41

The Art of Interviewing

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Street Corner Society, first published in 1943, is one of the classic urban ethnographies. In the Appendix, William Whyte discusses some of the problems he encountered in doing the field research, including difficulties in getting people to talk to him about sensitive issues. His key informant, Doc, gave him some timely advice.

> Go easy on that 'who' 'what' 'why' 'when' 'where' stuff, Bill. You ask those questions and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answers in the long run without ever having to ask those questions. (Whyte 1955: 303)

Doc was right, of course, but the problem facing undergraduates who are required to carry out research for a dissertation or extended project is one of time. You simply do not have enough time to hang around in the field, working on being accepted by the group you want to study. So I write this chapter in the expectation that you have probably already left things just a little late – and we shall indeed consider some of the basic *why*, *who*, *what*, *how* and *then what* questions of interviewing. Research in human geography embraces both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Interview methods include one-to-one conversations between researcher and informant, and small group interviews or focus groups, where the researcher will facilitate discussions between six to eight people. I shall discuss both approaches in this chapter but will concentrate more on one-to-one interviews since these represent a basic methodological tool for qualitative research.

Qualitative field research has a long and respectable tradition in sociology and anthropology. Within geography it is most closely associated with cultural and social geography (see Limb and Dwyer 2001). The basis of qualitative research is an emphasis on people as creative human beings who act in the world on the basis of their knowledge and understanding of the society and the institutions which structure their lives and which, in turn, they are able to shape and change. If that sounds a bit of a mouthful, what it means in practice is a commitment to understanding people's experiences through listening to the ways in which they describe and account for aspects of their lives and activities. Not surprisingly, therefore, qualitative methods provide more complex interpretations of feelings and actions than do quantitative studies. The data are usually linguistic rather than statistical; contextual rather than cut out from everyday life; and researchers are engaged with their informants rather than separated from them, as in a questionnaire survey.

What do you need to be a good interviewer? In the jargon of American sociology, 'successful interviewing is not unlike carrying on an unthreatening, self-controlled, supportive, polite and cordial interaction in everyday life' (Lofland 1971: 90). In plain English, if you like talking to people – you don't go around shouting at them, putting them down, ridiculing them or not listening to what they say – you have the potential to become a good interviewer. The art of interviewing is to be able to conduct a conversation in such a way that the person you are talking to is able freely to express her or his opinions and feelings while, at the same time, enabling you to meet your own research objectives. It is not uncommon to come away from a fascinating conversation with someone about life, the universe and everything, to use Douglas Adams's famous phrase from *The Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy*, only to realize that you still do not know whether that individual really does believe that the answer is 42! So the goal is to achieve an end result which satisfies both of you, informant and researcher. What follows is some practical advice on how to achieve that result.

Why Use Interviews as the Basis for Dissertation Research?

In order to reach your decision, you must consider the following points:

- the nature of your research proposal; your objectives;
- alternative methods of achieving your objectives;
- the constraints that will affect the ways in which you can achieve those objectives.

If your research proposal is concerned with aspects of human geography which require that you make interpretations of the feelings, values, motivations and constraints that help shape people's geographical behaviour, or you need to understand the discourses through which different social groups make sense of complex issues, then interviewing may be an appropriate research technique. Whatever the topic, you need to consider whether interviews would provide the best way of achieving your objectives. Would a questionnaire survey be more appropriate? The answer will be no, if you want to concentrate on how individuals describe and account for their own experiences; if you want to understand the complexities of the problem rather than reducing it to a set of key explanatory variables; if your aim is to undertake a case study rather than a representative sample of a wider population.

Among the major constraints you will face will be those of *access* and *time*. Can you get hold of the people you want to talk to? It is often very difficult, for example, to gain access to members of elite groups, such as the managing directors of multinational companies or the very rich. Time is also important. If it will take a year to win the trust of the community you want to work with, then it may not be possible to continue with the project. The best kind of qualitative research builds over time with the researcher moving backwards and forwards from the field to the interpretation of data and back into the field for more interviews, informed by the experiences of what has gone before. Bear in mind that the transcription and interpretation of interview data take much longer than for statistical data; writing up is a more creative and interactive process than that associated with quantitative analysis. Students often ask how many interviews are 'enough'? It is a balance between resources (time, money) on the one hand, and intellectual content on the other. All qualitative researchers can describe the moment when they stop hearing new stories; in other words, the bounds of the subject have been reached.

What Kind of Interviews Will You Conduct?

Having done the background reading and formulated your research objectives, you will now need to decide:

- who you will interview;

- how you will make contact;
- what kind of interview you will conduct – formal or informal; one-to-one and/or focus group.

