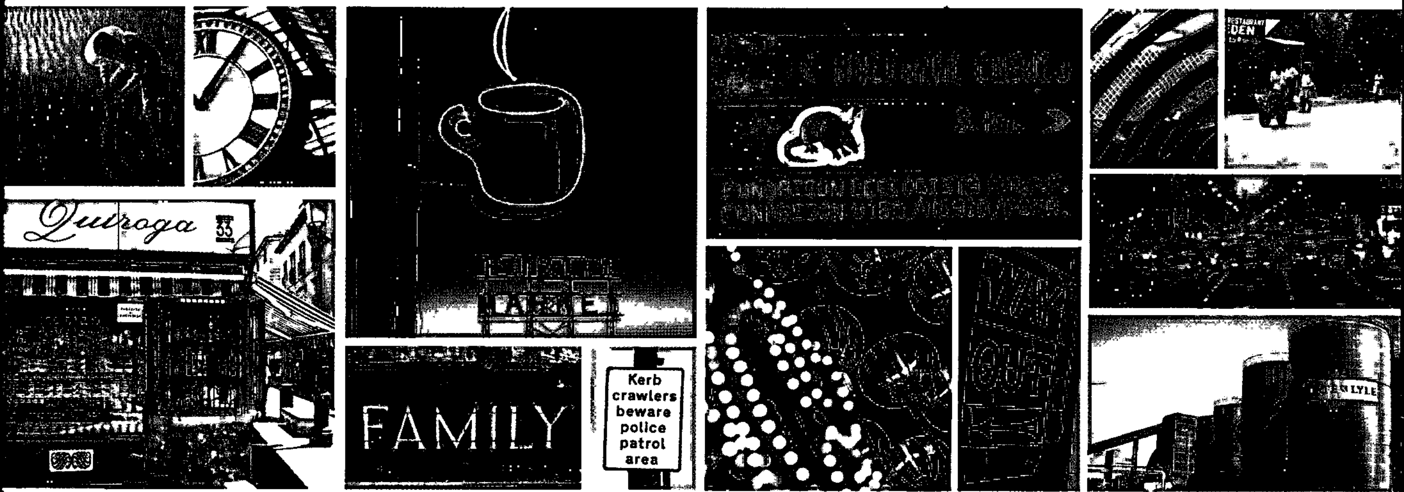
FIELDWORK FOR HUMAN GEOGRAPHY



RICHARD PHILLIPS AND JENNIFER JOHNS

'If fieldwork is an indispensable component of geographical education then this book is equally essential to making the most of fieldwork: at last, students have a guide to making the most of their journeys abroad or closer to home.'

NOEL CASTREE, PROFESSOR OF GEOGRAPHY, MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY

First published 2012

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, Post Bag 7
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011932823

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-85702-586-9
ISBN 978-0-85702-587-6 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C013056

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INTERVIEWING FOR FIELDWORK

OVERVIEW

This chapter addresses the following questions:

- What is an 'interview' and when is it an appropriate method for fieldwork?
- How can you select, seek and gain access to interviewees?
- What should you consider when preparing for and conducting interviews?
- How can you learn to be 'reflexive' in interview-based fieldwork?

This chapter focuses on interviewing as a research method but also discusses areas of overlap with other methods including questionnaires and focus groups. It explains how we select knowledgeable individuals or institutions to interview, approach our potential interviewees, and subsequently conduct interviews.

When you start to think about fieldwork and consider which methods are appropriate to answer your research questions, a natural instinct is to 'find people who know the answers and can give you the answers'. The assumption that there are others in the field who can be sources of information for us and our research is often a valid one and this search for knowledgeable research participants underpins many research methods, including interviewing, focus groups, and participant observation (see Chapter 8). However, interviewing is not simply about entering the field and passively seeking 'answers' from others. Interviewing has become one of the most popular methods for research in the social sciences (Atkinson and Silverman 1997) including human geography (Cloke et al. 2004), but paradoxically this has served to 'dumb down' the method. In this chapter we encourage you to move away from assumptions that interviewing is 'easy' (it is, after all, just chatting?) towards more sophisticated understandings of the interviewing process. We explain that interviewing can be a critical and challenging method which requires thought, planning, and the investment of time.

Academic research articles, based on data collected through interviews, will rarely provide a full and rigorous justification of this methodology and this sets a poor example for students to follow. More usefully, for students wondering whether and how to conduct interviews in the field, there are some excellent textbooks on geographical research methods which contain chapters on interviewing and discuss interviewing in theoretical and practical terms (see, for example, Flowerdew and Martin 2005; Clifford et al. 2010). Rather than replicating this generic literature on interviewing, this chapter has a more specific objective: to offer guidance on how students can design and conduct interviews *in the field*. It provides practical advice, supplemented with real examples from students and academics in different research environments.

If you use interviews imaginatively, rigorously, and effectively you will find yourself meeting people you would otherwise almost certainly never have cause to spend time with, and in locations that can take you away from the 'normal' spaces tourists inhabit in your field location (such as business premises, government buildings, and people's homes). There is nothing quite like finding yourself meeting – and connecting with – someone from a very different background and set of experiences: interviewing fifty-year-old award-winning female business owner whilst being served jasmine tea in the board room of a 40th floor office in the Shibuya district of Tokyo; or sitting in a simple cafe, while a homeless person tells you about his or her life on the streets; or listening to an elderly farmer, who has invited you to sit with him outside his home in Buenos Aires, Honduras (see Figure 7.1). Interviewing is a recipe for some highly memorable fieldwork experiences!

Figure 7.1 Tony (a student) interviewing a resident of Buenos Aires, Honduras, outside his home. Photograph by Richard Phillips

WHAT IS AN 'INTERVIEW' AND IS IT AN APPROPRIATE METHOD FOR YOUR RESEARCH?

