher. This allows the researcher to respond quickly to matters emerging in the interviews and make changes if necessary.
- 13. Some would suggest that qualitative interviews are exploratory and more to do with hypothesis generation than hypothesis testing.
- 14. Additional or repeat interviewing is appropriate in qualitative interviewing as it provides the researcher with an opportunity to reformulate their ideas or 'regroup'. Repeat interviewing allows the researcher to check their analysis against the perceptions of the participants in their research.

TABLE 3.2 Stages in the qualitative interview process

Prior to the interview	During the interview	What happens after the interview?
1 Research conceptualisation and development	1 Recording the interview	1 Support for the interviewer
2 Preparation of the interview guide (interview schedule)	2 Orientation stage of the interview	2 Data protection and management
3 Suitability of the sample for in-depth interviewing	3 What qualitative interviewers 'do' when interviewing	3 Data transcription
4 Interview trialling (piloting)	4 Bringing the interview to a conclusion	
5 Inter-interview comparison		
6 Communication between interviewers		
7 Sample recruitment and selection		
8 Participant management		
9 The preparation/selection of the interview location		

How to conduct qualitative interviews

Good interviewing skills together with careful preparation are the major aspects of success in qualitative interviewing. It is one of the crucial features of qualitative research that the researcher uses extensive, rich, dense and detailed data no matter its source.

Consequently, the efforts of the interviewer have to focus on encouraging this descriptive richness. While training and experience are needed in order to carry out an interview well, success involves many different features of the data collection process other than just the interview itself. The researcher needs to be in command of all stages of the research process which include recruitment and retaining of participants.

The qualitative interview is very flexible and it can be carried out in a variety of ways to meet the demands of a particular research study. The following indicate some of the dimensions on which qualitative interviews vary:

Traditionally interviews are seen as a dyad – the interviewee plus the interviewer. Qualitative researchers are much more flexible than this in terms of the format of interviews. For example, the focus group is a sort of group interview which may involve more than one interviewer and two or more interviewees.

Equally, qualitative interviews may be carried out with more than one interviewee at the same time such as when partners (e.g. married couples) are the subject of the research. The interviewer–interviewee dyad may not always be the best in all circumstances. Indeed, it may not be possible always to adopt the traditional structure – for example, other family members may wish to join in.

Interviews do not have to be carried out on a face-to-face basis. The telephone interview is a feasible substitute in some circumstances. It has the big advantage of being economical in terms of time and money. There is no travelling between interviews, for example, which can be very time consuming and not every person who agrees to be interviewed can be relied on to make the appointment. Some researchers claim that the telephone interview may be useful where a highly sensitive topic is being discussed but, equally, it may be the case that the telephone interview seems a little casual and superficial when very sensitive topics are being raised.

Each circumstance is different and the researcher needs to consider many factors when reaching a decision about the style of interviewing to employ. One important and major criticism of telephone interviews –poor response rates – actually has little or no relevance to qualitative research since sampling in qualitative research is usually for theoretical purposes rather than in order to represent the characteristics of the population from which a sample is taken.

For some researchers, especially those who approach research from a mixed method strategy (i.e. being willing to combine qualitative and quantitative methods in a creative fusion), there may be advantages in using both fairly structured questions in combination with relatively unstructured ones.

In this way, fairly simple data (e.g. demographic and other background details) may be quickly collected while at the same time providing the opportunity to allow the participant to discuss their feelings, experiences, life histories and so forth in detail.

The totally unstructured interview is rarely if ever found in qualitative research and it is wrong to imagine there are successful interviews where the researcher has no particular agenda in mind. The qualitative or semi-structured interview, because of its very nature, demands that the researcher has good question-asking skills together with well-developed listening skills. Asking good questions is impossible without having absorbed and understood what has gone before in the interview.

Preparatory stage for the qualitative interview

Step 1

Research conceptualisation and development: It is difficult to generalise about how research ideas develop. However, it is always important to develop clarity about the objectives and purposes of one's research as soon as possible in the research process. Now this is not to suggest that the researcher has to have complete clarity about the research topic under consideration. There are many circumstances in which the researcher needs to gather data simply to understand a phenomenon better: that is, the extant research in the field may be poorly developed and the interviews are needed to shed light on the topic in question. The qualitative researcher needs, at this stage, to develop a clear understanding of why qualitative interviews are required to meet the objectives of the study. Now this justification does not need to be elaborate but a choice has been made and the researcher should be able to articulate the basis their decision.