The selection of interviewees will be determined theoretically by the nature of your project and practically by the relations you are able to establish in the field. Let us take an example. The question of fox hunting has dogged New Labour since it came to power in 1997, stimulating some of the largest protests about countryside politics witnessed in London for many decades. You are interested in the cultural politics of the issue. On a theoretical level, you know that ideological distinctions between 'city' and 'country' are embedded in English culture, and that hunting is a practice which expresses the material bases of class and power that bind city and country together. Furthermore, the animal rights movement and the hunt saboteurs are engaged in actions which mobilize around ethical issues but which also have class-based politics at their core. Media coverage has been intense – great pictures of 'the country coming to town' as Barbours and Green Wellies march down Oxford Street.

You may decide to study the question from the rural perspective and focus on a locality where hunting is part of the way of life. Or you may be more interested in understanding the nature of protest from the perspective of the animal rights activists. In either case, your aim will be to adopt a strategy of *theoretical sampling*: your choice of informants is made on this basis rather than on random sampling from a whole population. If the topic is a sensitive one, it may be better to interview individuals on a one-to-one basis. On the other hand, if you are most interested in listening to people debate among themselves about the reasons why they believe hunting is right or wrong, then running a focus group with hunt protesters might be better. The number of people you interview or the number of focus groups you run is less important than the quality of information you gain from your interviewees. As you proceed, you may well find that new ideas and issues are emerging from the field research, and that the right to hunt is actually subordinate to a much bigger argument about rights and obligations, especially how individual freedoms – to engage in a sport which has only very recently been socially constructed as 'cruel and unnatural', or to engage in active, political protest without being threatened by police in riot gear and arrested on a 'terrorism' charge – are being renegotiated.

Figure 41.1 The country comes to town.
Photograph: Richard Watt Photography.

Normally, you should first contact your interviewee by letter, by telephone or through a personal introduction to make an appointment. With ethnographic research generally, the best idea is to make an initial contact with someone who might be able to provide you with other introductions – these people are often members of community-based organizations, for example. This kind of contact technique is often described as *snowballing* – inevitably, you find that you get passed on and the list of 'people you really should talk to' grows at quite an alarming rate. Say who you are and who recommended that you talk to the interviewee. Say what you are doing; try to make it interesting to the other person – why should someone want to give up their time to talk to a geography student? But don't make any rash promises about being able to change the world as a result of your dissertation findings. You will also need to think about problems of confidentiality – people will need to be reassured about what will happen to the information they might give you. If you are interviewing one-to-one, you need to decide where to conduct the interview – in people's homes or offices, or in a public space? If running a focus group, can you find a space such as a room in the local library or community centre where people can come together?

Qualitative researchers normally make distinctions between *formal* and *informal* interviews (Burgess 1984; Limb and Dwyer 2001). Formal interviews most closely resemble questionnaire-based interviews in that the researcher has a clear agenda of issues that he or she wishes to cover. These will usually be written down beforehand, not as set questions but as important topics to be discussed. Occasionally, it is useful to send your interviewee the schedule before you meet to give him or her time to prepare. This also saves time – a useful point if you are dealing with very busy people. Similarly, focus group sessions are designed around an agenda of topics to be discussed by the group which are introduced by the facilitator. Formal interviews differ from questionnaires in one very important respect. The sequence of topics covered in individual and group interviews is determined through the interaction of researcher and informants. The important thing is to go with the flow of the interview, being flexible about the order in which topics are discussed but making sure that, by the end of the meeting, you have met all your objectives. Formal interviews give you the security of knowing that you have covered the full range of issues with all your informants. By contrast, informal interviews much more closely resemble ordinary conversations. The aim is to discover how individuals describe and make associations between different kinds of ideas and experiences. These interviews tend to be much longer and more tangential to the problem. But informal interviews can be full of insights into the life and personality of the person you are talking to.

How to Conduct a Successful Interview

We need to think about three issues here:

- the interpersonal skills you need to conduct the interview;
- different ways of asking questions;
- the recording of information.