To those who are unfamiliar with qualitative research methodologies and their application in the field, there may appear to be little difference between meeting to speak to people and stopping individuals on the street to ask them questions. However, there can be significant differences based on the content of the questions and the methods used to obtain the answers. The definitions of and distinctions between interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires are summarised in Table 7.1. This should help you to understand how these methods differ and also to determine which is most appropriate for your research. You should pay particular attention to the variances between questionnaires and interviews, since it is common for less experienced researchers to conflate these.

The term 'qualitative interviewing' refers to in-depth, semi-structured, or loosely structured forms of interviewing (Mason 2002). Interviews have been defined as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1984: 102). This means that interviews involve interaction or dialogue between the researcher or interviewer and the interviewee. Put simply, interviewing is the process of finding, contacting, and meeting with research participants with the purpose of asking questions about their experiences and knowledge, and then listening – in open and non-judgemental ways – to what they say.

The use of interviewing spans many sub-disciplines of human geography, including historical, cultural, political, and economic geographies. In our experience undergraduate fieldwork using interviewing has covered topics such as: transnational firm entry methods into foreign markets; environmental policy-making prior to a large sporting event; the provision of child-care and its impact on household relationships in an underprivileged area; and the origins of produce sold in a 'local' farm shop.

Interviewing (like all research methods) is by no means a perfect science so there is always room here for innovations and improvements. There is no reason why students themselves cannot also seek to contribute to the development of interviewing as a method. So while this chapter provides specific advice and guidance on how to conduct and plan interviews, we would also encourage you to think critically and imaginatively about interviewing in the field.

WHO TO INTERVIEW AND HOW TO GAIN ACCESS?

Having decided to conduct interviews in the course of your fieldwork, the next stage is to think more carefully about exactly who it is you intend to speak to, how you will make contact with them, and how you will convince them to devote an hour or so of their time to your research. Rarely is the process of sampling, determining target interview respondents, and gaining access a straightforward one. A number of challenges and barriers may have to be overcome, often demanding serious commitment in terms of time and dedication. One of the frustrations

Table 7.1 Summarising the central characteristics of questionnaires, interviews and focus groups

	Definition	Purpose and forms	Limitations
Questionnaires	Often categorised as quantitative due to their emphasis on factual and/or numerical data. The questionnaire survey represents 'an indispensable tool when primary data are required about people their behaviour, attitudes and opinions and their awareness of specific issues' (Parfitt 1997: 76).	Purpose is to collect data that are representative of a population and to assess the statistical significance of the results. Can take a variety of forms including telephone surveys, postal surveys, face-to-face interviews, drop and pick-up questionnaires and internet surveys. The distanced relationship between interviewer and respondent reduces the influence of the researcher.	Questionnaires will not yield information on the processes that have caused events to happen, the individuals and decision making behind events, nor the underlying policies. In-depth discussions about the viewpoints of individuals are not possible. To produce statistically significant results a large number (hundreds) of questionnaires must be conducted.
Interviews	Aim is not to be representative of a particular population, rather to 'understand how individuals experience and make sense of their own lives' (Valentine 2005: 111). Based on the understanding that all knowledges are situational and contextual, interviews seek to 'ensure that relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced' (Mason 2002: 62).	Encourages immersion in the field in order to interact with the social actors whose accounts are privileged as data sources. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or structured depending on the research context. They can use thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approaches. All seek to achieve a fluid and flexible structure.	Data collected, and results revealed, are not representative of a whole population. It is often difficult to make generalised statements. Interviewing can be a time-consuming process.
Focus groups	A group of people, usually between 6 and 12, who meet in an informal setting to respond to questions set by the researcher. Interaction between researcher and respondents can differ to that of interviews. The term 'discussion group' or 'group interview' may also be used.	Effective in 'capturing tacit or experiential knowledge, seeing understandings and feelings as socially constructed rather than independent' (Hoggart et al. 2002: 214). Can be used to examine new or existing government policies, or environmental issues, for example.	Recruitment of participants is often time-consuming and it may be difficult to coordinate up to a dozen people. Topics for discussion can be limited i.e. personal and/or sensitive issues are rarely discussed in groups. Can be used in fieldwork as a method of validation or presentation of research findings.

experienced by human geographers is the perception (often from 'harder' scientists) that all we do is 'go out and chat to people and write about it'! In fact, interviewing is a challenging and time-consuming process that when done well will require a certain degree of skill and tenacity on the part of the researcher. This section will outline the process of sampling to determine potential interviewees and distinguish the two main 'types' – broadly defined as 'professional' and 'personal'. It will then offer some practical advice about how to gain access to interviewees, relating this specifically to undergraduate fieldwork and emphasising the sort of work that can be conducted before entering the field.

As explained above, one of the key ways in which interviewing differs from questionnaires is that the former does not seek to be fully representative. However, do not interpret this as meaning that researchers do not have to consider whom they should speak to and how potential interviewees should be sampled. Although interviewing is not used to prove or disprove a set hypothesis and rather to find, interpret, and discuss qualitative findings, the researcher is still required to develop a reliable and valid method that includes identifying a sample population and sampling from this. For example, if your research project focuses on the activities of Japanese electronics firms in your field location, the first stage will be to find/construct a list of all such firms. If this list is extensive you may wish to differentiate between the firms by categorising them (for example according to size or length of presence in the field location). You can then select (or 'sample') from this list, making sure you include a number of firms from each category. If you do not do this the interviews you conduct may be skewed towards a particular type of firm and your results will tell only a partial story. Be aware that you are not trying to answer everything about your topic – you are trying to answer your research questions comprehensively – so your sampling strategy should reflect this. Identifying a list of potential interviewees is an important step in the research process and should be done methodically. The discussion of documentary sources accessed through archives and libraries in Chapter 6 may help you to compile lists of individuals and organisations. Further advice on sampling strategies can be found in all of the core qualitative methodology textbooks.