Step 2:

Standard practice in the use of qualitative interviewing dictates that a skeletal outline of the interview should be prepared prior to beginning the main data collection phase.

Such an outline structure is referred to as the interview guide. This may be as simple as a list of areas or topics to be covered or it may list the questions. Of course, topics may be covered and questions answered during the course of the interview without any direct prompt from the researcher which means that the interviewer needs to be flexible as to whether each question on the interview guide needs to be asked directly. Asking a question when the participant has already answered it in response to earlier questioning can be perceived by the interviewee as lack of interest on the part of the interviewer rather than their inexperience.

The guide may be adapted in the light of experience – perhaps an important but unanticipated issue seems to be emerging in the interviews which is felt should be systematically included in subsequent interviews.

For inexperienced interviewers, there is a danger that the interview guide becomes overly the focus of the researcher's attention to the detriment of the interview's quality.

The primary focus of the qualitative interview is on what the interviewee has to say and ensuring that sufficient supplementary questions/probes are introduced to fully explore the issue from the participant's perspective.

In other words, the qualitative interviewer is an active listener. The active listener needs to (a) absorb as much of what is being said as possible and (b) formulate further questions to 'fill the gaps' in the interviewee's replies where their account is unclear, contradictory or too short, for example.

The interview guide provides the structure through which the richness of the participant's replies is maximized. The purpose of the qualitative interview and its success lie in the richness of the data which emerges.

In summary: The interview guide should structure the questions or topics to be covered in a natural, sensible and helpful sequence. This, of course, may need to be varied in each interview as, for example, it is pointless and counterproductive to ask a question when the required information has already been mentioned by the participant.

Furthermore, a disorganised sequence of questioning makes the interview difficult for both the interviewer and interviewee. There is a considerable amount of memory work during an interview and a logical and natural structure can help both parties in an interview.

Even if one is conducting a qualitative interview it may be desirable to collect simple basic and routine information using direct and structured questioning. Basic demographic information such as age, gender, educational qualifications, occupation and so forth may be effectively collected using such structured methods. This is not a recommendation but merely a possible resource for the researcher. There are dangers in that it may set up an atmosphere of short questions and answers. Furthermore, in some contexts, the researcher might wish to explore in depth matters such as education which, in other contexts, would be regarded as relatively unimportant.

The interview guide is not a list of all of the obvious questions or topics which might be of interest. Research is carried out for a purpose and the interview needs to be informed by the questions and ideas guiding the research.

It is simply impossible to include every question that might be thought up about a topic. There are practical limits to the length of any interview and two hours or so is the likely maximum length tolerable. Much longer than that and considerable strain is placed on both interviewer and interviewee.

Step 3

Suitability of the sample for qualitative interviewing

It is difficult, but not impossible, to carry out an effective qualitative interview with certain types of individuals – for example, young children – but the use of language appropriate for the group in question can certainly help. However, the richness of response required in the qualitative interview may simply not emerge with such groups no matter what adjustments the researcher makes.

The qualitative approach, in this case, may not be appropriate. The advice of knowledgeable informants about such groups together with pilot interviews may be helpful in planning such difficult research.

Step 4

Interview trialling (piloting)

One cannot guarantee that the early interviews in a series will produce data of the quality expected. There are many reasons for this, including the skill of the interviewer as well as the adequacy of the interview guide. For this reason, it is a wise step to try out one's interviewing style and procedures in advance of the main data collection phase. This is the pilot study stage. Such an early trial can involve either:

- ❑ a number of practice interviews as part of gaining experience and identifying problems; or
- ❑ beginning the main data collection but recognising that the early interviews may have problems which may need to be addressed by modifying one's procedures.

The choice between these two depends very much on the scarcity of suitable participants. Where participants of the right type are hard to obtain then even inadequate interviews might be of value. Of course, trialling interviews is best done by obtaining the comments of both the interviewees and others such as members of the research team or a research supervisor.

Step 5

Inter-interview comparison

Interviews are usually part of a series of interviews rather than one-off events in research. As a consequence, the interviewer will have completed other interviews or be aware of interviews that colleagues have done. Issues which have emerged in these earlier interviews must impinge on the current interview.

