

CHAPTER SEVEN

SEMI-STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Some things cannot be spoken or discovered until we have been stuck, incapacitated, or blown off course for a while. plain sailing is pleasant, but you are not going to explore many unknown realms that way.

David Whyte

The research method e-researchers choose can often reveal their beliefs about what is valuable knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, perspectives of the nature of reality. As discussed in Chapter 3, an objective of qualitative research methods is the discovery of patterns and the development of theories that expand understanding of complex social phenomena. When conducting qualitative research the researcher usually uses an in-depth inductive process. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are the most common methods for achieving this deep understanding of complex social phenomena. The interview is a unique method for data collection in that the researcher gathers data through direct communication between individuals. This direct communication allows for customization of the questions, depending on the subjects' previous answers, their attitudes, and the trust that builds between the researcher and the participants. Such direct and focused interaction is necessary to pursue a deep understanding of the subjects' views and of the topic of investigation. In particular, interviews offer the researcher infinite flexibility in probing deeper by following leads and insights that may provide surprising new directions for both participants and researcher. This is the principle advantage of interviews over other kinds of research methods.

There are many different kinds of interviews used by e-researchers. In fact, there is considerable variation within the literature on types and definitions of interview genres. Fontana and Frey (1994), for example, describe nine types of interviews including structured, semi-structured, oral history, creative, group, postmodern, gendered, ethnographic, and in-depth interviews. Most of the literature, however, lists the most common kinds of interviews as structured, unstructured, and focus