



# Contents

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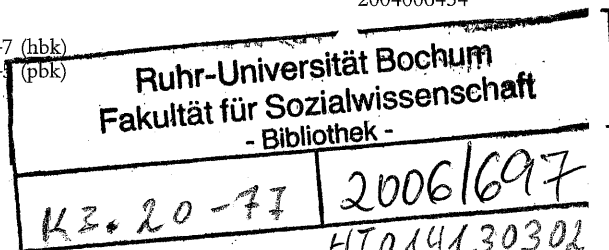
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might find a more formal, structured approach and even closed questioning appropriate.

Some specific styles of interview were introduced. Oral and life history interviews have a tradition that dates back to the classical Chicago School ethnographies. Focus groups are becoming popular in many disciplines, so this chapter has explored the role of what I call discussion groups and group discussion in ethnography.

### **Further reading**

Specialist texts on qualitative interviewing that are worth exploring are Spradley (1979) and Rubin and Rubin (1995). See Heyl (2001) for a review of ethnographic interviewing, including feminist interviewing, and Skeggs (2001) for more on feminist ethnography.

Thompson (1988) is the classic text on life histories and oral history. For a review of essays and volumes on life history and its role in ethnography see Reed-Danahay (2001), and see Plummer (2001b) on the same topic.

Gibbs (1997) and Morgan (1988) are useful texts on focus groups. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) have a fair bit on focus groups and interviewing, but not necessarily ethnographic.

## **6 Practical issues in interviewing**

### **Conducting the interview**

Having said in the previous chapter that I refuse to be too prescriptive about interview styles and techniques, there are a few practical guidelines I can give that relate to interviews that are pre-arranged, where you ask someone to agree to an interview, arrange a time and date with them and turn up specifically for the purpose of asking them some questions. These cover the stages of an interview, from arranging an appointment to deciding whether to record or transcribe the interview, and in most cases apply to discussion groups as well as individual interviews.

### ***Setting up an appointment***

Whilst you are doing participant observation all sorts of opportunities might arise for you to have a more in-depth conversation with someone. You find yourself listening to people, joining in conversations, slotting in a few questions of your own, directing discussions towards topics related to your research, and even initiating conversations. When you want to explore some issues or ideas in a little more depth you may be able very casually to ask someone to join you for a coffee, or to sit somewhere quieter and more private. Or you can ask someone to meet you later for more of a chat. However, it is likely that at some stage you will want to arrange an interview with someone a little more formally and

concretely than that. How do you go about it? Well, first of all I should say that in my experience people enjoy being interviewed and are happy to agree as long as they are not nervous about what you might ask, and can fit it in to any busy schedule they may have. So, it is important that you give the participant some information about what you are doing and why and that you fit in with them in terms of place and time of the interview. Of course, the actual approach depends on the person you are interviewing and the topic. Some people require a letter or phone call or both. Others don't need to be approached so formally. Some will want to know about your research in great detail, others will be happy to have a vague idea of your interests. Generally, you can consider the standard approach in ethnographic research to be informal, an approach that puts people at their ease, is not exploitative or demanding, and gives them power and control where possible. You should begin by telling participants what the research is all about, and giving them the chance to ask questions. Do this via a letter, a phone call, or (better) face to face. You should explain what you mean by an interview, how long it might take, what sorts of questions you will ask, and what will happen to the data. You should reassure the participant that they do not have to say anything they don't want to, that the research is confidential, that if they think you are asking the wrong questions they can tell you, and that they can change their minds at any time. I find a fairly humble approach works best, that demonstrates fascination and empathy with the person, making them feel that their contribution is crucial to the project. However, this approach must be combined with professionalism and a sense of earnest. If you are flippant, or too casual, and do not appear to be taking what you are doing seriously then why should anyone respond? Furthermore, being too casual might not work for some people. You might need to be more formal and more in control of the situation for some groups and some individuals.

### **Access can go through several stages and styles of approach**

John undertook ethnographic research in a school. His access to the school and to interviews went through several stages.