The interviewer may have already incorporated these topics into the new interview but sometimes things which have emerged before may not emerge in the current interview. The researcher needs to consider this and possibly seek the reasons why this is the case by carefully questioning. This across-the-board view of a series of interviews adds to the complexity of the interviewer's task.

Step 6

Communication between interviewers

Just how many different researchers will be conducting the interviews? Using two or more different interviewers produces problems in terms of ensuring similarity and evenness of coverage across interviews. How are developments to be communicated between the interviewers? It is possibly worth considering the use of much more structured interviews if the logistics of using several interviewers become too complex.

However, this may well be problematic and there may not be any enthusiasm for, or advantage in, a structured approach.

Step 7

Sample recruitment and selection

Although conventional random sampling is very unusual in qualitative research, nevertheless the researcher needs to employ a strategy to recruit appropriate sorts of participants.

Sometimes this strategy may be relatively simple where selection is not restricted to a special group of participants. Where a specialised group of individuals is required then more care and ingenuity have to be exercised. For example, a health psychologist may be interested in people with a particular type of medical condition (cancer, chronic pain, carers of persons with dementia and so forth)

Step 8

Participant management

One of the frustrating aspects of qualitative interviewing is the extent to which the researcher is dependent on the participant being at a certain place at a certain time and happy to be interviewed.

very easy to waste time and effort setting up interview appointments only to find that the interviewee fails to turn up. Now this may be because of all sorts of reasons. It is not appropriate to assume that such no-shows indicate that the would-be participant is not really interested in taking part. Sometimes they may simply forget.

So it is important to 'keep the participant on-board' during the period before the appointment for the interview. This involves such things as:

- ❑ writing letters thanking the participant for agreeing to take part while at the same time reminding them of the date, time and place of the interview;
- ❑ using courtesy telephone calls the day before or the morning of the interview to remind the participant of the interview and to check whether any problems or issues have arisen;
- ❑ providing the participants with some background details about the research and its purpose together with a description of the ethical arrangements involved in the research. Participants who lack such information may get the wrong idea about the nature of the research and back-out for the wrong reasons.

Step 9

The preparation/selection of the interview location

There are many potential locations for research interviews, each with its advantages and risks. Precisely what the possibilities are depends somewhat on the individuals being studied and judgements as to what is appropriate.

The lengthy nature of the qualitative interview means that one would rarely interview participants in the street or on the doorstep as commonly occurs in market research interviews.

One obvious choice is for the interviewee to travel to the researcher's workplace. Among the problems with this is that the researcher is relying on the participant to do all of the work in meeting the appointment.

There may be some complex logistics involved which result in the loss of some interviews.

❑ There are other difficulties such as:

❑ the need to find a suitable uninterrupted, quiet place; the communication problems which might be involved in ensuring that all relevant colleagues are informed that the interview is taking place – they need to know where to direct the interviewee when they arrive, for example;

❑ some offices may appear to be cold and sterile places in which to conduct interviews on sensitive topics;

❑ offices tend to be available during the working day which may be when the interviewee is not available because of their job

- ❑ There may be too many distractions from children, animals, etc. There may be other people around in front of whom the interviewee might not wish to discuss certain problems – or, alternatively, the other people might want to contribute to the interview.
- ❑ It is more difficult to set up recording equipment in someone's home since setting up has to be done on the spot – or there may be a canary singing in the background, making it harder to transcribe the recording.

The qualitative interview stage

While a good interview involves the interviewee seemingly doing most of the work, in reality the interviewer has to maintain a great deal of involvement in what is happening during the interview. In particular, the qualitative interview is highly dependent on the researcher's quick absorption of the detail of what is being said. Kvale describes the good interviewer in the following terms:

The interviewer must continually make quick choices about what to ask and how; which aspects of a subject's answer to follow up – and which not; which answers to interpret – and which not. Interviewers should be knowledgeable in the topics investigated, master conversational skills, and be proficient in language with an ear for their subject's linguistic style. The interviewer should have a sense for good stories and be able to assist the subjects in the unfolding of their narratives. (Kvale, 1996, p. 147)