Interviewing skills should be learned and practised before you go into the field. They are as much part of the geographical repertoire of research techniques as learning how to use a depth-integrating sampler. The skills needed for individual and group interviews are the same. Taking *interpersonal skills* first, the fundamental goal is to create a rapport between yourself and the interviewee(s). If they like you, find talking to you a pleasant and interesting experience and trust you, then the interview will go well. You can do several things to ease the transition from 'stranger' to 'friendly acquaintance'. Prepare yourself for the interview by being sensitive to the expectations of the person you will be meeting. It is not a very good idea to arrive for an interview with the chief planning officer of a local authority in worn-out jeans and dirty trainers. Neither would it really be appropriate to interview adolescents in the neighbourhood gang in your most formal clothes. Communication covers much more than the language we use in talking to one another. Non-verbal communication through our body language is just as power-

ful. Think about your posture in the interview. Are you sitting hunched up with arms and legs crossed, clutching your notebook and pencil as if your life depended on them? Your nervousness will communicate itself to your interviewee, who may begin to wonder what is wrong with them – or you. Be relaxed in your posture but continue to convey interest and attention. Make lots of eye contact with the other person – acknowledge that they exist – but also be careful that it does not get out of hand and you end up interrogating them with piercing stares or inviting them to bed! Practise a range of facial expressions in the mirror or on a friend and see how you express interest, pleasure, confusion and uncertainty. See how you take the initiative in asking questions or changing the topic of conversation. In a group context, use your eye contact to engage with all the members of the group, especially those who look as if they need drawing into the discussion.

In the interview itself, you need to think about two related issues: the ways in which you *phrase your questions* and the *pace of the interview*. It is possible to ask questions in different ways that will give rather different kinds of answers. *Closed questions* with the familiar 'what, where, when, how often, how much, who, why' require that the informant give you pieces of information and often leave all the initiative with you. *Open questions* such as 'tell me about...' and 'in what ways do you feel...' are invitations to encourage communication. A good interviewer will use both kinds of phrasings. Perhaps even more importantly, a good interviewer will learn to listen not only to what he or she is being told, but also to how it is being said and what lies underneath the remarks. Listening closely enables you to handle the different kinds of silences which arise in conversations and to pace the interview. When I began my research career, I conducted interviews with local government officers. Playing the tape-recordings afterwards, I was dismayed by the number of times I jumped in with the next question rather than giving the interviewee time to develop his or her point. The majority of inexperienced interviewers find silences difficult to deal with. It is a reflection of their own anxieties about the interview. Try to identify what kind of silence you are dealing with and then respond accordingly. For example:

- Is it a thoughtful silence? In which case, make the appropriate 'mms' and 'aahs' to ease the interview on.
- Is it a stuck silence? The informant is having difficulty with the question you have asked, perhaps. In which case, rephrase, recapitulate what they have just said or clarify with an example.
- Is it an embarrassed silence? Maybe something has been said or asked which should not have been. If you made the error, say that you hadn't realized that it would cause difficulties, apologize and move on to a safer topic. In general, be sensitive to the feelings of your interviewee and tactfully change the subject if necessary.

The third issue is working out an appropriate method of *recording the answers* to your questions. Clearly, if you are frantically scribbling down everything that is being said to you, you are not going to be able to develop a good rapport with your informant who, in turn, is likely to become more self-conscious and anxious about what you might be writing. Tape-recorders would seem to be the obvious solution, but beware. Many people will simply refuse to be 'on the record' or they will severely censor what they say to you. Others will become acutely embarrassed. Some years ago, our first-year fieldclass was held in north-east England and one project was based on recording the oral histories of retired miners and their families. In setting the project up, I tried to record an interview with an elderly man who had a broad Geordie accent. The session was going very badly, despite the fact that we had previously struck up a very good relationship. I stopped the tape and asked if it was a problem for him. 'Yes, it bloody well is,' he said. 'Your students in London will listen to me and think I'm just an ignorant nobody because I don't talk like them.'

Good practice is to use a reporter's notebook and just jot down key words or phrases, often called *scratch notes*, during the course of the interview. Once the interview has finished, *as soon as possible* find a quiet spot and write down everything you can remember about the course of the interview. Review in your mind precisely how it went, the sequence in which topics came up and what was said. You will find that you can remember very much more than you think you can. Then, once you get back to base, type up a full transcript of the interview. Do not forget to include date, time, name of person, address and telephone number. In a focus group, it is impossible to maintain the flow of discussion, take scratch notes and remember what everyone has said. It is essential to tape-record the meeting, gaining the participants' permission first. The vital point here is to listen to the tape immediately after the session and produce a *running order* of speakers, i.e., identify each person from their voice and the first few words of their contribution. Then, when you come to transcribe the discussion fully, you will have a record of who spoke when. It is extremely difficult to remember people's voices, especially if you do not have any previous acquaintance with them.

In both cases, debrief yourself. Add in other details which will help you later to remember the interview. How did it go? Did you have any problems? What was the person or the group like? Which questions worked well? Was there anything surprising that you hadn't thought about before? This procedure will take a considerable amount of time, but you will gain from it when you come to interpret the data and write your dissertation.