He had a friend who was a teacher in the school, and she told the headmistress informally about John's research.

John then wrote a letter to the headmistress explaining more fully and asking to meet her. At this meeting he described his proposed project in full and presented the headmistress with a written summary of it that she could read more closely later. He used headed notepaper from his university, and included the name and telephone number of his supervisor, in case the headmistress wanted to verify anything. The school was told in an assembly about John's research and a short summary of his project was pinned on a notice board for all to see.

John then began visiting the school regularly, sitting in lessons, walking around the playground, chatting to people in classrooms and as they played outside during breaks, and talking with the staff during their breaks. He wanted to talk with a few members of staff in more depth so during their coffee breaks arranged a time and place when they might be able to concentrate more and be undisturbed.

He also wanted to interview the headmistress of the school but, although she had agreed to be interviewed, each time he approached her she had an excuse for not fixing a time or place. He was approaching her too informally and when she was busy thinking about other things. In the end John wrote the headmistress a short note saying that he was pleased she had agreed to talk to him, and that as time was getting short he hoped it would be okay for him to come by her office at 4 p.m. (a time he knew things were a little calmer) and arrange the interview with her. He turned up at her office at 4 p.m. with his diary and pen in his hand, and a big smile on his face, and asked 'is this a good time to try to fix an appointment with you for the interview?' It was.

Whether your approach is less or more formal, setting up an appointment is usually easier if the person has seen you face to face, or if they know someone who has met you before and can vouch for you on a personal level. Some people use a letter or phone call as the first step and in that ask to meet the person to explain about the research and ask for an interview. You might consider using another word than 'interview', asking people to meet you to talk about something, or to have a chat, for example. You can still demonstrate that it is the other person's point of view you are interested in, not your own, but the word interview is already infused with meanings from other areas of social life – job interviews, for example. If you believe what you are doing is important and you put that across it is usually possible to persuade someone to agree to an interview. Here are a few points to bear in mind:

- Ask the person face to face for time to share a conversation or, if that is difficult, use a phone call or letter to explain something about your research and to ask for an interview.
- Consider using a letter to ask to meet the person to explain more about your research before they agree to an interview.
- When setting up the appointment give the participant the opportunity to ask about the research and the interview. Prepare a short paragraph or two on the project that you can leave with them to read later if they want to.
- Try using other words than 'interview', e.g. can we meet to chat, discuss, talk, have a conversation.
- Combine professionalism with empathy and interest, but avoid sounding patronising.
- Explain about your research and what will happen to the data.
- Give participants a good reason to contribute to the research.
- Reassure participants that they can stop the interview, change their minds, refuse to answer, add new questions.
- Ask permission if you want to record and transcribe (and maybe archive) the interview.

### *Time*

People often ask me how many interviews can be conducted in a day. If we focus merely on in-depth interviews rather than on the myriad conversations that can go on during participant observation, then I would have to say do not try to do too many interviews in one day. It is exhausting. You are listening attentively, empathising and drawing on your own emotional reserves, while also thinking about the implications of what the person is saying for your overall research interests, and for what you might ask next. You may be taking notes, you may be keeping one eye on your tape recorder and the other on the time, yet both on the participant. You may be listening to harrowing details of a person's personal experiences on the one hand, or on the other hand, as they are telling you a long-winded story about how their cat was brought down from the neighbour's tree you might be thinking how to bring the subject back to your topic or determining whether this might after all be relevant. Interviewing is completely engrossing. I doubt anyone could manage more than two in-depth interviews in one day, and even less than that if the interview is very long or intense.

It is worth remembering that interviewing can also be tiring for the other person, so even if you are feeling fresh and relaxed watch out for signs of tiredness from your research participants. Most in-depth interviews last between forty-five minutes and two hours. This is because less than forty-five minutes is not long enough to begin to talk in-depth about a subject, and after two hours people are generally getting tired. However, this is not to say that longer or shorter interviews are of no value. People have been known to tell me some very intimate things as a result of a great deal of reflexive thought in just fifteen minutes (usually because we have spoken before) and others have talked freely and happily for three hours without showing any signs of tiredness (usually because we have stopped for coffee, changed the subject several times, and the interview has not been intense).