You should also take into account who you are including in your research (and hence giving a 'voice' to) and who you are excluding. Historically social science research has marginalised, inadequately represented, and even completely excluded the experiences of many sections of the population, including women, the young, ethnic minorities, and the gay and bisexual community. Linda McDowell (1992) highlights several seminal research contributions that totally excluded women in their analysis, citing an infamous study by William Whyte (1955) entitled *Street Corner Society* in which the author seems to have been completely unaware that he had interviewed only men. While many geographers have worked hard to represent previously unheard voices, interviews continue to be structured around power dynamics and differentials, not all of which are understood or addressed. McDowell (1992: 405) argues that 'conventional research methods in human geography' – especially interviewing – have suffered from 'gender blindness'. She pointed out that 'male researchers may privilege male respondents without considering whether the information so obtained is systematically biased'. You should therefore take time to properly consider who you wish to interview – and thereby represent – in your research and if you are affected by any research blindness.

When narrowing down your list of potential interviewees to approach in the field, be aware that your list needs to be much longer than the number of interviews you plan to conduct. Not all the approaches you make will be successful. One question frequently asked by students is 'How many interviews do we need to do?'. There are no set amounts for this as much depends on the type of interview, its potential, the nature of the topic, and the sample size. 'How long is a piece of string?' is a favoured staff response that is often not satisfactory for those students who crave a set number here. To gain a more comprehensive answer your best strategy would be to sit down with a member of staff and talk them through your topic, sampling strategy, and interview plans.

Depending on the nature of your research topic, and therefore the type of social actor you are seeking information from by interviewing them, you may not be able to establish a target list of potential interviewees. For example, where your research focuses on organisations such as firms or public organisations, directories and lists can be used. In contrast, if your research requires that you speak to individuals on a private basis (i.e. asking them about their personal lives, circumstances, and feelings), such lists are not publically available. As such recruitment strategies will often be required that use different (or variations in the combination of) methods of approach.

Traditionally each interview respondent would be approached via a formal letter, often written on university headed paper, sent to them in the post. This would have had the advantage of seeming 'official' and important, but today could seem slow and expensive in comparison with an instant (and free) email communication. A letter can also get lost and/or be placed straight in the wastepaper basket! Email approaches have the advantage of being faster, but are just as easily ignored or 'junked'. Therefore, as researchers have increasingly begun to adopt email as a form of interview approach, the use of a formal letter has not necessarily been lost. It is advisable that in order to retain an 'official' air to your research, you should compose a letter of introduction that you can attach to your email. You should include details of your research project and make sure you are clear about what you expect from the respondent (i.e. a sentence along the lines of 'should you wish to participate in this research your contribution would take the form of an interview lasting around one hour at a place and time of your convenience'). The letter should also detail some ethical aspects of the research, such as a reassurance that the interview would be confidential, that data would not be distributed beyond the project team, that no individuals would be named in the report, and that the final report would not be publically available. A difficult issue — which all researchers face — is how we can convince potential interviewees to give an hour of their time when often there is little that we can offer in return! You should try to develop an approach that suits the type of interviewee you are approaching. For example, in the case of large corporations (or indeed, government officials) a little flattery can go a long way, so letters can begin with a statement that lets the individual (and the firm or organisation they work for) know that they have been selected on the basis of their importance in the sector and that the research will be incomplete without their contribution.

Approaching potential interviewees by telephone is daunting and will demand a certain set of skills from one or more of your group members, but it can be worth the effort. In certain geographical contexts (for example, the USA, Canada or Australia) it is feasible to find the name of a respondent in a directory or from the internet and contact them to introduce yourself and arrange an interview. In other places (such as Japan or Central and Eastern Europe) it is expected that you will participate in a more formal and lengthy process of introduction. Regardless of the context, you may find that you need to combine phone and email. In the context of corporate interviewing it can be most effective to first phone a company to find out the name and email address of the most appropriate person to interview; second, to email a letter of introduction to that person; and third, to leave a period of time (anything from a few days to a week, but never more than a fortnight) before phoning that individual (or their personal assistant) to ask if they wish to participate in the research. Step three may have to be repeated several times before you are able to secure an interview and your success will often depend on how willing you are to make a slight nuisance of yourself with repeated phone calls (repeated emails are likely to be ignored). It is also advisable to 'make friends' with the personal assistants of senior executives as they act as 'gatekeepers' (see below) and can make sure their bosses have read your email and letter and also control their diaries.

Gaining access to interviewees is a complex process of negotiation that is sometimes refreshingly easy but at other times can be frustratingly slow and indeed sometimes impossible. Are you able to pick up the phone and cold call potential interviewees? This isn't an easy task for everyone and doesn't necessarily get any easier the more calls you make, but it may become a valuable skill in your life post-graduation. How much do you want or need a particular interview? Your group needs to plan the amount of time you spend chasing specific people and prioritise according to their potential importance to your research project. It is advisable to start approaching research participants before you enter the field. The process of securing an interview can take several weeks, so if you wait until you arrive at your field location you may well fail to arrange a sufficient number of interviews. It is also psychologically valuable to have some interviews arranged before you leave for the field – this can be encouraging and help to keep you focused on your research project.

If your research topic requires you to interview individuals on a more personal basis (i.e. asking about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences) different strategies for recruitment will have to be used. You may wish to use 'on-site' recruitment as discussed above whereby you would visit a location when your potential interviewees may be present. One downside to this approach is that the sample would be self-selecting. For example, if you were conducting a research project on criminal activities in an area you could visit the police station to find some criminals to interview. However, your sample would only consist of unsuccessful criminals (i.e. people who have been caught). To find successful criminals you would have to infiltrate the criminal community (which is potentially very dangerous and unlikely to receive ethical approval!). Therefore, in order to find interviewees it may first be necessary to investigate any organisations that work in the area of your research, such as trade associations, government departments, and/or non-governmental organisations or charities. Information on these organisations is publically available and often makes an excellent first port of call for research. Individuals who work for such organisations are often highly networked and will be able to act as 'gatekeepers' for your research. A gatekeeper is a contact who can provide access to key people in a specific setting or they can be an individual who exercises control over physical access and provides or withholds information. For example, for those conducting research on primary education headteachers are often the gatekeepers: '[they determined] when we visited the school, where we visited the school, whom we talked with, and for how long' (Burgess 1991: 47). If you are able to identify any individuals or organisations whom you feel may become important gatekeepers for your research, you should endeavour to contact them as soon as you can, and certainly before arriving in the field.

