Interviewing

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Chapter Overview

This chapter provides advice on interview design, practice, transcription, data analysis, and presentation. I describe the characteristics of each of the three major forms of interviewing and critically assess what I see as the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. I outline applications of interviewing by referring to examples from economic, social, and environmental geography. Finally, some of the unique issues regarding Internet-based interviews are reviewed.

Interviewing in Geography

Interviewing in geography is so much more than 'having a chat'. Successful interviewing requires careful planning and detailed preparation. A recorded hour-long interview would have involved days of preliminary background work and question formulation. It would have required diplomacy in contacting **informants** and negotiating 'research deals'. A 60-minute interview will require at least four hours of transcription if you are a fast typist, and verification of the record of interview could stretch out over a couple of weeks. After all that, you have still to analyze the interview material. These are time-consuming activities. Is it all worth it? In this chapter, I outline some of the benefits of interviewing and provide a range of tips for good interviewing practice.

An interview was once defined as 'a face-to-face verbal interchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons' (Maccoby and Maccoby 1954, 499). An interview is a data-gathering method in which there is a spoken exchange of information. While this exchange has traditionally been face-to-face, researchers have also used telephone interviews (Groves 1990). However, the new millennium has seen the emergence of **computer-mediated communications (CMC) interviewing**, a mode from which direct access has disappeared.

Types of Interviewing

There are three major forms of interviewing: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. These three forms can be placed along a continuum, with the **structured interview** at one end and the **unstructured interview** at the other (see also Chapter 1, Box 1.1). Structured interviews follow a predetermined and standardized list of questions. The questions are asked in almost the same way and in the same order in each interview. At the other end of the interviewing continuum are unstructured forms of interviewing such as **oral histories** (discussed fully in Chapter 7). The conversation in these interviews is actually directed by the informant rather than by set questions. In the middle of this continuum are **semi-structured interviews**. This form of interviewing has some degree of predetermined order but maintains flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant. Different forms of interview have varying strengths and weaknesses that should be clear to you by the end of this chapter.

Strengths of Interviewing

Research interviews are used for four main reasons (see also Krueger 1994; Minichiello et al. 1995, 70–4; Valentine 1997, 110–12):

1. To fill a gap in knowledge that other methods, such as observation or the use of census data, are unable to bridge efficaciously.
2. To investigate complex behaviours and motivations.
3. To collect a diversity of meaning, opinion, and experiences. Interviews provide insights into the differing opinions or debates within a group, but they can also reveal consensus on some issues.
4. When a method is required that shows respect for and empowers the people who provide the data. In an interview, the informant's view of the world should be valued and treated with respect. The interview may also give the informant cause to reflect on their experiences and the opportunity to find out more about the research project than if they were simply being observed or if they were completing a questionnaire.

Interviews are an excellent method of gaining access to information about events, opinions, and experiences. Opinions and experiences vary enormously between people of different class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Interviews have allowed me to understand how meanings differ among people. Geographers who use interviewing should be careful to resist claims that they have discovered the *truth* about a series of events or that they have distilled *the* public opinion (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 116; Kong 1998, 80). Interviews can also be used to counter the claims of those who presume to have discovered *the* public opinion. This can be done by seeking out the opinions of different groups, often marginalized or subaltern groups, whose opinions are rarely heard.

Most of the questions posed in an interview allow for an open response as opposed to a closed set of response options such as 'yes' or 'no'. In this way, each informant can describe events or offer opinions in their own words. One of the major strengths of interviewing is that it allows you to discover what is relevant to the informant.

Because the face-to-face verbal interchange is used in most interviewing, the informant can tell you if a question is misplaced (Box 6.1). Furthermore, your own opinions and tentative conclusions can be checked, verified, and scrutinized. This may disclose significant misunderstandings on your part or issues that you had not previously identified (Schoenberger 1991, 187).

Asking the Wrong Question: A Tale from Cabramatta — Box 6.1

On 23 June 1990, I began my first formal research interview. The informant was a senior office-bearer from one of the Indo-Chinese cultural associations in New South Wales, Australia. My research interest was in the social origins of the concentration of Indo-Chinese Australians around Cabramatta and the experiences of these immigrants. The political context of the time was still heavy with the racialized and anti-Asian overtones of the 1988 'immigration debate' in which mainstream politicians and academics such as John Howard (later prime minister from 1996 to 2008) and Geoffrey Blainey (professor of history) had expressed concern about 'Asian' immigration and settlement patterns in Australian cities. Specifically, Vietnamese immigrants were accused of congregating in places like Cabramatta (Sydney) and Richmond and Springvale (both in Melbourne) and of purposefully doing so in order to avoid participating with the rest of Australia. I had hypothesized that Vietnamese Australians did not congregate voluntarily but that they were forcibly segregated by the economic and social constraints of discrimination in housing and labour markets. Indeed, the geographic literature supported my assertion at the time. I was a somewhat naive and colonialist investigator who saw his role as 'valiant champion' of an ethnic minority.

But back to my first interview. One of my first questions was: 'Please explain the ways in which discrimination has forced you, and members of the community you represent, to reside in this area?' The answer: 'I wouldn't live anywhere else.' This informant, and most subsequent informants, described the great benefits and pleasures of living in Cabramatta. They also explained how residing in Cabramatta had eased their expanding participation in Australian life (Dunn 1993). I had asked the wrong questions and had been told so by my informants. I decided to focus the project on the advantages and pleasures that residence in 'Cab' brought to Indo-Chinese Australians. The face-to-face nature of the exchange, and the informed subject, makes interviews a remarkable method. The participants can tell the researcher, 'You're on the wrong track!'

INTERVIEW DESIGN

It is not possible to formulate a strict guide to good practice for every interview context. Every interview and every research issue demands its own preparation and practice. However, researchers should heed certain procedures. Much of the rest of this chapter focuses on strategies for enhancing the credibility of data collected using rigorous interview practice. In the next section, we look at the organization of **interview schedules** and the formulation of questions.

The Interview Schedule or Guide

Even the most competent researcher needs to be reminded during the interview of the issues or events they had intended to discuss. You cannot be expected to recall all of the specific questions or issues you wish to address, and you will benefit from some written reminder of the intended scope of the interview. These reminders can take the form of interview schedules or **interview guides.**

An interview guide or **aide-mémoire** (Burgess 1982c) is a list of general issues you want to cover in an interview. Guides are usually associated with semi-structured forms of interviewing. The guide may be a simple list of key words or concepts intended to remind you of discussion topics. The topics initially listed in a guide are often drawn from existing literature on an issue. The identification of key concepts and the isolation of themes is a preliminary part of any research project (see Babbie 1992, 88–164).

One of the advantages of the interview guide is its flexibility. As the interviewer, you may allow the conversation to follow as 'natural' a direction as possible, but you will have to redirect the discussion to cover issues that may still be outstanding. Questions can be crafted in situ, drawing on themes already broached and from the tone of the discussion. The major disadvantage of using an interview guide is that you must formulate coherent question wordings 'on the spot'. This requires good communication skills and a great deal of confidence. Any loss of confidence or concentration may lead to an inarticulate and ambiguous wording of questions. Accordingly, a guide is inadvisable for first-time interviewers. It is more appropriate for very skilled interviewers and for particular forms of interview, such as oral history.

Interview schedules are used in structured and sometimes semi-structured forms of interviewing. They are also called question schedules or 'question routes' (Krueger 1994). An interview schedule is a list of carefully worded questions (see Box 6.2).

I have found that a half-hour interview will usually cover between six and eight primary questions. Under each of these central questions I nest at least two detailed questions or **prompts.** In ~~some~~ research, it may be necessary to ask each question in the same way and in the same order to each informant. In others, you might ask questions at whatever stage of the interview seems appropriate. The benefits of using interview schedules mirror the disadvantages of interview

Formulating Good Interview Questions **Box 6.2**

- Use easily understood language that is appropriate to your informant.
- Use non-offensive language.
- Use words with commonly and uniformly accepted meanings.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Phrase each question carefully.
- Avoid leading questions as much as possible (i.e., questions that encourage a particular response).

guides. They provide greater confidence to the researcher in the enunciation of their questions and allow better comparisons between informant answers. However, questions that are prepared before the interview and then read out formally may sound insincere, stilted, and out of place.

A mix of carefully worded questions and topic areas capitalizes on the strengths of both guides and schedules. Indeed, a fully worded question can be placed in a guide and yet be used as a topic area. The predetermined wording can be kept as a 'fall-back' in case you find yourself unable to articulate a question 'on the spot'. I find it useful to begin an interview with a prepared question. It is damaging to one's confidence if an informant asks, 'What do you mean by that?' or 'I don't know what you mean' in response to your first question.

Interview design should be dynamic throughout the research (Tremblay 1982, 99, 104). As a research project progresses, you can make changes to the order and wording of questions or topics as new information and experiences are fed back into the research design. Some issues may be revealed as unimportant, offensive, or silly after the initial interview. They can be dropped from subsequent interviews. The interview schedule or guide should also seek information in a way that is appropriate to each informant.