- Step 1: Recording the interview
- Few authorities dispute that qualitative interviews should be recorded in their entirety. Recordings of interviews are critical to producing good quality transcriptions. The following are key considerations:

- ● Do *not* assume that it is sufficient to speak into a voice recorder to check the quality of the recorder. A recorder which is adequate for individuals to use to make memos, etc. may not be suitable to record an interview which is a much more complex recording situation. Always try out the equipment in a situation as close as possible to the research setting.
- Use the best quality recorder available since high quality recordings both save time in the long run and help maximise transcript quality.
- If one is transcribing large amounts of interview material, then a recorder which facilitates back-and-forward movement through the recording is a big advantage. However, there are computer programs which can help with this when used with a foot control.
- It is useful to be able to monitor the sound quality during the course of the interview which means that a recorder capable of simultaneous recording and playback through headphones/earphones is a boon. It also means that the risk of nothing being recorded because of operator error is minimal.
- Digital recordings are generally to be preferred.
- Take precautions to make sure that you have the capacity to record a lengthy interview on your recorder.
- The quality of the microphone used will affect the quality of the recording. The use of an external microphone is usually to be preferred as it ensures a better quality recording of conversation. There are some microphones which are particular good at recording more than one individual.
- The quality of the recording will be affected by how close participants are to the microphone so try to ensure that all participants are seated near to it. Generally, faced with a choice, it is better to maximise the quality of the recording of the interviewee than the interviewer.
- Extraneous noise in the environment affects the clarity of the recording. Directional microphones may help if this is a problem.

- Try to avoid setting up the microphone in such a way that it picks up sounds caused by the movements of the interviewer or interviewee. Moving papers on the desk on which the microphone is placed may result in parts of the recording being impossible to transcribe.
- Stereo recordings are usually easier to transcribe.
- Video recording is more difficult and also more intrusive on the interview situation than sound recording. The interviewee may be reluctant to be recorded on video because they feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. This suggests that you should think very carefully before using video (and perhaps try out video as a preliminary before carrying out the research) when investigating highly sensitive research topics since videoing may exacerbate the situation. If your research does not really require video, it is probably best avoided. However, if your analysis is to involve the transcription of gesture and gaze then the use of video is essential.

Step 2

Orientation stage of the interview The major spoken contribution of the researcher in a qualitative interview is the introductory stage of the interview. In this, the interviewer begins the process of engaging with the interviewee by:

- ● introducing themselves;
- explaining the purpose of the interview and what it is hoped to achieve during the session;
- indicating the typical amount of time the interview will take;
- explaining the ethical basis of the research in general and in particular explaining that they, the interviewee, is free to withdraw at any stage and ask for their data to be destroyed;
- allowing an opportunity to the interviewee to ask any questions before the interview starts;
- throughout this process encouraging the interviewee to speak and respond extensively;
- explaining that it is the interviewee's views, perceptions, responses, etc. that the researcher is interested in and that time is not constrained in terms of giving answers.

Step 3

What qualitative researchers 'do' when interviewing The role of the interviewer in qualitative research can be best understood by considering what the researcher does and does not do during an interview:

- The interviewer does *not* normally take detailed notes. The detail often required for many types of qualitative analysis can only be achieved using a sound recording together with careful transcription. Generally speaking, the most detailed notes are inadequate for this purpose. Some researchers may prefer to take notes as an aid to their memory but this is not a requisite. Some, however, would question whether note-taking is appropriate during the qualitative interview. The case against note-taking is that it takes up some of the interviewer's attention during the interview and that for the interviewee it may be distracting. For example, it may appear to signal that the interviewee has just said something particularly 'noteworthy'. In contrast, it might be thought that note-taking is part of the interviewer's active synthesis of what is being said during the interview. For the novice researcher, taking notes complicates an already difficult task and, perhaps, should be avoided until the other skills involved in qualitative interviewing have been mastered. If notes are to be taken, the question arises about what these should consist of. If the notes are seen as purely an aide memoire then it becomes obvious that things such as names and dates should be noted down as one may refer to particular family members by name or sort out the chronological order of events.
- The qualitative interviewer normally does *not* do a lot of talking during the course of the interview itself. It can be a sign of problems in the interview or inexperience.
- The qualitative interviewer does not interrupt the interviewee's replies. Of course, accidental interruptions can happen but generally the interviewer should defer to the interviewee in these circumstances.
- During a qualitative interview, once the scene has been set and the arrangements clarified, the researcher is largely listening to the replies to the questions and issues raised by the interviewer. The direction of the interview is largely in the control of the interviewee though the interviewer may have to intervene