While you are in the field conducting your research you may well find that you begin to deviate from your original list of potential interviewees and/or initial expectations of where your research would lead you. In many instances this will be a positive process as you are 'snowballing' in your research. 'Snowballing' is the term used to refer to the process of obtaining more information and access to additional interviewees through previous research respondents. During an interview a respondent may ask 'Have you spoken to so-and-so? ... you must, she knows everyone in this industry'. Gaining this contact, and being able to approach them using the interview respondent's name, can often make the process of securing an interview easier (as you are demonstrating that you are 'connected' and therefore worth investing time in). Snowballing is also often used to find and recruit 'hidden populations' – groups who are not easily accessible to researchers via traditional sampling strategies. Whichever methods you use to find your interviewees, each will require an investment in terms of time and organisational skills. It is very important to keep detailed records of who you contacted and when you did so in order to avoid getting mixed up. You should try to interview an appropriate selection of people, but also leave sufficient flexibility in your research methodology to allow for unexpected avenues to be followed and/or snowball interviews to take place.

PREPARING FOR AND CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Much of this chapter focuses on the interview with the expectation that you will be conducting face-to-face interviews. While there are other forms of interview available to the researcher (such as email, telephone or Skype interviews) this book specifically addresses research that is conducted *in the field*. It may be that a small proportion of your interviews will be conducted remotely (for example, short follow-up emails upon your return home), but when you are in the field you should expect to conduct your interviews face-to-face. This section will address some of the practical issues surrounding interviewing in the field before we turn to discuss issues of reflexivity in research.

How will you structure the interview?

While you are arranging your interviews there will be a number of decisions that will need to be made regarding the interviews themselves. You will need an interview schedule – a pre-prepared document that contains a list of topic areas and/or questions that you wish to ask. As outlined above, your interview can be highly structured (set questions followed in a set order – although this rarely happens in reality), semi-structured (allowing flexibility in the order in which questions are answered and leaving the interview open to unanticipated avenues of discussion), and unstructured (few questions, allowing the interview to take its own direction). Most undergraduate fieldwork interviews are semi-structured, but take some time here to think through which approach will best suit your research topic (for an example of a schedule see Figure 7.2).

Example Interview Schedule: Apple Supply Chains

1 Interviewee:
   - What is your role at the organisation?
   - How do you envisage your role changing in future years?

2 Supply chain dynamics:
   - How do you envisage the supply chain industry as a whole changing in future years?
   - What are the company's goals or targets to achieve efficient supply chain management and how will you attain this?

3 Supply chain management:
   - Do you directly transport apples from the producers or are regional distribution hubs used?
   - Which countries do you import from?
   - What percentage of apples come from outside the USA?
   - What percentage of apples are from the EU?

4 Regulation:
   - Do any regulating bodies govern your industry?
   - If so, who are these? How do they impact on your business?

5 Consumers:
   - How have consumer demands changed over the last decade?
   - How do you factor consumer taste into your business model?
   - Do your consumers care how far their apples have travelled to reach the store?
   - How do you anticipate customer consumption patterns changing with regard to apples?
   - How do you anticipate customer consumption patterns changing in general with regard to environmental concerns around food miles?

Figure 7.2 Example of a semi-structured interview schedule. This group of students decided to examine the supply chains of food retailers in their field location: a city in North America. They wanted to investigate the degree to which environmental factors were important in determining where produce came from and how large retailers sourced their produce. The group focused their research on examining one particular commodity: apples.

Figure 7.2 identifies five key areas of questioning/topics that the interviews should cover. The first asks general questions about the interviewee and these are designed as ice-breakers to get the interview going rather than questions that are fundamentally important to the research. It is, however, vital that you understand who you are speaking to and what their background is in relation to your research area. Interviewees may admit that they are new to a job or role and will therefore emphasise that their knowledge is not quite as vast as you may have hoped! The interview schedule should list some specific research questions (making it semi-structured) that can be asked in any order. Interview schedules can be flexible and you will need to expect to jump from topic to topic as natural conversations do not follow predicable patterns. When you are designing your own interview schedules you must first decide how structured you want them to be. Listing specific questions is useful for ensuring similar questions are asked in each interview and as a prompt during interviews (you may 'lose your place'!). After this try to consider the number of questions you wish to include and endeavour to achieve a concise summary that you can quickly scan through during the interview (also remember that seeing pages and pages of questions will intimidate the interviewee).

How many group members will attend the interview?

Much depends on the size of your group. If you are a group of three or more it is possible to split into two and you can therefore conduct more than one interview at a time. You also need to consider how the dynamics of interviews will be affected by the number of people present. How will a lone interviewee feel if confronted by six interviewers? Is it possible for all the group members to contribute if everyone is present? We would advise that you think about the roles that are required. You might find that two is an ideal number as you can take it in turns asking questions (and help each other to fill any awkward silences that may appear!). Whatever you decide, it is customary to inform interviewees of how many people will be attending the interview. This is especially important in some cultural contexts: for example, in Japan it is preferable if the number of interviewees and interviewers is the same. A Japanese company will therefore send two representatives to be interviewed if there are two interviewees. In addition, where you are asking people about potentially sensitive issues, or visiting them in their own home, it may be inappropriate for more than one or two interviewers to be present.

How will you record the interview?