While the primary purpose of interview schedules and guides is to jog your memory and to ensure that all issues are covered as appropriately as possible, it is also useful to provide informants with a copy of the questions or issues before the interview to prompt thought on the matters to be discussed. Interview guides and schedules are also useful note-taking sheets (Webb 1982, 195).

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Interviews utilize **primary** (or original) **questions** and **secondary questions.** Primary questions are opening questions used to initiate discussion on a new theme or topic. Secondary questions are prompts that encourage the informant to follow up or expand on an issue already discussed. An interview schedule, and even an interview guide, can have a mix of types of original questions, including descriptive questions, storytelling prompts, structural questions, contrast and opinion questions, and devil's advocate propositions (see Box 6.3). Since different types of primary questions produce very different sorts of responses, a good interview schedule will generally comprise a mix of question types.

Primary Question Types — Box 6.3

Type of Question	*Example*	*Type of Data and Benefits*
Descriptive (knowledge)	What is the full name of your organization? What is your role within the organization? How many brothers or sisters do you have?	Details on events, places, people, and experiences. Easy-to-answer opening questions.
Storytelling	Can you tell me about the formation and history of this organization and your involvement in it?	Identifies a series of players, an ordering of events, or causative links. Encourages sustained input from the informant.
Opinion	Is Canadian society sexist? What do you consider to be the appropriate size for a functional family?	Impressions, feelings, assertions, and guesses.
Structural	How do you think you came to hold that opinion? What do you think the average family size is for people like yourself?	Taps into people's ideology and assumptions. Encourages reflection on how events and experiences may have influenced opinions and perspectives.
Contrast (hypothetical)	Would your career opportunities have been different if you were a man? Or if you grew up in a poorer suburb?	Comparison of experience by place, time, gender, and so forth. Encourages reflection on (dis) advantage.
Devil's advocate	Many practising town planners are voicing concern about the lack of transparency in the new development consent process.	Controversial/sensitive issues broached without associating the researcher with people who are not prepared to make their opinions public.

See also Box 6.4.

Asking the Tough Questions without Sounding Tough — Box 6.4

My work with Indo-Chinese communities in Cabramatta occurred within a political context in which Vietnamese Australians were being publicly harangued by academics and politicians (Dunn 1993). I felt it was important to get the informants to respond to the views of their critics. My interview schedule had the following two devil's advocate propositions. I also used a preamble to dissociate myself from the statements.

> In my research so far, I have come across two general explanations for Vietnamese residential concentration. I would like you to comment on two separate statements that to me represent these two explanations:
>
> First: that Vietnamese people have concentrated here because they don't want to participate in the wider society.
>
> Second: that the Vietnamese are segregated into particular residential areas through social, economic, and political forces imposed upon them by the wider society.

The aim was to gather people's responses to both statements. In most cases, informants were critical of both views. Some informants took my question as a request for them to select the explanation that they thought was the most appropriate. Those people selected the second statement. Others were in no doubt that I disagreed with both views. Either way, devil's advocate propositions are often leading. My political views were noticeable in the question preamble and wording as well as in the preliminary discussions held to arrange the interviews. It is fairer that the researcher's motives and political orientation are obvious to the informant rather than hidden until after the research is published (see Chapters 2, 4, and 17 of this volume).

On an interview guide or schedule, you might have a list of secondary questions or prompts (Box 6.5). There are a number of different types of prompts, ranging from formal secondary questions to nudging-type comments that encourage the informant to continue speaking (Whyte 1982, 112). Sometimes prompts are listed in the interview guide or schedule, but often they are deployed, when appropriate, without prior planning.

Ordering Questions and Topics

It is important to consider carefully the order of questions or topics in an interview guide or schedule. Minichiello et al. (1995, 84) advise that the most important consideration in the ordering of questions is preserving **rapport** between you and

Types of Prompt — Box 6.5

Prompt Type	*Example*	*Type of Data and Benefits*
Formal secondary question	Primary Q: What social benefits do you derive from residing in an area of ethnic concentration?	Extends the scope or depth of treatment on an issue.
	Secondary Q: What about informal child care?	Can also help to explain or rephrase a misunderstood primary question.
Clarification	What do you mean by that?	Used when an answer is vague or incomplete.
Nudging	And how did that make you feel? Repeat an informant's last statement.	Used to continue a line of conversation.
Summary (categorizing)	So let me get this straight: your view, as just outlined to me, is that people should not watch shows like 'Survivor'?	Outlines in-progress findings for verification. Elicits succinct statements (for example, 'quotable quotes').
Receptive cues	Audible: Yes, I see. Uh-huh. Non-audible: nodding and smiling.	Provides receptive cues, encourages an informant to continue speaking.

your informant. An interview might begin with a discussion of the general problem of homophobia or racism: how widespread it is, how it varies from place to place, and how legal and institutional responses to those forms of oppression have emerged. Having broached these general or macro-level aspects of oppression, the interview might then turn to the particular experiences of the informant.

In an interview with a **pyramid structure**, the more abstract and general questions are asked at the end. The interview starts with easy-to-answer questions about an informant's duties or responsibilities or their involvement in an issue. This allows the informant to become accustomed to the interview, interviewer, and topics before they are asked questions that require deeper reflection. For example, to gather views on changes to urban governance, you might find it necessary to first ask an informant from an urban planning agency to outline their roles and duties. Following that, you might ask your informant to outline the actions of their own agency and how those actions may have changed in recent times. Once the 'doings and goings-on' have been outlined, it may then make sense to ask the informant why agency actions and roles have changed, whether that change has been resisted, and how they view the transformation of urban governance.

A final question-ordering option is to use a hybrid of **funnel** and pyramid structures. The interview might start with simple-to-answer, non-threatening questions, then move to more abstract and reflective aspects before gradually progressing towards sensitive issues. This sort of structure may offer the benefits of both funnel and pyramid ordering.

When thinking about question and topic ordering, it can be helpful to have key informants comment on the interview guide or schedule (Kearns 1991a, 2). Key informants are often initial or primary contacts in a project. They are usually the first informants, and they often possess the expertise to liaise between the researcher and the communities being researched. Key informant review can be a useful litmus test of interview design, since these representatives are 'culturally qualified'. They have empathy with the study population and can be comprehensively briefed on the goals and background of the research (Tremblay 1982, 98–100).

Structured Interviewing

A structured interview uses an interview schedule that typically comprises a list of carefully worded and ordered questions (see Boxes 6.3 and 6.5 and the earlier discussion on ordering questions and topics). Each respondent or informant is asked exactly the same questions in exactly the same order. The interview process is question-focused.

It is a good idea to **pre-test** a structured interview schedule on a subset (say 3 to 10) of the group of people you plan to interview for your study to ensure that your questions are not ambiguous, offensive, or difficult to understand. Though helpful, pre-testing is of less importance in semi-structured and unstructured interviews in which ambiguities (but not offensive questions!) can be clarified by the interviewer.

Structured interviews have been used with great effect throughout sub-disciplines of geography, including economic geography (Box 6.6).

Interviewing—An Economic Geography Application — Box 6.6

In 1991, Schoenberger argued that most industrial geography research had been on the outside looking in, deducing strategic behaviour from its locational effects rather than investigating it directly (1991, 182). One of the assumptions challenged by the use of structured interviews was that the location of firms was strongly associated with the location preferences of the industries in question. Using structured interviews with managers, Schoenberger was able to show that the location of foreign chemical firms in North America was as much, if not more, related to historical and strategic contingencies than to contemporary location preferences.

For example, one of Schoenberger's case studies was a German-owned chemical firm. Her interviews revealed that the firm's board of directors had decided on a major expansion in the US market. But the board had been split between establishing a 'greenfields' site, which would be purpose-built to company needs, and acquiring an already established chemical plant, which would hasten their expanded presence in the market. Plans to establish a greenfields facility were foiled by organized community opposition. The directors who argued for an acquisition then gained the upper hand, and at about the same time a US chemical firm came up for sale. For many decades, German chemical firms had agreed among themselves to specialize in certain parts of the chemical sector. These agreements were about to end, and Schoenberger's case-study firm was keen to expand horizontally into another speciality. The US firm that came up for sale happened to specialize in that area. A host of historical and strategic events had combined to produce a particular location result.

The historical and strategic contingencies that accounted for the location of the German chemical company were revealed through structured interviews. Their location was in fact quite at odds with the apparent preferences of the firm and reveals nothing about the firm's location preferences (Schoenberger 1991, 185). The US chemical sector has a high level of foreign ownership, and most of it was established through acquisition. Replicated interviews with managers and directors across the chemical sector revealed the prevalence of location choices being determined by historical and strategic contingency. Interviewing was therefore an essential method for unravelling the location determinants of chemical plants in the North America.

Semi-structured Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews employ an interview guide. The questions asked in the interview are content-focused and deal with the issues or areas judged by the researcher to be relevant to the research question. Alternatively, an interview schedule might be prepared with fully worded questions for a semi-structured interview, but the interviewer would not be restricted to deploying those questions. The semi-structured interview is organized around ordered but flexible questioning. In semi-structured forms of interview, the role of the researcher (interviewer or facilitator) is recognized as being more interventionist than in unstructured interviews. This requires that the researcher redirect the conversation if it has moved too far from the research topics (see also Chapter 16).