And Then What?

The analysis of qualitative data is not easy and it is the most difficult aspect of the research procedure to describe succinctly. Good discussions of different approaches can be found in Jackson (2001) and Crang (1997). Prepare your transcript by entering sequential line numbers for the whole text – including your questions, and have a very wide margin on the right-hand side of the page to allow you to enter comments and codes that summarize what is being said. Interview analysis proceeds through the development of *coding frames*, which summarize and then fracture the text analytically. Coding frames develop from your original research questions, your understanding of the theoretical concepts you are working with, and, critically, from the interviews themselves. This latter way of coding is often described as *grounded*, i.e., it comes from the data, and contributes to the development of 'grounded theory' (Strauss 1987). Within your interview transcript, you will be able to distinguish factual information from opinions and feelings; stories and anecdotes based on personal experiences from stories based on the media; details of when things happened, who was involved, why certain decisions were made and by whom.

Coding frames develop from reading and rereading the interview texts. At stage 1, you will probably want to code on the basis of factual information and answers to set questions, rather like producing a detailed index of content for each interview. The coding will allow you to trace the substantive elements of the interview and identify when and where themes/items occur across the transcript. Stage 2 will begin to develop more conceptual codes as you focus more closely on the meanings of what has been said. Some researchers will develop a coding frame for key concepts before they apply it to their stage 2 analysis; others allow it to emerge from the data. So, to return to the fox-hunting example, you want to explore the concept of 'rights'. Within the transcript of the

fox hunters, there may be strong comments about 'interference from townies', 'the depredation of foxes destroying farmers' livelihoods', the 'importance of maintaining traditional bridleways by hunting across countryside', etc. On the other side, your hunt saboteurs talk about 'how cruelty to foxes is not acceptable', why it is 'wrong that humans can take pleasure from killing animals', about the ways in which new laws about protest 'makes us all criminals'. In developing the stage 2 analysis, the coding frame will identify these different kinds of expressions of 'rights' and begin to make finer connections and distinctions both within, and between, interview transcripts.

The analytical process becomes more refined the deeper you get into it. As you progress, write memos to yourself, memos about the ideas that arise while you are carrying out the interpretation. Use your discoveries to inform subsequent interviews in the field, and to draft pieces of writing that will eventually become your first draft of the empirical material for the dissertation. By the end of the research experience, you will have been able to write an interesting, lively and insightful project that is grounded in the realities of everyday life – an example of genuinely humane geography.

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42

Doing Ethnography

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Ethnography is a term which geographers and others have imported from social anthropology, literally meaning 'writing about people'. These days, it generally means a particular mode of research which involves being in close contact with the people one is studying. However, if one goes back less than 20 years, it generally meant the body of *facts* about the social organization, beliefs and practices of distinctive groups of people. In this meaning, ethnography was descriptive and was contrasted with analysis and interpretation, which were theoretical and interpretive. The change in meaning is an important part of why ethnography is now such a rich and important element in social research.

Ethnography As Was

It seems incredible now, but in the past methodology was not generally taught to social anthropology undergraduate students and even postgraduates were lucky to get more than a few patronizing words of advice before embarking on their fieldwork in foreign societies. As an undergraduate I took a course entitled 'Central African Ethnography'. It involved knowing about tribal societies in that region and had nothing to do with fieldwork or research techniques. This lack of attention to methods and methodology was reflected in the way people wrote; it was considered bad form for anthropologists, constructed as dispassionate scientists, to write about themselves or use the first person (though sometimes in a map of a village one would find 'the ethnographer's tent' marked). Referring to experiences, emotions or insecurities was regarded as being overly popularist, resulting in nothing more than amateurish travel writing. There was an assumption (pretence?) that any diligent anthropologist would observe the same things in the same situation – of course, this could never be proven since there never were two anthropologists in identical situations. There was a conspiracy of silence about the problems of inserting oneself into a society that was not expecting to be studied, the difficulties of learning the language and appropriate behaviour, let alone the isolation, self-doubt and fear.

Anthropologists have long been identified on the basis of *participant observation*, their preferred research method, whereby the researcher becomes part of the research. This implies simultaneously joining in with the people being studied and being sufficiently detached to observe, take notes about and analyse what is taking place. I am sure that many readers recoiled from this description, thinking that anthropologists must be pretty tacky people, worming their way into other people's lives and then, sneakily, treating them like objects. But this reaction was not always normal.

Like geography, anthropology emerged from the British empire's need to understand