Many qualitative researchers will record their interviews using a Dictaphone and then transcribe the interviews verbatim (word for word, together with silences, gestures, and interruptions). You may wish to do this as it provides a definitive recording of the interview. If you do so, it is still advisable to make notes during the interview in order to make sure you have the key points and if possible some good quotes. Dictaphones can fail, batteries can run out, and sometimes the location of the interview can make the recording unintelligible. We would advise that you take notes and discuss the interview immediately afterwards so you may make further notes. Remember also that some universities will require that you obtain written permission to conduct the interview and also to record it. It may be that your interviewee does not wish to be recorded. Ask just once about this and do not press individuals about recording interviews – your interviewees are well within their rights to say no and you should not create a difficult and tense atmosphere before the interview begins by trying to convince them otherwise. Just be prepared to make copious notes instead!

Where should the interview take place?

This may be something over which you have very little control, or you may be asked where you would like to meet. In either event, the location will have an impact on the interview. For corporate and institutional interviews you will often be expected to hold the interview at their offices. This may be in order to save time for the interviewee, but it also sends a message about the status of the interviewee as you are shown to his/her office or meeting room. Occasionally a corporate interview can take place outside the office when the interviewee suggests getting out of the office and having a coffee in a café. These more neutral settings can result in a more relaxed atmosphere and sometimes the interviewee will divulge more information and/or personal opinions than he or she necessarily would while in their office. One downside to such meeting places is that they are often noisy and the quality of any tape recordings will be poor (espresso machines are particularly loud on Dictaphone recordings!). Unlike when interviewing people in a professional capacity, when conducting research on the personal circumstances and opinions of individuals it is more likely that you will be able to suggest a meeting place. If you used 'on-site' recruitment, that site may also provide a space that you can use and is familiar to both you and the interviewee. Again, meeting in cafés or restaurants may be possible, but if the topic is particularly sensitive you may require a more private space. It is also possible that you will be visiting interviewees at home which will put them more at ease and offer you insights into the everyday lives of your research respondents. However, an interview at home must only be offered by the interviewee and should not be suggested by the interviewer.

Sarah Elwood and Deborah Martin (2000) suggest that the physical location of an interview will directly affect the discussion that takes place. This is therefore not a trivial matter and a consideration of the interview location should therefore be included (and justified) in our research methodologies. Robyn Longhurst recalls that she 'once made the mistake of helping to facilitate a focus group about the quality of service offered by a local council at the council offices. The discussion did not flow freely and it soon became apparent that the participants felt hesitant (understandably) about criticising the council while in one of their rooms'(2010: 109). Similarly, a corporate executive is unlike to criticise their company's strategy if interviewed at his or her workplace. If we are seeking critical insight and honest opinions from our interviewees, interview location is an important facilitator. As Elwood and Martin conclude, 'Reflection on the microgeographies of interviews is a process that starts before the actual interviewing begins, and continues throughout the research and analysis. Understanding the ethical implications and analytical significance of interview sites may help researchers to navigate the process of selecting and analyzing interview sites, while they try to balance the needs of research with the interests of participants' (2000: 656). Above all we should heed Gill Valentine's valuable advice: 'for your own safety never arrange interviews with people you do not feel comfortable with or agree to meet strangers in places where you feel vulnerable' (2005: 118).

How else can you prepare for interviews?

First, it is very important that you arrive at interviews fully prepared and informed. It is crucial that you make sure you have done your homework and researched the person, organisation, or company that you are interviewing. Make sure that all available information has been found and read (one of the strengths of working in a group is that you can split this between you). You will want to avoid wasting time in the interview collecting data that are already in the public domain. For example, if you are interviewing a representative from a firm you should read their website and, if available, their press releases and annual report (see Chapter 6 for more details on such documentary sources). If you do not do so you will waste time asking questions to which you should already have the answers (e.g. number of employees, company history, turnover, etc.). You need to be asking questions that are pertinent to your research. Similarly, if you are interviewing an academic make sure you have read any of their latest publications that relate to your research topic, otherwise the interview will be dominated by the academic providing an outline of their research findings. A more profitable exchange would arise from you critically engaging with their work, asking questions, and talking to them about your own research and how it relates to theirs. Second, make sure that you dress appropriately for the context in which you are interviewing. Smart clothes are expected for corporate or government interviews although some industries are more concerned with suits and ties than others. If in doubt wear smart clothes as you won't regret it (whereas you may if you are underdressed). If you are visiting people in their homes or in informal contexts, you should still make an effort to be presentable and not wear any inappropriate clothes (too short, too tight, etc.). Do not forget that you are not just representing yourself and your group, but also your institution.

REFLEXIVE RESEARCH: CROSS-CULTURAL INTERVIEWING AND POSITIONALITIES

Researchers using qualitative interviewing have increasingly paid attention to calls to consider 'reflexivity' in research, recognising the need to give due regard to the interpretive, political, and rhetorical nature of empirical research. Reflexivity is about 'ways of seeing which act back on and reflect existing ways of seeing' (Clegg and Hardy 1996: 4). As such, being reflexive turns the attention 'inwards' towards the researcher(s) and the research context. In other words, it is necessary for you to reflect on how you are conducting your research and to acknowledge that you are part of the research rather than independent of it. This section will discuss two elements of interviewing that require reflexive consideration. First, conducting research outside our home country and how the culture can affect our data collection, and second, our own 'positionalities' in research.

When conducting cross-cultural research in a bounded timeframe, there will be some challenges that will need to be overcome and some limitations on the data we will be able to collect. While qualitative methodologies are now the most commonly used approach in cross-cultural studies, there is a general lack of specific focus on cross-cultural interviewing and its implications for data collection and data interpretation (Shah 2004). An interview 'displays cultural particulars' (Silverman 1985: 174); it is determined by discursive relations and situatedness. As Shah (2004) suggests, our own understandings of interaction between the interviewee and interviewer may not be similarly interpreted by cultures that are outside western capitalist societies. Therefore conducting interviews of all kinds outside our home countries necessitates reflection and a re-evaluation of our previous understandings of our research practices and interpretation of meanings. Postcard 7.1 details student fieldwork in Malaysia, highlighting some of the issues that will be discussed further below.