Unstructured Interviewing

Various forms of unstructured interviewing exist. They include oral history, life history, and some types of group interviewing and in-depth interviewing. Unstructured interviewing focuses on personal perceptions and personal histories. Rather than being question-focused like a structured interview or content-focused as in a semi-structured format, the unstructured interview is informant-focused. Life history and oral history interviews seek personal accounts of significant events and perceptions, as determined by the informants and in their own words (see Chapter 7 and also McKay 2002). Each unstructured interview is unique. The questions you ask are almost entirely determined by the informant's responses. These interviews approximate normal conversational interaction and give the informant some scope to direct the interview. Nonetheless, an unstructured interview requires as much if not more preparation than its structured counterpart. You must spend time sitting in musty archive rooms or perched in front of dimly lit microfiche machines gaining a solid understanding of past events, people, and places related to the interview. But through these interviews we can 'find out about' events and places that had been kept out of the news or that had been deemed of no consequence to the rich and powerful (Box 6.7).

Oral Environmental Histories — Box 6.7

Oral history interviews can collect data about environmental history. This type of interviewing helps produce a more comprehensive picture of the cause and process of environmental change than is available through physical methods of inquiry. Data collected might include people's memories of changes in local land use, biodiversity, hydrology, and climate.

Lane (1997) used oral history interviews to reveal changes in watercourses, weeds, and climate in the Tumut Region high country of the Australian Alps. Interviews were conducted with five main informants, first in their homes and then while driving and walking through the countryside where they had resided. The informants told of the waterholes and deep parts of creeks where they would fish and swim and where they and their children had learned to swim. One informant commented that one of the creeks used to be almost a river—and now you could step over it (Lane 1997, 197). The same informant noted the change in colour and quality of the water. Lane's informants described how the water level and quality had steadily degraded since pine plantations had been planted in the 1960s. This description was consistent with 'scientific' understandings of the impact of pine plantations in which there is an ever-decreasing level of run-off as the pines grow.

> Such specific observations from local residents may often be the only detailed evidence on environmental change that is available. Oral history can fill gaps in the 'scientific record', or it can be used to complement data gathered using physical or quantitative methods. More important, with the use of oral history, environmental change can be set in a human context and related to the history of people who lived in the region (Lane 1997, 204).

Interviewing Practice

Rapport with another person is basically a matter of understanding their model of the world and communicating your understanding symmetrically. This can be done effectively by matching the perceptual language, the images of the world, the speech patterns, pitch, tone, speed, the overall posture, and the breathing patterns of the informant (Minichiello et al. 1995, 80).

Achieving and maintaining rapport, or a productive interpersonal climate, can be critical to the success of an interview. Rapport is particularly important if you need to have repeat sessions with an informant. Even the first steps of arranging an interview are significant, including the initial contact by telephone and other preliminaries that might occur before the first interview. Interviews in which both the interviewer and informant feel at ease usually generate more insightful and more valid data than might otherwise be the case. In the following paragraphs, I outline a set of tips that can help you to enhance rapport before, during, and while closing an interview.

Contact

Informants are usually chosen purposefully on the basis of the issues and themes that have emerged from a review of previous literature or from other background work (see Chapters 5 and 16). This involves choosing people who can communicate aspects of their experiences and ideas relevant to the phenomena under investigation (Minichiello et al. 1995, 168). Once you have identified a potential informant, you must then negotiate permission for the interview. This means getting the consent of the informants themselves, and in some circumstances, it will also involve gaining the sanction of 'gatekeepers' like employers, parents, or teachers. This might occur, for example, if you wanted to interview schoolchildren, prisoners, or employees in some workplaces.

Your first contact with an informant will often be by telephone or by some form of correspondence such as e-mail. In this preliminary phase, you should do at least four things (Robertson 1994, 9):

1. Introduce yourself and establish your bona fides. For example: 'My name is Juan Folger, and I am an honours student from Java State University.'
2. Make it clear how you obtained the informant's name and telephone number or address. If you do not explain this, people may be suspicious and are likely to ask how you got their name or e-mail address. If you are asked this question, rapport between you and your informant has already been compromised.
3. Outline why you would like to conduct the interview with this particular informant. Indicate the significance of the research, and explain why the informant's views and experiences are valued. For instance, you may believe that they have important things to say, that they have been key players in an issue, or that they have experienced something specific that others have not. On the whole, I have found that most people are flattered to be asked for an interview, although they are often nervous or hesitant about the procedure itself.
4. Indicate how long the interview and any follow-up is likely to take.

Making an informant feel relaxed involves dealing with all of the issues mentioned above and in addition spelling out the mechanics of the interview and negotiating elements of the interview process. All of these matters can be outlined in a 'letter of introduction', which may be sent to an informant once they have agreed to an interview or while agreement is still being negotiated. This formal communication should be under the letterhead of your organization (for example, your university) and should spell out your bona fides, the topic of the research, the manner in which the interview will be conducted, and any rules or boundaries regarding confidentiality. You must, of course, seek permission from your supervisor to use the letterhead of an organization such as a university, although ethics procedures within your institution (see Chapter 2) are likely to have made this mandatory. In the absence of a letter of introduction, informants should be made aware of their rights during the interview. This procedure is sometimes referred to as brokering a 'research deal' or a 'research bargain'. The research deal may be agreed to over the telephone or by e-mail or orally just before an interview begins. The deal can be set out in written form. (See Box 6.8 for some of the rights of informants that can be established. Chapter 2 of this volume includes material relevant to the ethics of interviewing. See also Hay [1998] and Israel and Hay [2006].) These preliminary discussions are important to the success of an interview. Indeed, they set the tone of the relationship between interviewer and informant.

The Interview Relation

The relationship established between interviewer and informant is often critical to the collection of opinions and insights. If you and your informant are at

Codifying the Rights of Informants — Box 6.8

In their research on the Carrington community in Newcastle, New South Wales, Winchester, Dunn, and McGuirk (1997) decided to codify informants' rights in the oral histories and semi-structured interviews that were to be conducted. They included the following list of informants' rights on university letterhead, and they gave a copy to each of the informants:

- Permission to record the interview must be given in advance.
- All transcribed material will be anonymous.
- Tapes and **transcripts** will be made available to informants who request them.
- Informants have the right to change an answer.
- Informants can contact us at any time in the future to alter or delete any statements made.
- Informants can discontinue the interview at any stage.
- Informants can request that the audio recorder be paused at any stage during the interview.

To this list one might add further statements (for example, that informants can expect information about the ways in which their contributions to the research would be used). A codification of rights was deemed necessary for two reasons. First, it was done to empower the informants and assure them that they could pause or terminate the interview process whenever they deemed it necessary to do so. Second, the researchers had employed an articulate local resident to conduct the interviews, and so it was important that the interviewer was also constantly reminded of the informants' rights.

ease with each other, then the informant is likely to be communicative. However, there are competing views on the nature of the interviewer–informant relationship. On the one hand is an insistence on **professional interviewing** and on the other 'creative' or empathetic interviewing. Goode and Hatt (in Oakley 1981, 309–10) warn that interviewers should remain detached and aloof from their informants: 'the interviewer cannot merely lose himself [*sic*] in being friendly. He must introduce himself as though beginning a conversation, but from the beginning the additional element of respect, of professional competence, should be maintained. . . . He is a professional in this situation, and he must demand and obtain respect for the task he is trying to perform'.

A very different, indeed opposite, sort of relationship was proposed by Oakley (1981) and Douglas (1985). In their view, a researcher who remains aloof would undermine the development of an intimate and non-threatening relationship

(Oakley 1981, 310). Rather than demanding respect from the informant, Dou las's model of **creative interviewing** insists that each informant must be treat as a 'Goddess' of information and insight. Douglas recommends that researc ers humble themselves before the Goddess. The creative or empathetic moc of interviewing thus advocates a very different sort of relationship between t informant and interviewer than that recommended for professional intervie relations. Overall, there is a range of interview practice that lies between the pol of professional and creative interview relationships.

Decisions about the interview relationship will vary according to the characte istics of both the informant and the interviewer. The cultural nuances of a stuc group will at times necessitate variations in the intended interaction. However, is wise to remember that despite any empathy or relationships that are establishe the interview is still a formal process of data gathering for research. Furthermor there is usually a complex and uneven power relationship involved in which infoı mation, and the power to deploy that information, flows mostly one way: from th informant to the interviewer (see Chapter 2 and also McKay 2002, Stacey 1988).

Rapport may increase the level of understanding you have about the informan and what they are saying. There are a number of strategies for enhancing rapport The first is through the use of respectful preliminary work. The second involve the use of a **warm-up** period just before an interview commences. Douglas (1985 79) advises that rather than getting 'right down to business', it is better to engage in some 'small talk and chit-chat [which] are vital first steps'. This warm-up discussion with an informant could be a chat about the weather, matters of shared personal interest, or 'catching-up' talk. In their surveys and interviews of Vietnamese Australians in Melbourne, Gardner, Neville, and Snell (1983, 131) found that '[t]he success of an interview (when measured by the degree of relaxation of all those present and the ease of conversation) generally depended on the amount of "warm-up" (chit-chat, introductions, etc.).'

