Qualitative Interviews Overview

Pre-reading Tasks for Chapter 2

1. Make a list of all the different kinds of interviews you can think of? How would you classify them into different sorts of interview?
2. It is sometimes claimed that interviews have a ‘taken-for-granted nature’. What do you think this means and what particular dangers does this pose for the qualitative researcher?

Introduction

This chapter takes a wide-angle view of the interview, recognising that interviews take place in many forms and are very much part of our everyday experience. Through providing an overview of different perspectives of interview and research interviews, we can contemplate the ways in which we experience interviews in everyday life. Even if we have not conducted a research interview, we are likely to have been interviewed and certainly to have watched/listened to a range of interviews on television/radio. Interviews are both mundane and memorable, both ubiquitous and unique, and it is worth considering their range in terms of genre. This chapter assembles a collection of texts and perspectives on interviews that I hope will stimulate thinking about the nature and purpose of research interviews.

Another important aim of the chapter is to provide a starting point for novice researchers in establishing and understanding the roles, expectations and interactional routines in interviews. Getting a sense of
both the ubiquity and range of interviews in society is helpful in raising this awareness. The first part of the chapter works towards an appreciation of the genre of interviews and tries to provide a fix on what counts as ‘an interview’. To do this, it starts with a task and comment from a qualitative researcher who has shifted career into therapy and counselling. After considering the nature of interviews in our more everyday lives (e.g. political interviews), Chapter 2 provides a short summary of the history of the research interview and then narrows the focus to introduce some key concepts, ideas, and concerns related to qualitative research interviews.

### Task

Make a list of the three most famous interviews of all time? Why have you chosen them? Why were they important at the time?

### Iconic interviews

I am wondering what you have chosen. Most of us will choose either a political interview or a celebrity interview (because that is what we get exposed to most on television). Certainly there are a range of iconic interviews and my experience of the task above is that it produces really interesting discussion but also very different responses depending on age and background.

In a module called *Spoken English*, I show my postgraduate students a range of television interviews; they always find the Jeremy Paxman and Michael Howard interview one of the most jaw-dropping. Paxman interviewed Michael Howard in 1987 after his resignation as Home Secretary. The interview, available on YouTube, centres on the report of a meeting Howard had had with Derek Lewis (Head of Her Majesty’s Prison Service) about the position of John Marriott (the governor of Parkhurst Prison). Paxman essentially asked Howard the same question (‘Did you threaten to overrule him [Lewis]?’) 12 times with some variation (including displays of exasperation and explicit comments that Howard is not answering the question). Howard’s evasive answers are typical of the media-trained modern politician as he manages to keep giving his answer (I did not over-rule him) and evading the key aspect (threatening to over-rule). It is the sheer persistence of the grilling that students find stunning.

Politicians have, of course, become adept at evasion and not quite answering the question, or at least answering the part of the question