Postcard 7.1: Interviewing in Cross-cultural Contexts: Student Fieldwork in Sabah, Malaysia, by Kate Lloyd

Conducting fieldwork and interviews in the cross-cultural context of Sabah, Malaysia, has been highlighted by students as one of the most difficult yet rewarding aspects of their fieldwork experience. Throughout their three week stay in Kipouvo village just outside of Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah, the students experienced a range of interview scenarios which included group interviews with government officials, individual interviews with indigenous village members, and community-based focus groups. The challenges they faced included language barriers, cross-cultural misunderstandings, and trying to undertake complex fieldwork in very short time periods.

Prior to leaving for the fieldwork, there was a significant part of the unit devoted to cross-cultural understanding and issues such as language which could impact on the collection of data in a cross-cultural context. Students spent time reflecting on their own 'maps of consciousness', how they are influenced by their positionality and the perspectives that are shaped by their own unique mix of race, class,

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gender, nationality, sexuality, and other identifiers which influence how the world is viewed and interpreted (Mullings 1999). Emphasis was placed on the importance of the process over the outcomes in an effort to manage the high expectations students often have about being able to collect data in a new cross-cultural context.

PACOS focus groups

For the majority of the three weeks the students were divided into groups and worked on a range of community projects with a local NGO called the PACOS Trust, a community-based voluntary organisation that has been working to raise the quality of life in indigenous communities in Sabah, Malaysia. In the first week they worked with PACOS staff to prepare the guides, activities, and data collection tools that would be used during a programme evaluation community workshop. Throughout the fieldwork, language barriers were considered to be the biggest challenge for the students. For example, of the four PACOS staff members working with the groups, only the coordinator spoke limited English, resulting in difficulties on both sides – e.g. questions and answers were not understood and this made it difficult for the students to understand the project and for PACOS to explain their objectives. Language barriers also may have led to different answers (from the coordinator) to the same question on various occasions – and the 'goalposts being continually shifted'. Focus groups were used as the key data collection tool and the students ran three of these in total: one with the men of the village, one with the women, and the third with the children. Similar language barriers existed when working with the communities, however instead of focusing on the limitations students were encouraged to build a rapport with the community members and communicate using photos they had brought with them, maps, songs and dance in order to engage and exchange information. They also worked with a PACOS staff member who translated questions and responses.

Homestay interviews

In the second week the students spent 2-3 days in a homestay outside of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, where they had the opportunity to interview their host family and community about socio-economic issues related to

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the impact of homestay tourism on their families and communities. Again language barriers were significant as little English was spoken in the homestay community. To help overcome language barriers students were paired up with the local University of Malaya, Sabah (UMS) students who accompanied them to the homestay. Students were encouraged to learn as much as possible with, through, and about their local peers and to reflect on the diversity and their experiences throughout their three-day-long homestay. The UMS students were also tasked with collecting data for the same project and with help from their 'buddies' the students were able to work through their structured interview questions which had also been translated into Bahasa Malay. While the majority of students found the experience positive, those who were very frustrated by the process felt they were unable to really engage in the interview process because of their buddies' lack of experience in interpreting. For example, some students who were cited reported that a lengthy response would be translated into one or two words. This resulted in frustration from many students who were reliant on their buddies for data. This experience reveals the importance of setting expectations prior to the fieldtrip and despite the many years we have run the fieldtrip there remains a need to emphasise the importance of the process rather than the outcome. Participant observation and participation was also used as a way of overcoming language barriers and students collected data through personal impressions recorded in their diaries and participating in village activities like rubber tapping, fruit picking, rice pounding, traditional music and dance, cooking, and simple everyday tasks.

Group interviews

Negotiating access to government officials to interview required that students follow the appropriate protocols. Official letters of introduction were needed to request each interview and we recognised that our relatively privileged position as staff and students from an Australian university helped to facilitate this access. These group interviews would usually begin with a presentation to the students by the official, often on current government policy, followed by a question-and-answer session. While language wasn't so much of a problem here as many officials spoke English or had professional interpreters, it

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was getting beyond the government policy rhetoric that frustrated the students and often inadequate responses to politically or culturally sensitive topics such as land rights and related legal issues were common. An essential part of the data collection process was scheduled time to reflect on the interview experience as soon as possible after the event. This would take place over dinner and on the bus on the way home, where students could fill in the gaps in interviews, clarify their interpretations, and discuss the responses. Upon reflection students reported finding the cross-cultural issues and language differences to be the hardest barrier to deal with, despite these also being the key reasons for wanting to participate in the experience.

When interviewing we should be prepared for our own expectations to be challenged. It is rare to enter any interview (whether at home or abroad) and be able to extract the exact data we require – to expect to do so is to deny the agency of individuals and the societal embeddedness of knowledge and how information is shared. An entire text could be written to explain how and why culture matters in the exchange of information, but for the purposes of this chapter a few illustrative examples will be provided make this point. In Jennifer Johns' experience of corporate interviewing across the globe, there are variations in the kinds of data interviews yield depending on the context in which these have been conducted. For example, British and American executives are often quick to offer their personal opinions on their company's strategies and to participate in discussions about how the company is operating and its future plans. These executives are rarely formally prepared for the interview and do not bring any supporting documentation with them. They do become more hesitant, however, when their company's financial performance is raised. Obtaining information on profitability is particularly problematic and once this is asked about the interview will invariably become less open for a while before the conversation returns to more amenable topics. In contrast, interviewees from South East Asia tend to request the interview questions before the interview and come to the meeting loaded with documentation. They are keen to impart quantitative data (and appear more open about financial data than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts) and will have concise answers to the questions prepared in advance. It is, however, far more difficult to instigate any discussion about corporate decision making (even when interviewing the Chief Executive Officer or Managing Director). The rich, discursive data that qualitative interviewing seeks are more difficult to obtain. To illustrate, Japan has been described as 'fact-rich but data-poor' (Bestor et al. 2003: 234). This situation is not due to any reluctance on behalf of the interviewees, it is purely a result of the cultural context in which the interview is conducted and the culturally-specific expectations of the researchers that cannot be fully met, as Mark Wang highlights in Postcard 7.2.