My own warm-up techniques for face-to-face interviews have included giving the informant an overview of the questions I plan to ask and presenting relevant diagrams or maps, as well as discussing historical documents (see also Tremblay 1982, 99, 103). Maps, diagrams, tables of statistics, and other documents can also be used as references or stimuli throughout an interview. If an informant offers you food or drink before an interview, it would be courteous to accept. As we shall see in more detail later in this chapter, many of these forms of warm-up are not available in CMC interviews.

You should also have acquainted yourself with the cultural context of the informants before the interview. As Robin Kearns pointed out, 'If we are to engage someone in conversation and sustain the interaction, we need to use the right words. Without the right words our speech is empty. Language matters' (Kearns 1991a, 2). For instance, you must be able to recognize the jargon or slang and frequently used acronyms of institutions or corporations as well as the language of particular professions or cultural groups.

Listening strategies can improve rapport and the productivity of the interview. Your role as interviewer is not passive but requires constant focus on the information being divulged by informants and the use of cues and responses to encourage them. Your role as an active participant in the interview extends well beyond simply asking predetermined questions or broaching predetermined topics. You must maintain an active focus on the conversation. This will help to prevent lapses of concentration. You must also avoid 'mental wandering'—otherwise, you may miss unexpected leads. Moreover, it is irritating to the informant, and a threat to rapport, if you ask a question they have already answered (Robertson 1994, 44).

Adelman (1981) advises researchers to maintain a **critical inner dialogue** during an interview. This requires that you constantly analyze what is being said and simultaneously formulate the next question or prompt. You should be asking yourself whether you understand what the informant is saying. Do not let something pass by that you do not understand with the expectation that you will be able to make sense of it afterwards. Minichiello et al. (1995, 103) provide a demonstration of how critical inner dialogue might occur: 'What is the informant saying that I can use? Have I fully understood what this person is saying? Maybe, maybe not. I had better use a probe. Oh yes, I did understand. Now I can go on with a follow-up question.'

Strategies to enhance rapport continue throughout the interview, through verbal and non-verbal techniques that indicate that the responses are valued. Informants may sometimes recount experiences that upset them or stir other emotions. When an informant is becoming distressed, try pausing the interview or changing the topic and possibly returning to the sensitive issue at a later point. If the informant is clearly becoming very distressed, you should probably terminate the interview.

There may be a stage in an interview when your informant does not answer a question. If there is a silence or if they shake their head, the informant may be indicating that they have not understood your question or simply do not know the answer. They might be confused as to the format of the answer expected: is it a 'yes no' or something else (Minichiello et al. 1995, 93)? In these cases, try restating the question, perhaps using alternative wording or providing an example. You should always be prepared to elaborate on a question. It is important to remember, however, that choosing not to respond is the informant's right. If the informant refuses to answer and says so, you should not usually press them. They may have chosen not to answer because the question was asked clumsily or insensitively (or for some other reason—if the question dealt with sensitive commercial matters, for instance). If you prepare your questions carefully, you should avoid this sort of problem and the consequent loss of empathy and data.

As an interviewer, you should also learn to distinguish between reflective silence and non-answering. Robertson cautions, 'Do not be afraid of silences. Interviewers who consciously delay interrupting a pause often find that a few seconds of reflection leads interviewees to provide the most rewarding parts of an interview. . . . There is no surer way of inhibiting interviewees than to interrupt, talk too much, argue, or show off your knowledge' (Robertson 1994, 44).

It is important to allow time for the informant to think, meditate, and reflect before they answer a question (see Box 6.9). It is also important to be patient with slow speakers or people who are not entirely host language–fluent. Resist the temptation to finish people's sentences for them. Supplying the word that an informant is struggling to find may seem helpful at the time, but it interrupts them and inserts a term they might not have ordinarily used.

Finishing Sentences, Interrupting, and 'Rushing-on' **Box 6.9**

During February 2001, Minelle Mahtani (then of the University of British Columbia) joined me in Sydney to undertake joint, and comparative, research on the media and representations of ethnic minorities in Australia and Canada. This involved interviews with managers and employees within newsrooms. They were powerful and confident informants. Dr Mahtani had a wealth of expertise in such environments, having been a producer with the flagship Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's 'The National', a news television program. Our first field interview was with a network news editor for one of the commercial networks in Australia. Our questions included themes such as media representations of ethnic minorities, attempts by the organization to improve the portrayal of ethnic minorities, the presence of 'minority' journalists, and circumstances in which they or their staff had challenged stereotypical storylines. The questions had been developed and agreed to in advance, but what very different styles we had! The informants would sometimes provide very short and dismissive responses to some questions. When it was clear that they had answered, I would probe or move to another question. Dr Mahtani would wait, however. The silence would hang heavy over the interview. I felt uncomfortable, but these powerful informants got the idea that we wanted a fuller response. They would then justify the view they had briefly given, or they would admit that there were alternative viewpoints to the one they had expressed. My rushing-on was a strategy vastly inferior to the 'sounds of silence' for uncovering richer insight into ethnic minority representations and the dynamics of the newsroom (Dunn and Mahtani 2001).

Closing the Interview

Do not allow rapport to dissipate at the close of an interview. It is critical to maintain rapport—especially if you intend to re-interview the informant. You must prepare for the closure of an interview—otherwise, the ending can be clumsy. Because an interview establishes a relationship within which certain expectations are created, it is better to indicate a sense of continuation and of feedback and clarification than to end the interview with an air of finality.

Try not to rush the end of an interview. At the same time, do not let an interview 'drag on'. There is an array of verbal and non-verbal techniques for closing interviews (Box 6.10). Of course, non-verbal versions should be accompanied by appropriate verbal cues; otherwise, you could appear quite rude. The most critical issue in closing an interview is to express not only thanks but also satisfaction with the material that was collected. For example, you might say, 'Thanks for your time. I've got some really useful, insightful information from this interview.' Not only is gratitude expressed this way, but the informant is made aware that the process has been useful and that their opinions and experiences have been valued.

Techniques for Closing Interviews — **Box 6.10**

Four types of verbal cue:

- direct announcement: 'Well, I have no more questions just now.'
- clearinghouse questions: 'Is there anything else you would like to add?'
- summarizing the interview: 'So, would you agree that the main issues according to you are . . . ?'
- making personal inquiries and comments: 'How are the kids?' or 'If you want any advice on how to oppose . . . just ring me.'

Six types of non-verbal cue:

- looking at your watch
- putting the cap on your pen
- stopping or unplugging the audio recorder
- straightening your chair
- closing your notebook
- standing up and offering to shake hands.

Source: Adapted from Minichiello et al. 1995, 94–8.

Recording and Transcribing Interviews

Interview recording, transcription, and field note assembly are referred to as the mechanical phases of the interview method. These are the steps through which the data are collected, transformed, and organized for the final stages of analysis.

Recording

Audio recording and note-taking are the two main techniques for recordin face-to-face and telephone interviews. Other less commonly used techniques i geography include video recording, compiling records of the interview after th session has ended, and using cognitive maps. Both audio recording and note taking have associated advantages and disadvantages, as will become clear in th discussion to follow. Therefore, a useful strategy of record-keeping is to combin note-taking and audio recording.

The records of an interview should be as close to complete as possible. A audio recorder will help to compile the fullest recording (Whyte 1982, 117–18) Interviewers who use note-taking need excellent shorthand writing skills to pro duce verbatim records. However, the primary aim in note-taking is to captur the gist of what was said.

Audio or video recording can allow for a natural conversational interview styl because the interviewer is not preoccupied with taking notes. Instead, you can b a more attentive and critical listener. Audio recording is also preferable to note taking because it allows you more time to organize the next prompt or ques tion and to maintain the conversational nature of the interview. The note-takin researcher can be so engrossed in taking notes that they may find themselve unprepared to ask the next question. Note-takers can also miss important move ments, expressions, and gestures of the informant while they are hunched over scribbling at a furious pace (Whyte 1982, 118). This undermines rapport and detracts from attentive listening.

On the other hand, an audio recorder may sometimes inhibit an informant's responses because the recorder serves as a reminder of the formal situation of the interview (Douglas 1985, 83). Informants may feel particularly vulnerable if they think that someone might recognize their voice if the recording were aired publicly. Opinions given by the informant on the 'spur of the moment' become fixed indelibly on tape (or disc or memory stick) and have the potential to become a permanent public record of the informant's views. This may make the informant less forthcoming than they would have been if note-taking had been used. Some informants become comfortable with an audio recorder as the interview progresses, but others do not. If you find the latter to be the case, consider stopping the recorder and reverting to note-taking.