Step 4

Bringing the interview to a conclusion The end of a qualitative interview is not signalled simply by the final topic on the interview guide being reached. The satisfaction of the researcher and the interviewee is an additional important criterion. So there needs to be some consideration of the interview experience as part of the process of concluding the interview. It is always wise, at this stage, to leave the voice recorder running given that important information often emerges at this stage. The following are some of the steps which may be associated with the finishing of the interview:

- The interviewer may wish to take a short 'time-out' break to review the interview guide in the light of how the interview proceeded. Topics not adequately covered may be returned to at this stage.
- The interviewee may be given the opportunity to discuss things that they think are of some relevance but which have not emerged thus far in the interview.
- The interviewer should thank the interviewee formally.
- The interviewer should enter a debriefing stage in which the interviewee's experience of the interview is discussed. This may involve (a) allowing the interviewee to answer any questions they wish about the research; (b) checking that the interviewee remains happy that the recording can be part of the research; (c) providing names and contact details of organisations, etc. which might be able to deal with issues of a counselling or therapeutic nature arising from the interview (a psychologist must be qualified in order to offer such support and researchers are not in that position); and (d) obtaining feedback about the interview content and interviewing methods employed.

Box 3.3 explains how quality can be achieved in qualitative interviews.

What happens following the qualitative interview?

- There are a number of post-interview considerations to bear in mind: Support for the interviewer While not all qualitative interviews involve sensitive and perhaps distressing material, some of them do. Interviews with victims of sexual abuse, sexual abusers, domestic abusers, those suffering bereavements and so forth all have potential for distressing the interviewer as well as the interviewee. Of course, during the interview,
- the interviewer avoids demonstrating their feelings and emotions. However, these will remain as baggage after the interview is over. How are they best dealt with? One approach is for the interviewer to have a confidant with which he/she may work through the interview experience. This may be little other than just someone to talk to. Having 'buddies' who have experience of similar interviews or are currently involved in the same sort of interview has its advantages.

- Data protection and management Usually as part of the ethical considerations for qualitative research, plans are presented or requirements imposed about matters such as the safe storage of the interview recording and its eventual disposal. These should be followed at the appropriate time. z
- Data transcription Issues surrounding the transcription of recorded data and methods of transcription are discussed in Chapter 6.