Postcard 7.2: China Field Class: Meeting the Real People and Getting Real Answers, by Mark Wang

For the past twelve years, the University of Melbourne has run a fieldtrip to China that has included sites in the Yellow River basin and the Yangzi River valley. Conducting a fieldtrip in China raises some challenges about how to engage with the local population and how students can collect their data. Based on our experiences in China, the followings tips will help you to conduct interviews in a foreign country:

- *Think carefully about how to access local populations. This can be difficult in some countries and we had particular problems in China. We found that organised interviews with government officials were not successful. It did not matter what level of government the officials worked in or if they were pure politicians or had formerly worked as professors or experts. Government propaganda and opinions were frequently quoted with rarely any critical views given. Similarly asking officials to arrange interviews and visits for us was difficult. When visits with ordinary Chinese citizens were organised, the individuals were unable to speak freely about their views.*
- *If official channels fail try other potential contacts and gatekeepers. We started to arrange all visits and interviews through local contacts such as Chinese professors. Given the difficulties of arranging 'genuine' interviews through official channels, if students want to speak to local people they have to rely on staff to help them or seekout their own ways of approaching people.*
- *Plan in advance how you will manage translation. The main barrier to interviewing ordinary Chinese people is language. Apart from my Chinese background and ability to speak Mandarin, about five to seven students each year will also be native Mandarin speakers. We also sometimes take graduate students as translators. When we conduct interviews with urban Chinese people or peasants we usually divide into three groups with at least one native Chinese*

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speaker in each of these. We also arranged it so that at least one Mandarin speaker is allocated to project groups that require semi-structured interviews.

- *Establish what the role of the interpreter is. Interpreters are reminded that their role is to interpret exactly what each side says, irrespective of whether students like or agree with it as it is not the interpreter's views that are being sought. The interpreter is a conduit. Our students are asked to speak in short sentences that can be easily translated; if they have a complex question they must break it down into small bits; if a respondent gives a long answer and the interpreter does not, enquire as to what is going on.*
- *Think about where you can conduct interviews so that interviewees are at ease. We try to interview Chinese peasants in their houses, either in sitting areas or in front yards.*
- *Remember your purpose. Keep in mind what sort of information you need from interviewees and try to avoid questions that are too long and complicated. Build up a picture of a complicated issue with a series of small questions.*
- *Ask people about what they know - about themselves, about what they do, about what they think. Do not ever ask people about 'other people', or 'people in China', or 'farmers', or 'people in Beijing'.*
- *Develop a standard set of questions and ask them in the same way in each household. Of course this does depend on the household composition and its answers, but try to get similar information about each household. Keep probing until you get the information you need in the form in which you want it. But don't turn interviewees off.*

Finally, the use of local contacts for informational and translatory services can be very significant in cross-cultural contexts where the researchers do not speak the language. The relationships between researcher, translator/interpreter, and interviewee adds another layer of complexity to the research experience. Their use is not necessarily straightforward and, as with other aspects of interviewing, some time and preparation should go into making sure that the translator is used as efficiently as possible. Academics will often use local translators (usually postgraduate students found through contacts at local universities) with highly varied results. In most cases, students will be a good source of local knowledge and will offer highly valuable assistance. This is not, however, always the case. Postcard 7.3 discusses how the positionality of a researcher can influence the relationship with local contacts.

Postcard 7.3: Local Contacts in Cross-cultural Contexts: Experiences of Interviewing in Hungary, by Jennifer Johns

Working in the field can present challenges beyond academic, organisational or practical concerns. The context in which we are researching and our own positionalities can interact in sometimes unpredictable and difficult ways. Often we do not need to travel far to face particular dilemmas in the field. I faced a specific set of challenges when working on a large project as a research assistant in Central and Eastern Europe. While in Hungary I struggled to communicate and work effectively with my local translator. This was partly due to my gender – although the translator was also female – but was primarily as consequence of my age (in my early twenties, I was younger than her).

Early on in our working relationship, it became apparent to me that the translator was not impressed with my age and had seemed to have been expecting to work 'for' a more senior (and older) academic. I did not appear to fit the bill! My initial response was to meet regularly with my translator and seek to get on with the job of arranging and conducting interviews as best I could. Few sources of advice were available and none of my methodological training or reading had addressed the issue of age from the perspective of young researchers in the field (apart from some implicit references to seniority in interview power relations). Our relationship was strained and research progress was slow.

A breakthrough came unexpectedly and gave me pause to think about how I was managing the situation. We were walking to attend an interview with a small video games company in a suburb of Budapest when we passed a dog that was sitting outside its house. I went over to the dog and spoke to it but then turned to my translator and said 'Silly me, he speaks Hungarian not English!'. She thought this was hilarious and we both had a shared moment of seeing my communication with the dog as a metaphor for our situation. I used this as an opportunity to talk through the issues with the translator and communicated that I wanted her to work 'with' me and not 'for' me. She expressed concern that my research would be unsuccessful as my corporate interviews were with older men. As it turned out my age was not a barrier to completing the research successfully, I just had to work harder to negotiate access to respondents and during

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interviews relied upon my knowledge of the industries being studied to come across as intelligent and informed. In a short time, the translator and I had a much more productive working relationship and the experience highlighted how the assistance of local contacts is often essential to our research and these relationships need to be fostered regardless of our own positionalities.

As researchers it is important we recognise that we are not objective, impartial robots entering the field without past experiences and our own viewpoints. Who we are will directly impact on how we collect data, particularly in relation to interviewing where our dialogue and questioning will influence the answers we receive: 'Whether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings complete with all the usual assembly of feelings, failings and moods ... there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher' (Stanley and Wise 1993: 157). Clare Madge (1993: 296) argues that it is crucial to consider 'the role of the (multiple) 'self', showing how a researcher's positionality (in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, sexuality) may influence the 'data' collected and thus the information that becomes coded as 'knowledge'' (see also Rose 1997). So you should think about your own background, circumstances, and characteristics and reflect upon how this will impact on your research.