If you use an audio recorder, place it somewhere that is not too obvious without compromising the recording quality. Modern digital audio recorders have long recording capacities and can be turned on and then left alone. But take care when using an audio recorder not to be lulled into a loss of concentration by the feeling that everything is being recorded safely. There may be a technical failure. You can maintain concentration and avoid the problem associated with recorder failure by taking some written notes. If you are taking notes, there is little likelihood of mental wandering. Everything is being listened to and interpreted, and parts of it are being written down, demanding that you maintain concentration. I find this particularly important when I am conducting the second or third interview in a long day's fieldwork.

Because an audio recorder does not keep a record of non-verbal data, non-audible occurrences such as gestures and body language will be lost unless you are also using a video recorder or taking notes. If an informant points to a wall map and says, 'I used to live there', or if they say, 'The river was the colour of that cushion', then the audio recording will be largely meaningless without some written record. These written notes can be woven into the verbal record during the transcription phase (described later in this chapter). Written notes also serve as a back-up record in case of technical failures. Overall then, a strategic combination of audio recording and note-taking can provide the most complete record of an interview with the least threat to the interview relationship.

Transcribing the Data

The record of an interview is usually written up to facilitate analysis. Interviews produce vast data sets that are next to impossible to analyze if they have not been converted to text. A transcript is a written 'reproduction of the formal interview which took place between researcher and informant' (Minichiello et al. 1994, 220). The transcript should be the best possible record of the interview, including descriptions of gestures and tone as well as the words spoken (although see Box 6.13 below). The name or initials of each speaker should precede all text in order to identify the interviewer(s) and informant(s). Counter numbers at the top and bottom of each page of the transcript enable quick cross-referencing between the transcript file and tapes or digital records of the interview. Converting interview to text is done either through a reconstruction from handwritten notes, a transcription of an audio or video recording, the use of **voice recognition computer software** (See Box 6.11), or editing CMC interview correspondence.

Interview notes should be converted into a typed format preferably on the same day as the interview. If there were two or more interviewers, it is a good idea to compile a combined reconstruction of what was said using each researcher's notebook. This will improve the breadth and depth of coverage. The final typed record will normally comprise some material recalled verbatim as well as summaries or approximations of what was said.

Recorded interviews should also be transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. Transcription is ~~a very~~ time-consuming and therefore resource-intensive task (Whyte 1982, 118). On average, most interviews take four hours of typing per hour of interview. Transcription rates vary according to a host of variables,

Voice Recognition Computer Packages and Interviews — Box 6.1

Computing packages have been developed that convert the spoken word i computer text. Packages such as NaturallySpeaking by Dragon Systems c help you convert text at rates above 160 words per minute. However, these s tems will only convert the speech of a single speaker. Each system has to 'trained' to understand a single 'master's voice'. The success of these packag for converting interview data has been mixed. The researcher has to simultar ously listen to a recording and orally repeat the informant's contributions to e able the system to convert the data. Gestures and indications of intonation ha to be typed into the **word processing** document manually. Nonetheless, typis can train the software and then re-speak the interview, typing corrections (u ing the 'correct that' command) and inserting notations as they go along (usi hot-keys for such things as speaker initials). Fatigue, illness, and alcohol ha all been reported as reducing recognition accuracy.

Listserve reports lodged by researchers have claimed accuracy rates as hig as 95 per cent once the program has been 'trained'. I have read a claim that th new age of software requires only 15 minutes of training, although my expe ence was that even after four hours of coaching, the software was still gettir every third word 'wrong' and some of the conversions were hilarious. It is critic that you save your speech files (the training) after each use, and it is advisabl that you use a very good quality microphone. It should also be noted that ser ous investigation of the methodological issues that may surround voice reco nition software has barely begun.

such as typist skill, the type of interview, the informant, and the subject matt You can facilitate transcription by using a purpose-built transcribing record You should transcribe your own interviews for two main reasons. First, since y were present at the interview, you are best placed to reconstruct the interchan You are aware of non-audible occurrences and therefore know where such eve should be inserted into the speech record. You are also better able to understa the meaning of what was said and less likely to misinterpret the spoken wor Second, transcription, although time-consuming, does enable you to engage wi the data again. Immersion in the data provides a preliminary form of analysis.

There is no accepted standard for symbols used in transcripts, but some of t symbols commonly used are set out in Box 6.12. CMC interviews do not requi transcription, since each informant's answers are already in a text format. T text may well include some **emoticons** that are popular in SMS (short messa service) and Internet-based communication.

Once completed, the transcript should be given a title page stating the inform ant's name (or a code if there are confidentiality concerns), the number of t

Symbols Commonly Used in Interview Transcripts — Box 6.12

Symbol	*Meaning*
//	Speaker interrupted by another speaker or event: //phone rings//
:	Also used to indicate an interruption
KMD	The initials of the speaker, usually in CAPS and bold
—	When used at the left margin, refers to an unidentified speaker
Ss	Several informants who said the same thing
E	All informants made the same comment simultaneously
. . .	A self-initiated pause by a speaker
. . . . or	Longer self-initiated pauses by a speaker
-	Speech that ended abruptly but without interruption
()	Sections of speech, or a word, that cannot be deciphered
(jaunty)	A best guess at what was said
(jaunty/journey)	Two alternative best guesses at what was said
*	Precedes a reconstruction of speech that was not taped
(. . .)	Material that has been edited out
But I didn't want to	Underlined text indicates stressed discourse
I got nothing	Italicized text indicates louder discourse
[sustained laughter]	Non-verbal actions, gestures, facial expressions
[hesitantly]	Background information on the intonation of discourse
Emoticon	(see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_common_emoticons)
:) or ☺ or :-) or :-D	Smiling, joke marker, happy, laughing hard
:(or :-(	Frowning, sad
;) or *)	Wink
:'(or :: or :,(	Tears, shedding a tear, crying
lol	Laughing out loud

interview (for example, first or third session), the name(s) of the researcher(s) (i.e., who carried out the interview), the date of the session, the location, duration of the interview, and any important background information on the informant or special circumstances of the interview. Quotations that demonstrate a particular point and that could be presented as evidence in a final report on the research might be circled or underlined.

The transcript can be given to the informant for vetting or authorizing. This will normally improve the quality of your record (see Box 6.13). This process of **participant checking** continues the involvement of the informants in the research process and provides them with their own record of the interview.

Debates about Changing the Words: Vetting and Correcting — Box 6.13

In general, it has been thought that a transcription should be a verbatim record of the interview. This would include poor grammar, false starts, 'ers', and 'umms'. There are a number of good reasons advanced for this position. A verbatim record will include the nuances of accent and **vernacular**, it will maintain any sense of hesitancy, and it could demonstrate an embarrassment that was present. For example, Sarah Nelson (2003, 16) reflected on how the 'humming and hawing' of Ulster politicians when asked about sectarian killings was reflective of their hesitancy and hypocritical stances on sectarianism. Transcripts that are not exact textual replications of an interview will lose the ethnographic moment of the interview itself. However, it may be difficult to search for key terms if they are 'misspelled' in a transcript (misspelled as a means of indicating accent or mispronunciation).

A range of researchers working in different disciplines and countries have expressed some concern about the political effects of exact transcription. Many have reflected on the embarrassment that many informants articulate when they receive the transcript of their interview. They express anxiety about the grammar, the false starts to their sentences, repetition, and the 'ers' and 'umms' and 'you knows'. This anxiety is even more strongly felt by informants who live in societies where the dominant language is not their first language. Informants might be so concerned as to withdraw their interview and avoid any future ones (McCoyd and Kerson 2006, 397). Moreover, research reports on the less powerful in society (the poor, single mothers, youth groups) that use the real language of informants and are largely sympathetic to those people can often portray them in a way that reproduces negative images and stereotypes. Nelson (2003) reflected on the way such quoted material reconstructs images of illiteracy, powerlessness, and inferiority. As stated earlier, transcription is a transformation of verbal encounter into text; it is a constructed document that is of the researcher's making (Green, Frauquiz, and Dixon 1997). As bell hooks (1990, 152) famously stated, 'I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. . . . Rewriting you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority.' Informants are more interested in the impact of their words than in the nuances of expression. Many researchers recommend sending informants summaries or interpretations of the interview rather than transcripts. It is certainly a good idea to send informants the eventual publications and reports.

Assembling Field Note Files

Assembling interview records marks the beginning of the analysis proper. It begins with a critical assessment of the interview content and practice and is followed by formal preparation of interview logs. To my mind, the best advice on assembling field note files comes from Minichiello et al. (1995, 214–46). In the wide margins of the transcript file, you can make written annotations. Comments that relate to the practice of the interview, such as the wording of questions and missed opportunities to prompt, should be placed in the left margin. These annotations and other issues concerned with contact, access, ethics, and overall method should be elaborated upon in a **personal log** (Box 6.14). The right margin of the transcript file can be used for annotations on the substantive issues of the research project. These comments, which generally use the language and jargon of social science, are then elaborated upon in the **analytical log**. The analytical log is an exploration and speculation about what the interview has found in relation to the research question (Box 6.14). It should refer to links between the data gathered in each interview and the established literature or theory.