Try to find some time to sit quietly directly after the interview to think about the themes that arose, to listen to your tape (if you used one) and make sure it worked, to check your notes and add

anything to them that you didn't have time to note during the interview. You may want to note down a few things about the setting, about body language, atmosphere, facial expressions. You should also spend some time merely reflecting on the interview and letting what was said work through your brain. You should never go straight from one interview to the next. If you do, there is a danger you will get the two participants confused, think you have asked something when you haven't or ask the same thing twice. You will not be able to give the participant due concentration, effort and interest.

As an interviewer you have to be fairly flexible with regards to time: you are subject to other people's whims and fancies, fears and frustrations. You might suggest the participant allows an hour and a half but they might have other ideas. Some interviews take much longer than you had expected. I went to interview one couple and they had invited five of their friends round for tea within an hour of the start of the interview. They hoped I would stay and meet them all and talk to them as well. I was there for five hours. Others are cut short for various reasons, and some just do not happen at all. A couple I went to interview had forgotten I was coming and were on their way out. They said, 'that's okay, come with us and interview us on the way'. So I did. It might be an idea to take some sort of snack in your bag in case of emergencies.

Remember there is more to interviewing than interviewing. Interviewing involves thinking, planning, writing, discussing with friends and colleagues, sorting through for themes, reading notes and transcripts and thinking again before the next interview. This is all part of the work. If you can avoid it, don't try to do several interviews in a row as if you are picking flowers. The flowers metaphor only works if you stop to look at the flowers and try to arrange them as you go along. A few points:

- Interviews usually last between forty-five minutes and two hours (as a rough guide).
- Allow time after the interview to reflect on it intellectually and to check tape recording and notes.

- Try to do no more than two interviews a day.
- Have a flexible schedule so that you can deal with the unexpected.

### *Role*

It is important in interviewing as well as participant observation to think about how you present yourself, what role you adopt, and how this might affect the interview. People react based on who they think you are, so think carefully what sorts of responses you are looking for. Perhaps you will take on a role similar to a therapist or an activist, a reporter or a historian. Some of my interviewees in Spain were anti-academic and anti-professional; it worked for me to be more like an interested friend and an empathetic observer (useful being a participant) or a type of therapist – not an academic. Of course, you are not a therapist and should not try to be one. What I am suggesting is that as part of the reflexive approach to interviewing you consider the nature of the interrelationship between you and the other person or people. The questions you ask will also affect how people see you. I got cast as tax inspector for a while because I had been asking about money. When Frederick interviewed men who took on the mothering role (chapter 8) he took on the role of empathetic bloke who was fascinated by the idea of men taking on the caring role but was not sure he could do it himself. This meant the participants could feel comfortable talking to him about their successes as well as their difficulties. However, this should be more a matter of emphasis than pretending to be someone you are not. Don't put yourselves at the risk of destroying an interview by being caught out pretending to be someone else; apart from being unethical this would be quite dysfunctional. Rubin and Rubin (1995) insist you need to be warm and responsive in order to make a relationship. It is okay to smile, grimace, and even look shocked, as long as it is *with* someone and not *at* them. They suggest that a good role is to think of yourself as developing a friendship, where you are the one doing the listening.

**Place**

Where should an in-depth ethnographic interview take place? If possible, choose a small, comfortable setting with few distractions. I find it useful to let the other person choose the place and time, to an extent, as long as you give them an idea that what you want is the opportunity to talk freely and comfortably. You can learn a lot about the person from allowing them these decisions, and it also makes them feel the interview is theirs as well as yours. A conversational-style interview will work better in a comfortable, small and private or intimate setting. Frederick asked his participants for some time when the children would be in bed or out for his in-depth interviews, explaining that the participant would be able to relax and enjoy it more that way. Too much background noise will affect your taping, if you do it, and certain settings may make intimate discussions difficult. However, I have conducted long interviews about people's personal lives and backgrounds in a busy Spanish bar with the television on and it has worked quite well.