One of the most pronounced ways that positionality is articulated in interviews is through the power relations that exist between researchers and their informants. Power imbalances between interviewees and interviewers exist on two levels: real differences associated with access to money, education, knowledge, and other resources, and perceived differences which exist in the minds of the participants (whereby they feel inferior or superior) (Scheyvens et al. 2003). As a relatively inexperienced researcher entering the field for the first time, it may seem as if the balance of power is weighed against you in interview situations. This may seem particularly acute when approaching and interviewing what have been termed 'elites' (this chapter has preferred to distinguish between professional and personal interviews). Certainly, when faced with individuals who consider themselves to be in powerful positions (such as management or politics) the researcher can feel inferior. You should ask yourself, however, if there is anything that you are able to do about this? How will it impact on the data you collect? If you demonstrate yourself to be articulate and informed on the research topic the interviewee is likely to respond with his or her own insights. Research participants can also 'gain' power by failing to respond to the interview process as the interviewer intends. For example, Rajni Palriwala explains how her fieldwork in Pakistan was 'subverted' by her research participants:

> Despite their good intentions, the villagers' perceptions and mine regarding data collection did not always coincide. The villagers, especially the women, would get bored and tired of what appeared to them as repetitious questioning. They saw no need for me to interview so many people and the same people repeatedly ... All through the period I was collecting data for my research I was also being thoroughly researched. I was questioned about my life, my hopes and future prospects and my reactions to their lifestyle. (1991: 32)

Perhaps more ethically problematic are interactions where the researcher assumes themselves to be superior to their research subjects, or where participants feel themselves to be inferior (due to conscious or unconscious acts by the researcher). This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, but in relation to interviewing we can see such power imbalances impacting on the levels and abilities of respondents to engage with the research (fear and insecurity can accompany feelings of inferiority) and this can result in participants telling the researcher what they think they want to hear, thereby compromising the research findings.

Qualitative interviewing relies upon an honest and open engagement between researchers and the researched. Being reflexive should be part of the research experience and each researcher should think about their positionality and how it may have affected their research. In group situations this may appear more difficult as you will have to consider the positionalities of all group members. But this can also be a good opportunity to learn: you may begin to notice how your age, gender, appearance and other characteristics shape the ways in which different people respond to you, and you might be able to contrast the ways in which interviews, conducted by different individuals, yield different kinds of data. Were the interviews different in terms of the types of discussion or information provided? Can you attribute this to any of the particular personal characteristics of the interviewers? Where you able to observe power relations between yourselves and research participants? Did these seem unbalanced? If so, how can you seek to achieve greater balance and is this necessary? These are all factors that you should bear in mind when you are reading through your interviews and preparing your research findings.

SUMMARY

This chapter outlined interviewing as a research methodology. As with many aspects of fieldwork, the process of planning and conducting interviews can be time-consuming and pressured. However, the types of data that are produced and the social interactions experienced are well worth the investment. The key points of the chapter were:

- Interviewing seeks to generate data that are insightful without being statistically significant or formally representative of a known population. The method should be regarded as distinct from questionnaires, although there is no reason why both cannot be combined in a multi-method approach.

- While there are different forms of interviewing, it is anticipated that interviewing in the field will mainly consist of face-to-face meetings. The process of arranging interviews can be lengthy and sometimes frustrating, so some practical advice was offered on how to successfully gain access to interview respondents. It has been stressed that much of the planning as well as approaching interviewees can be done before entering the field.
- Careful planning is necessary in order to conduct effective data collection and ensure that you get the most from your interviews. You should be well prepared for these, think about where the most appropriate places to conduct the interview are, and behave and dress in ways that are appropriate to the field context.
- The social and cultural embeddedness of knowledge demands that researchers themselves become immersed in the local context and, as such, cannot view themselves as detached and independent. Similarly, each researcher will bring their own influences to the field that will affect the interviewing process. This chapter recommends that you adopt a reflexive research strategy and reflect upon your own positionalities.

CONCLUSION

Due in part to the continuing popularity of interviewing in human geography and the social sciences generally, this method can be perceived as straightforward and rather simple. In fact, interviewing is far from easy and as this chapter has demonstrated there are a number of aspects to conducting interviewing that require planning, careful execution, and reflection. Should you choose to use interviewing in your fieldwork – either as a sole method or as part of a multi-method approach – you should be prepared to meet some challenges, particularly in the initial stages of identifying and approaching potential interviewees. Do not be too disheartened by rejections because if you persist you will eventually manage to arrange some interviews (and hopefully some before you enter the field). Conducting interviews can be intense and tiring and this chapter emphasises the responsibility that each researcher has to conduct themselves ethically while interviewing in the field. In addition to the richness and insight of the data generated by interviewing (when conducted thoroughly and thoughtfully), there is another reason why interviewing is so popular – researchers will find themselves enjoying the experience of meeting and connecting with individuals whom they would probably never have had cause to otherwise.

FURTHER READING/KEY TEXT(S)

- A key source for advice on 'conversational interviews' is Gill Valentine's (2005) chapter 'Tell me about ... using interviews as a research methodology' (in Flowerdew, R. and

Martin, D. (eds) *Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project* (2nd edn). Edinburgh Gate: Addison Wesley Longman). It offers guidance on who to talk to, how to ask questions, and how to practise interviewing skills.

- For a concise review of practical issues related to interviewing see Robyn Longhurst's (2010) chapter on 'Semi-structured Interviews and Focus Groups' (in Clifford, N., French, S. and Valentine, G. (eds), *Key Methods in Geography* (2nd edn). London: SAGE). The author uses her own interviewing experiences as illustrations.