

CHAPTER SEVEN

group (Borg Gall, 1989; Cohen Manion, 1994). In a structured interviews the researcher asks the same sequenced and preestablished questions to a large number of respondents in a standardized manner, often with response categories. Typically, there is no option for variations in response. While a structured interview, generally referred to as a survey, can be conducted one-on-one with the researcher, it is most commonly presented in a paper-based or online format to a large sample (see Chapter 11). The data from structured interviews are usually analyzed numerically using descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations or multivariate statistics such as cluster and factor analysis, with the reliability of internal scales being calculated using sophisticated mathematical formulas such as Cronbach's alpha. Since these types of interviews are presented to large and carefully selected samples, the results are often evaluated in terms of their generalizability. Conversely, focus group interviews (see Chapter 8) are never conducted one-on-one or with a large sample; rather, they are conducted as a small group interview. The data are analyzed for themes and topics, and the researcher is usually not concerned with the generalizability of results. Rather, the data is evaluated for its ability to provide insights into the issue(s) being investigated. Alternatively, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are conducted one-on-one. While the most typical setting for semi-structured and unstructured interviews continues to be a face-to-face verbal interchange, there is an increasing opportunity for individual interviews to be conducted on the Net.

Whatever the format, interviews are a favorite methodological tool of educational and social science researchers. According to Fontana and Frey (1994), "interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (p. 361). Although, Patton (1990) suggests that the "quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer" (p.279). To obtain quality information, the e-researcher needs to not only be a skilled interviewer, but must also be able to transfer these skills to the Net environment. This chapter focuses on the interviewing skills and questioning techniques necessary to create engaging conversations for effective Net-based semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

UNSTRUCTURED VERSUS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Unstructured interviews are often referred to as in-depth interviews, open-ended interviews, or even ethnographic research. While we acknowledge that many

qualitative researchers do not differentiate between ethnographic research and unstructured interviews (e.g., Fontana & Frey, 1994; Lofland, 1971), we do make this distinction. The frequently cited writing of Lofland maintains, for example, that in-depth interviews and ethnographic research go hand-in-hand. However, Net-based in-depth interviews typically do not use participant observation in natural settings, and in this context are considered to be fundamentally different from ethnographic research. As Internet technologies advance, in terms of cost and ease of use, we anticipate that in the not-too-distant future Net-based interviews will take place in virtual reality environments and make use of voice and video interaction. They will then allow e-researchers