How to analyze a qualitative interview

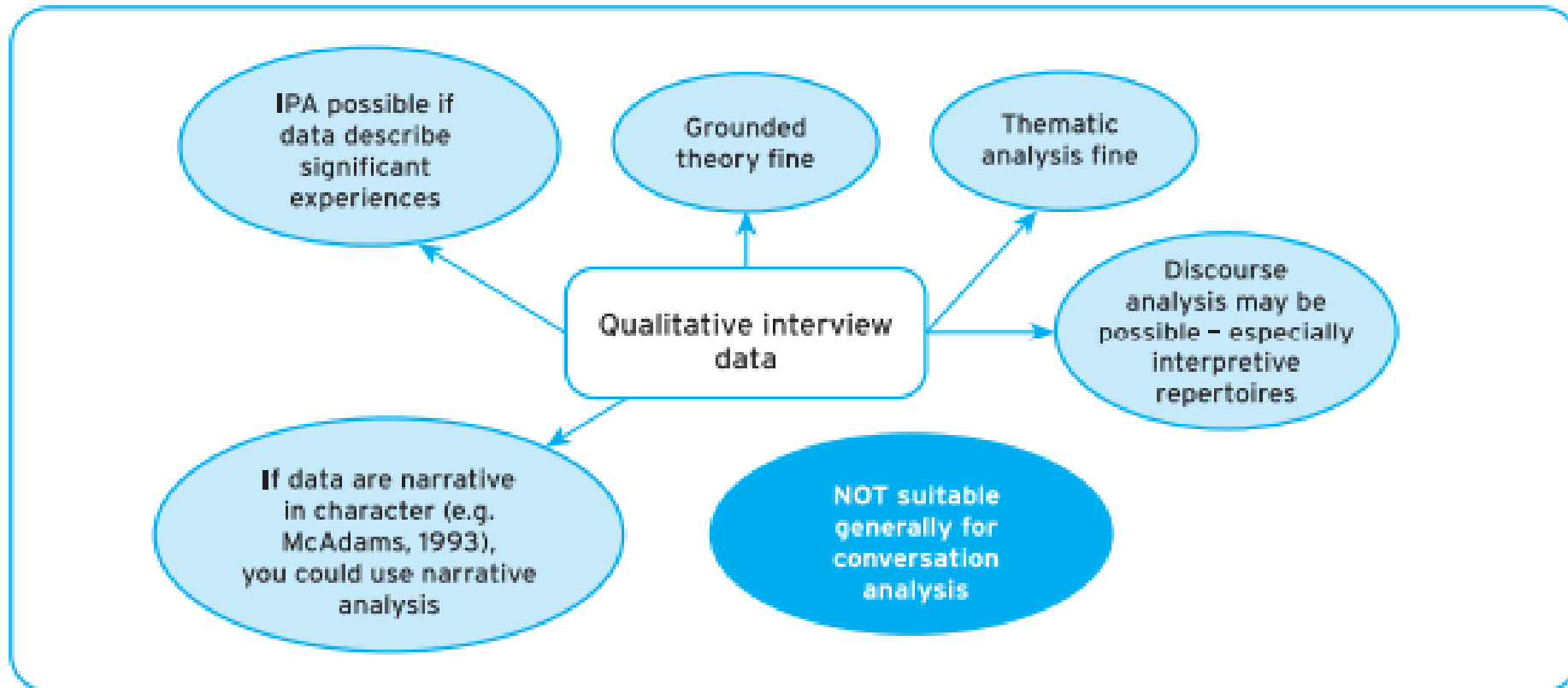


FIGURE 3.1 How to analyse qualitative interview data

Evaluation of qualitative interviewing

- The ideal circumstances in which to use a qualitative interview are where the experiences, thoughts, life histories and feelings of an individual (as opposed to individuals as part of a group) are the researcher's primary focus. The interview may, of course, be part of a series of interviews with different people allowing for comparisons between different participants or different types of participants.
- The qualitative interview might be regarded as one of the archetypal data collection methods in qualitative research in general. Nevertheless, the qualitative interview is not always the preferred source of qualitative data for all qualitative analyses.
- So, although the qualitative interview would be the data collection method of preference for interpretative phenomenological analysis because of its capacity to provide detailed accounts of experiences, it would not normally be the preferred method for conversation analysis given that research interviews are not the ordinary conversations of ordinary people.

- The apparent subjectivity of the qualitative interview is not a particular problem in qualitative research terms – indeed it is an advantage. The ethos of quantitative research may be to seek to capture an objective reality but this is not the case for qualitative research.
- The qualitative interview has advantages over focus groups (Chapter 4) in that it allows the researcher substantial control over the data collected. In contrast, the focus group hands even more control to the group under the researcher's guidance.
- Like most other qualitative data collection methods, the qualitative interview is extremely flexible and is not necessarily constrained by a conventional structure.

- In qualitative research, qualitative interviews may be combined with other data collection methods. An obvious example of this is their use in the context of ethnographic or participant observation approaches (Chapter 5).
- The qualitative interview can be used in a variety of ways in relation to research. For instance, many researchers have used the interview as part of a preliminary, exploratory, stage for their research especially when the topic is a relatively new one and the researcher cannot rely on the inspiration of the previous research literature on which to build their ideas.
- However, it is wrong to think of the qualitative interview as merely an ideagenerating technique. It may be useful used in this way but this use tends to undermine the qualitative interview since it implies that there are better methods of doing the 'real' research. The qualitative interview can provide data which is, in itself, sufficient for the purposes of the research.
- The resource-intensive nature of qualitative interviewing should always be a consideration. This, in the end, may lead to the view that the qualitative interview is the only practicable choice to achieve the researcher's aims. On the other hand, the researcher should question why it is that they need to use the qualitative interview.
- There are many circumstances in which there are no feasible alternative ways of data collection. For example, it is not possible to do observationbased studies of contraception use.