Field Note Files — **Box 6.14**

Transcript File	*Personal Log*	*Analytical Log*
Includes the record of speech and the interviewer's observations of non-audible data and intonation. Also includes written annotations in the margins on the practice and content of the interview.	Reflection on the practice of the interview. Includes comments on the questions asked and their wording, the appropriateness of the informant, recruitment and access, ethical concerns, and the method generally.	Exploration of the content of the interview. A critical outline of the substantive matters that have arisen. Identification of themes. Reference to the literature and theory. In-progress commentary on the research aims and findings.

Source: Adapted from Minichiello et al. 1995, 214–46.

Analyzing Interview Data

Researchers analyze interview data to seek meaning from the data. We construct themes, relations between variables, and patterns in the data through content analysis (see Chapter 14). Content analysis can be based on a search of either manifest or latent content (Babbie 1992, 318–19). **Manifest content analysis** assesses the visible, surface content of documents such as interview transcripts. An example would be a tally of the number of times the words 'cute' and 'cuddly' are used to describe koalas in interviews with members of the public. This might be important to understanding public opinion and the politics of culling in areas of koala overpopulation (for example, Muller 1999). Searching interview data for manifest content often involves tallying the appearance of a word or phrase. Computer programs such as NVivo or QSR N6 are particularly effective at undertaking these sorts of manifest searches (see Chapter 15).

Latent content analysis involves searching the document for themes. For example, you might keep a tally of each instance in which a female has been portrayed in a passive or active role. Latent content analysis of interview texts requires a determination of the underlying meanings of what was said. This determination of meanings within the text is a form of coding.

A coding system is used to sort and then retrieve data. For example, the text in transcripts of interviews with urban development authorities could be coded based on the following categories: structures of governance (for example, legislation, party political shifts), cultures of governance (with sub-codes like 'managerialist perspective' and 'entrepreneurial perspective'), coalitions and networks (of various types and agendas), the mechanisms through which coalitions operate, and the various scales at which power and influence emanate and are deployed (see McGuirk 2002). Once the sections of all the interviews have been coded, it is then possible to retrieve all similarly coded sections. These sections of text can be amalgamated and reread as a single file (Box 6.15). This might allow a researcher to grasp the varying opinions on a certain issue and to begin to unravel the general feeling about an issue.

Not every section of text needs to be coded. An interview will include material that is not relevant to the research question, particularly warm-up and closing sections and other speech focused on improving rapport rather than on gathering data. Some sections of text will be multiple-coded. For example, in one sentence an informant may list a number of causes of fish kills, including open-cut mine run-off, super phosphates, acid sulphate soils, and town sewage. This may require that the sentence is given four different coding values. Coding is discussed more fully in Chapter 14.

Coding Interview Data: Five Suggested Steps **Box 6.15**

Coding Step	*Specific Operations: Computing/Manual Versions*
Develop preliminary coding system	Prepare a list of emergent themes in the research. Draw on the literature, your past findings, as well as your memos and log comments. Amend throughout.
Prepare the transcript for analysis	Meet the formatting requirements for the computing package being used. / Print out a fresh copy of the transcript for manual coding.
Ascribe codes to text	Allocate coding annotations using the 'code text' function of computing packages. / Place handwritten annotations on transcript.
Retrieve similarly coded text	Use the 'retrieve text' function of computing packages to produce reports on themes. / Extract and amalgamate sections of text that are similarly coded.
Review the data by themes	Assess the diversity of opinion under each theme. Cross-referencing themes allows you to review instances where two themes are discussed together. Begin to speculate on relations between themes.

Presenting Interview Data

Material collected from interviews is rarely presented in its entirety. Most interview data must be edited and (re)presented selectively in research publications. While it is difficult to locate a 'genuinely representative' statement (see Connell 1991, 144–5; Minichiello et al. 1995, 114–15), it is usually possible to indicate the general sense and range of opinion and experience expressed in interviews. One way to indicate this is to present summary statistics of what was said. Computing packages such as NVivo can help you to calculate the frequency with which a particular term or phrase appeared in a document or section of text (see Chapter 15). However, the more common method is through a literal description of the themes that emerged in the interviews (see, for example, Boxes 6.6, 17.1, and 17.2 and the discussion in Chapters 17 and 18 on presenting results).

When describing interview data, you must cite transcript files appropriately. For example, in her interview-based honours research on the changing identity of the Australian industrial city of Wollongong, Pearson (1996, 62) noted that 'Several respondents asserted that elements excluded by the new identity were of little significance to the overall vernacular identity of Wollongong (Int. #1, Int. #6, and Int. #7).' The transcript citations provided here indicate which of the informants expressed a particular type of opinion. In research publications, the transcript citations can indicate the informant's name, number, code, or recorder count. Whenever a direct quotation from an informant is presented, then a transcript page reference or recorder count can be provided.

Transcript material should be treated as data. A quotation, for example, ought to be treated in much the same way as a table of statistics. That is, it should be introduced and then interpreted by the author. The introduction to a quotation should offer, if it has not already been provided, some background on the informant. It is important that readers have some idea of where an informant is 'coming from'; information about their role, occupation, or status is important in this regard. Also important, as Baxter and Eyles (1997, 508) point out, is 'some discussion of why particular voices are heard and others are silenced through the selection of quotes'. Quotations should be discussed in relation to, and contrasted with, the experiences or opinions of other informants. Statements of opinion by an informant should also be assessed for internal contradiction. Finally, a quotation cannot replace a researcher's own words and interpretation. As the author, you must explain clearly what theme or issue a quotation demonstrates.

Knowledge is a form of power. The accumulation and ownership of knowledge is an accumulation of power: power to support arguments and power to effect change. In most interviews, information and knowledge flow from the informant to the researcher. The researcher accumulates this knowledge and ultimately controls it. There is a host of strategies and guidelines to which researchers can adhere to reduce the potential political and ethical inequities of this relationship (see Chapters 2, 16, and 17). In terms of data presentation, it will sometimes be important that an informant's identity be concealed.

Pseudonyms or interviewee numbers have been used by geographers to disguise the identity of their informants when it has been thought that **disclosure** could be harmful. Informants can be given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym. Robina Mohammad (1999, 238–9) used this technique with some success in her interviews with young Pakistani Muslim women in England. The interviews included discussion of patriarchal authority, 'English cultures', and the cultures and dynamics of the Pakistani Muslim community in Britain. Some informants selected Pakistani Muslim pseudonyms for themselves, others chose very English names. These selections were themselves very interesting and provided further insight into the cultural perspectives and resistances of these women. Other researchers allocate pseudonyms that reflect the ethnicity of the informants (McCoyd and Kerson 2006, 396, 404). Gill Valentine (1993) felt it necessary to disguise the name of the town in which her interviews with lesbians had taken place. Similarly, Mariastella Pulvirenti (1997, 37) disguised the street names that were mentioned by female Italian Australians when discussing their housing and settlement experiences in Melbourne.

Naming an informant (or locating them in any detailed way) and directly associating them to a quotation could be personally, professionally, or politically harmful. Researchers must be very careful when they deploy data they have collected. Interviewers are privileged with insights into people's lives. Some researchers recommend instituting an alias or pseudonym for informants very early in the mechanical phase so that no electronic records will bear the informant's real identity. However, it can prove difficult to remember who the real people behind the aliases are, and some researchers only impose the pseudonym in the presentation phase of the research.

The presentation of interview-based research must contain an accessible and transparent account of how the data were collected and analyzed (Baxter and Eyles 1997, 518). This account should outline the subjectivity of the researcher, including their biases or 'positioned subjectivity' (see Chapters 2, 16, and 17). As we have already seen from the discussion in Chapter 3, it is only through transparent accounts of how interview-based research was undertaken that the trustworthiness and wider applicability of the findings can be assessed by other researchers.

Interviews Using Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) interviewing can include interviews with individuals and groups. They can be either **asynchronous** or **synchronous** (see Meho 2006, 1284; Mann and Stewart 2002, 604). The most common form of CMC interviewing has been asynchronous, using the to-and-fro of e-mail exchanges. Synchronous CMC interviewing has mirrored the environment of on-line chat. Meho's (2006, 1284–5) review of literature on e-mail interviewing concluded that since the early 2000s, this mode had moved from being experimental and is now considered an established format for research-oriented interviewing. Most early uses of CMC for social research involved attaching questionnaires to e-mails (and sometimes interview schedules). However, e-mail interviewing now commonly takes the form of an ongoing set of exchanges between a researcher and an informant. In the next few pages, I review advantages and disadvantages of CMC interviewing and then provide a series of tips for better practices specific to this mode.

Advantages of CMC Interviewing

CMC-delivered interviews offer five general sets of advantages: (1) an expanded sample; (2) reduced **interviewer-effects**; (3) enhanced convenience; (4) more reflective informant responses; and (5) cost savings (see Chapter 10 for additional discussion of some of these issues).

First, Internet delivery of questions allows a researcher to overcome spati temporal, and social barriers that would restrict access to informants for face-t face interviews. Interviews can be more easily facilitated with people living ove seas or in inaccessible locations (remote places or war zones) or who have m bility limitations (e.g., differently abled), and e-mailed exchanges can be mu more convenient for people who are shift workers or those who are based at hon with small children (Bampton and Cowton 2002; Mann and Stewart 2002, 60 6; Meho 2006, 1288). E-mail interviews can also allow researchers to transgre social hurdles to gain access to informants: they will suit people who are sh who are cautious about their identity being revealed, or whose cultural conte is too disparate from that of the researcher; they are also appropriate when t topic is very sensitive. Good examples in the literature include interviews wi political and religious dissidents, criminals and criminalized people, oppress minorities, and deviant subcultures. McCoyd and Kerson (2006) found fro their research with women in North America who had had medical terminatio (after learning of a foetal anomaly) that e-mail interviews were very effective f discussions on a topic that generated strong emotions among the informants a broached issues that are not normally discussed in public. Meho's (2006, 1286– review of the uses of e-mail interviewing indicates that response rates amo these 'difficult to reach' samples were on average about 40 per cent.

The absence of 'face-to-face' in e-mail interviewing means that researche can interview people who dress and look very differently from themselves—su as subcultural groups like Goths or bikers (Mann and Stewart 2002, 606). Mo broadly, a second advantage of e-mail interviews is a reduction in interview effects because of the researcher's visual anonymity. Many of the cues we use make judgments about people are based on visual appearance (e.g., dress, bo shape, skin colour, jewellery, hair styles), and these cues are much more lin ited in CMC interviews in which informants can adopt pseudonyms and eve de-gender themselves. This anonymity comes at the cost of the non-audio da that are usually gathered in a face-to-face interview. Contextual effects also di sipate. At the instrumental level, this means that the interview is not interrupte by telephone calls, colleagues, small children, or spouses. A more complicate matter is the absence of the researcher from the informant's own ethnograph setting and the loss of those observations. However, e-mail interviewing offe great convenience to informants, allowing them to choose the time of their re sponses, to consider their answers at their leisure, and to do so in the comfo of their own home (Bampton and Cowton 2002; Mann and Stewart 2002, 60 Meho 2006, 1290). An informant in McCoyd and Kerson's (2006, 397) researc with women who had medical terminations reflected that 'I'm looking forwar to doing the interview . . . it is a much more relaxed and productive way to do [through e-mail]. This way, I can do it when things are quiet and I'm in the rig frame of mind.' The informant has much more control over the pace and flow of the interview, more so than if it were a telephone or face-to-face interview during which they might feel rushed to offer an answer.

A fourth advantage of e-mail interviewing is that the answers that informants offer can be more detailed, reflective, and well-considered than those in other formats. James and Busher's (2006) e-mail interviews with people in university settings found that there was a 'richness of reflection among the participants'. Informants who took their time in responding to a question 'tended to generate more thoughtful answers' (2006, 414). James and Busher gave the example of an informant who began one of their answers with 'I didn't email you straight back, because I was thinking about my answer. So my responses were more carefully thought through and probably longer than if I'd tackled the whole thing in a face-to-face interview' (university-based informant, quoted in James and Busher 2006, 415). Informants can rethink, proofread, and re-craft their responses so that they most accurately represent their views and experiences (Bampton and Cowton 2002). Many of the above advantages apply to one-on-one e-mail interviews rather than to group discussions.

A final set of advantages of CMC interviewing is the reduced cost relative to face-to-face interviewing. The obvious savings are associated with travel costs and time—and carbon footprints. Another saving comes in the mechanical phase, since there is no need for a conversion of spoken word to text. The answers are already in text form, and this also removes issues of transcription error and interpretation (Chen and Hinton 1999; Mann and Stewart 2002, 608–9). This obviates the need to engage one of the debates about transcription referred to earlier (Box 6.13). Informants have 'cleaned' their own responses to a level they are satisfied with before they post them (McCoyd and Kerson 2006, 397). Of course, researchers do have to edit out the unnecessary e-mail symbols, signature sections, and line returns.

Challenges of CMC Interviewing

The weaknesses or limitations of CMC interviews, relative to face-to-face interviewing, stem mostly from the spatial and temporal displacements between the informants and the researcher. These issues include concerns about the authenticity of the informant, the loss of visual cues that assist rapport-building, and the 'clunkiness' of the interview relationship. There are also issues of uneven Internet access and comfort with the medium, as well as ethical issues having to do with privacy and anonymity.

The advantages that stem ~~from~~ the visual anonymity and the use of pseudonyms have the negative effect of reducing our ability to know who we are interviewing. The identity dynamism facilitated in Internet correspondence means that people can make misleading claims about who they are (James and Busher 2006). However, Mann and Stewart (2002, 210) do note that maintaining a false identity in a substantive correspondence is not so easy to do, and researchers ought be wary of inconsistencies and contradictions that reveal such false personae. More subtly, informants are more able to embellish or be bombastic in e-mailed answers, because the researcher does not have the visual cues to help detect and address such tendencies (Meho 2006, 1289). Similarly, prompts are delayed until the next e-mail interchange, at which point they may be considered less important than new primary questions, crowding out space for such clarifications (Chen and Hinton 1999; Meho 2006, 1289–90). Researchers using e-mail interviews must instead rely heavily on 'reading between the lines' of answers.

The absence of **paralinguistic clues** entails broader issues. It is much more difficult for researchers to tell whether an informant is becoming distressed or uncomfortable when reflecting on or writing an answer to a question (Bampton and Cowton 2002). Their answers are in a 'narrower bandwidth', and this has dramatic consequences on the potential for rapport. It is difficult to communicate empathy and sympathy (e.g., in regard to grief) to informants via e-mail without it sounding banal or insincere (Mann and Stewart 2002, 617–19). The generally truncated process of e-mail interviewing means that interviewing a single informant can extend over weeks and months. There will be substantial gaps at times between responses. These issues are related to the processes of reflection and response consideration discussed earlier, but they are also linked to the personal availability of the informants and to the ability of the researcher to properly assimilate previous answers and to consider necessary probes and relevant primary questions. These gaps can be interpreted, incorrectly, as disinterest on the part of the informant or as a sign that the researcher is underwhelmed or disgusted by previous responses. It is difficult for researchers to know why an informant might be delaying their response (Bampton and Cowton 2002). But the resulting form of rapport that develops is very different from what has been described for face-to-face interviews.

CMC interviewing is really only appropriate for study groups with widespread Internet access and literacy. This means that it would be inappropriate for homeless people or those who lack basic information technology skills and familiarity (Bampton and Cowton 2002; Mann and Stewart 2002, 605). Participating in an interview through e-mail or on-line in a chat format, is quite physically demanding, requiring a lot of time spent hunched over a computer screen and typing (Chen and Hinton 1999). It is more onerous for the informant than answering a question orally over the telephone or face-to-face. Interviews that require informants to download materials and open attachments shift a good deal of technical work to the informant, raising the concern that it may divert attention from the questions and research topic to the technology. One general lesson is that

CMC interviews are most appropriate for technically savvy study groups, including, for example, 'on-line communities', which are natural groups that already exist within the Internet environment (Mann and Stewart 2002, 615).

Decisions about good ethical practices surrounding CMC interviews are still evolving. One concern surrounds the privacy of informant comments. On the one hand, people often feel an inflated sense of anonymity within the Internet, using pseudonyms to avoid attribution. But e-mailed messages and posted comments can be traced (Cho and LaRose 1999). A bigger issue concerns the usual promises that researchers offer to informants about the confidentiality of their comments. Internet communications are intercepted, and server hosts do retain copies of e-mails, as do institutions like universities. This means that informants' answers are not only kept by or accessible to the researcher. As well, many universities and most research corporations have 'My Documents' directories on all researchers' computers through which files are stored centrally on a common server. E-mails should not be considered ephemera that disappear as soon as you delete them from your own inbox: they have potential longevity and circulation that is almost limitless, and the ethical risks entailed in that require careful consideration (Crystal 2006, 132; Spinks, Wells, and Meche 1999, 148–9). Although many universities currently require informants to sign consent forms before they participate in interviews, the Internet environment has different protocols for signatures and approvals, and some researchers consider that an e-mail from the informant detailing their informed consent should be sufficient. Some argue that such correspondence must occur before and separate from any discussion of substantive matters; others are more sanguine about the separation, suggesting that consent statements can immediately precede the first set of answers (Cho and LaRose 1999, 429; McCoyd and Kerson 2006, 394).

A final set of concerns regarding CMC interviews has to do with the way they add to Internet clutter. Requests that a person be involved in e-mail interviews or post responses in an on-line setting can be confused with corporate and commercial correspondence with which Internet users are increasingly bombarded. Forecasts by the Radicati Group (2005, 14) determined that in 2009, those who use e-mail for work will receive 109 messages per day on average (as opposed to 99 per day in 2005). This Internet clutter could pose substantial problems for engaging CMC interview informants in the future.

Strategies for Good CMC Interviews

As with face to-face interviews, rapport between researchers and informants can be enhanced or jeopardized in various phases of CMC interviews. In the contact phase, you should make quite clear how you obtained the potential informant's e-mail address. Internet users are increasingly suspicious of how people obtained their address and fed-up with the e-mail spam they receive. The sweeping up of e-mail addresses has been referred to as **trolling**, and any research that carries a sense that informant contacts were collected in that way will be treated with suspicion. E-mails also need to be sent in an individualized way to informants, not as a group e-mail (James and Busher 2006, 408). Contacting on-line groups or networks and asking them participate in on-line interviews should be preceded by some interaction with the group and some sanction from gatekeepers. A researcher who launches into a group unannounced will likely receive antipathetic reactions. Similarly, a long period of non-participation in a group followed by a request for interviews that demonstrates a good deal of knowledge about the group will create the impression that the researcher has been **lurking**—another form of Internet anti-social behaviour (Cho and LaRose 1999, 422–4, 430). Further, informants should receive individually tailored responses and follow-ups, not formally worded e-mails that anaemically state, 'Here is the next question'. This recursiveness means that most CMC interviews take a semi-structured or unstructured form.

One of the threats to rapport once an e-mail interview is underway is the silences and gaps in communication. The longer the gaps between exchanges, the higher the rates of drop-out and non-completion (Meho 2006, 1288). Researchers will need to remind informants about questions for which an answer has not yet been forthcoming. Bampton and Cowton (2002) advise that this asynchronous aspect (clunkiness) of interviews (and other differences from face-to-face format) should be made clear to the informants at an early stage. In general, informants need to be given a clear sense of the time frame of the whole process, the expected amount of response, the number of parcels of questions they will receive, and that there will be courteous reminders at times (see also Mann and Stewart 2002, 616). Nonetheless, patience is likely to be a virtue when one is waiting respectfully for answers, and pestering could spoil the field for future researchers (Cho and LaRose 1999, 425). When an answer from an informant is received, it is wise to send a prompt acknowledgment, and considered follow-ups can be delayed until you have been through a process of inner critical dialogue. James and Busher (2006, 412) recommend 'strategies of visibility' to maintain contact while informants are considering their answers: 'Haven't heard from you for while', 'How is it going?' These types of individualized prompts will remind your informants that you are still keen to hear from them, and it can provide an opportunity for informants to raise any issues they have about the question or make clear their desire to skip that question. These are ways to be vigilant to potential drop-outs and distress (Mann and Stewart 2002, 616–19).

Some researchers recommend that initial e-mails from the researcher should contain some element of personal disclosure relevant to the topic of the interview. This has the effect of building up a sense of trust and sharing (Mann and Stewart 2002, 615–17). The Internet is an environment with a spirit of information-sharing, so CMC interviews should commit to releasing the general findings and recommendations to the world wide web (Cho and LaRose 1999, 432).

On-line cultures may include the use of acronyms, abbreviations, and emoticons. Some researchers suggest that these textual cultures should be encouraged (Meho 2006, 1293), but others think that they should be discouraged in formal correspondence (Dumbrava and Koronka 2006, 62), and still others believe that they should be tolerated. Emoticons, for example, could be used by informants to indicate the kind of tone and emotion that would be apparent in face-to-face interviews (Bampton and Cowton 2002). McCoyd and Kerson (2006, 396) reported an informant placing the emoticon for tears '::' at the end of a sentence to indicate her emotional context as she was telling the researchers about her feelings regarding the medical termination of her foetus. Common emoticons could enhance rapport between researchers and informants once an interview is well underway, and the use of extra letters and dots can be a good indication of pauses ('hmmmmmm, I'm not sure about that', 'weeellll maybe') (see Box 6.12). There are debates regarding the extent to which researchers should ensure proper grammar and spelling in CMC interviewing. In general, some latitude is granted for contractions that imitate speech (e.g., I'm, don't) as well as some abbreviations (txt, fwd) (Crystal 2006, 113–17). However, rich and well-expressed formal text provides a clearer and more usable form of data than text that is full of emoticons and SMS-like abbreviations (Mann and Stewart 2002, 15, or see Spinks, Wells, and Meche 1999, 149, on business communications).

Many of the rules and cultures of Internet communication carry over into CMC interviews. Researchers should be cautious about attempting to use humour and sarcasm. E-mails should have appropriate subject lines, and university e-mail addresses and URLs should be used to provide informants with a stronger sense of the project's credibility (Chen and Hinton 1999; Cho and LaRose 1999, 431). Capitalized and bold text should be avoided, since it is considered on-line shouting. Each e-mail should have only enough text to fit into a single screen, or the first screen should have a summary of all that follows (see Bampton and Cowton 2002; Crystal 2006, ch. 4; Hassini 2006, 33; Spinks, Wells, and Meche 1999, 147–9) These rules of 'netiquette' flow from long-standing principles established in the mid-1990s (see Scheuermann and Taylor's [1997, 270] reference to the Ten Commandments of Etiquette or Rinaldi's [1994] often-cited guidelines).

The ethical issues surrounding CMC interviews mean that the threats to privacy should be prominent in consent agreements. Researchers can make the compiled records of interviews anonymous and store all such files off-line on external hard drives, and they can attempt ~~to erase~~ all e-mails and destroy all print-outs (Chen and Hinton 1999; McCoyd and Kerson 2006, 394; Mann and Stewart 2002). These actions can provide the informant with some assurance of confidentiality.

Because of the limitations and challenges of CMC interviewing, some have concluded that it is best seen as a complementary mode and that face-to-face interviewing remains the gold standard method (see Meho 2006). According to this view, CMC interviewing is appropriately used for informants who are difficult to physically reach or for those who already have a presence within some form of on-line community or network. However, the mode has special advantages of its own, such as the opportunity for more reflective responses, and it represents an appropriate method for the Internet age.

Conclusion

The rigour of interview-based research is enhanced through adequate preparation, diverse input, and verification of interpretation. Being well-informed and prepared will give you a deeper understanding of the 'culture' and discourse of the group(s) you study. You can then formulate good questions and enhance levels of rapport between you and your informants. You should also purposely seek out diversity of opinion. By interviewing more than one informant from each study group, you can begin to draw out and invite controversy or tensions. An opinion from one informant should never be accepted as demonstrative of group opinion unless it is shown to be so. Finally, some means of verifying your interpretations of interview data are necessary (for example, participant checking, peer checking, and cross-referencing to documentary material).

Interviews bring people 'into' the research process. They provide data on people's behaviour and experiences. They capture informants' views of life. Informants use their own words or vernacular to describe their own experiences and perceptions. Kearns (1991a, 2) made the point that 'there is no better introduction to a population than the people themselves.' This is what I find the most refreshing aspect of interview material. Transcribed interviews are wholly unlike other forms of data. The informant's non-academic text reminds the researcher and the reader of the lived experience that has been divulged. It reminds geographers that there are real people behind the data.

Key Terms

aide-mémoire

analytical log

asynchronous interviewing

computer-medicated communications (CMC) interviewing

creative interviewing

critical inner dialogue
disclosure
emoticon
funnel structure
informant
interview guide
interview schedule
interviewer effects
latent content analysis
life history
lurking
manifest content analysis
NVivo
oral history
paralinguistic clues
participant checking
personal log
pre-testing
primary question
professional interviewing
prompt
pyramid structure
rapport
secondary question
semi-structured interview
structured interview
synchronous interviewing
transcript
trolling
unstructured interview
vernacular
voice recognition computer software
warm-up
word processing

Review Questions

1. Select one of the four questions below, and spend about 15 minutes constructing an interview schedule for a hypothetical five-minute interview with one of your colleagues. Use a mix of primary question types and prompts. Think about the overall structure of your schedule, and provide a sense of order in the way the issues are covered. Try to imagine how you will cope if the interviewee is aggressive, very talkative, or non-communicative. Will your schedule still work?
   a. Most of us would agree that a greater use of public transport is an environmentally and economically sound goal. However, most of us would personally prefer to use a private car and only pay lip service to such noble goals. Why?
   b. Beach activity is decidedly spatial. Performances are expressive, and behaviour is at times territorial.
   c. The re-integration of the differently abled into 'normal society' is a noble ideal. However, this integration will always be confounded by the organization of public space and the reactions of the able-bodie when the differently abled are in public space.
   d. The local environment plan (LEP) of every local council should allo cate a specific area for sex industry uses.

2. Conduct two semi-structured in-depth interviews with someone of an older generation than yours. It could be an older relative (however, do not interview a sibling or parent). Limit both interviews to approximately 30 minutes. Construct an interview guide that operationalizes key concepts in the following research question: 'Ours is a patriarchal society. We are often told, however, that the society of our parents and grandparents was structurec by an even more restrictive and oppressive system of sexism and compulsory heterosexuality. Investigate how the opportunities, resources, and experiences differed according to gender for earlier generations. Pay particular attention to gender variations in the use of and access to space.'
3. Devise a list of rapport strategies you could use if you were to conduct a face-to-face interview with an older relative not well known to you. Consider the preliminary, contact, warm-up, and closing phases of the interview.
4. The absence of direct contact in CMC interviewing has implications for rapport. Map out a list of strategies specifically tailored to maintain rapport in an interview comprised of e-mail exchanges. You can imagine that the topic of the interview is one of those outlined in Questions 1 and 2. In making your list, reflect on the means by which you could maintain 'listening strategies' over the web, as well as 'strategies of visibility'.

Useful Resources

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