**Conduct**

Try to think of the interview as a conversation with a difference: the difference is you are in control! Try to think of it as a conversation where you are focussing on the other person, guiding them, asking for explanation or depth. Try not to interrupt long renditions, but if you have to, guide the participant gently back to your topic. Encourage depth by asking for more details, for specifics or thoughts, when given brief answers. But always be polite and respectful. I have treated you as intelligent researchers and not included prescriptions such as don't ask questions like 'how often do you beat your wife?' (that is, very pointed or sensitive questions). or 'what do you think about friendship?' or 'how was it to be a male mother?' (that is, very general and vague questions). Avoid questions which are confusing, full of negatives, obviously expecting a certain answer, too closed (unless you want closed answers) or too nebulous (unless you want nebulous answers). But it is difficult to be prescriptive about

such things. I tend to ask myself questions such as, was the participant able to argue with me if he or she wanted to, could they expand or interject where necessary, did I allow them to ask questions and to think things through and change their minds? If you are sure of the quality or type of response you are hoping for it will enable you to check that you are making space for this to emerge.

**The ethnographic interview**

The best kind of in-depth interview takes place in a comfortable setting and consists of an hour or two of meaningful conversation between two people, who chat freely and undisturbed. One is doing more of the listening and the other more of the talking but both feel relaxed and are enjoying the experience.

Some rules can be broken – people can chip in, the room can be large and noisy, the approach can be fairly formal to begin with, that is all okay, as long as the participants feel comfortable and unpressured, and are able to talk to you freely and happily. If either of you feels pressured, if either can't concentrate (for example, because children are running around), if the conversation is not flowing well, or if it is hurried, the quality of what you hear will be affected and it is probably better to leave it and try again another time.

**Beginning**

Hopefully you have had time to discuss the interview and confidentiality previously, but reiterate it here, especially where there is concern shown. However, don't insist on it if things are flowing nicely; you can remind them at the end. Typically, begin with an informal chat, with phrases like: 'it's nice here isn't it?' Don't be afraid to make a joke or two to put the person, and yourself, at ease. Then get on to the topic you want to focus on gradually, starting from its edges. This early chat allows you to show empathy. In Frederick's research on male full-time carers, for example, he could start by

talking about the children, the flat or house, being at home and not working, and so on – topics related to the one under research. Eventually he would need some more directed questions that begin to get to the topic, such as ‘so, when were the children born?’ and ‘were you working at the time?’ But *not* ‘how did it feel to be a male mother?’ or other such sweeping questions early on. Gently encourage openness and frankness. Demonstrate that you really are listening by repeating what’s been said and asking relevant follow-up questions. Generally, you will have to wait until you have shown whose side you are on before asking very sensitive questions, but sometimes you will have to continue talk around the subject rather than being too direct.

Don’t be afraid to be in control of the interview, but allow the participant some control. Show you have some understanding of the subject by talking about your own related experiences or reading you have done, or people you have talked to, but be careful not to influence the response too much, and remain naïve in as much as you admit the interviewee can teach you a lot. Showing that you are sort of in charge (that is, not overpowering but that you know what you are doing) is more likely to put participants at ease than if you are fumbling and mumbling, but showing that they are the expert on the topic will encourage their responses.

### *The interview guide or plan*

It is very difficult in ethnographic research to prescribe what an interview guide or plan should look like. Sometimes, more directed questions will be used early in the stages of research when learning about a subject, then the information gleaned will be used to guide more informal discussions later, where you are less directed, less formally addressed, and hold interviews that are more like conversations. Other ethnographers will work the other way around, asking all sorts of little informal questions early on then being more directed as the theory and analysis develop. But informality in no way equates with lack of preparation! It is important to know what you want to achieve and then design a guide to suit you. Rubin and Rubin (1995) talk of a conversational guide

which has a set of *main questions*, and *probes* which enable these to be explored in depth if the participant gives brief answers, then *follow up questions* to take you into more depth. Rubin and Rubin insist any interview guide needs some kind of structure yet flexibility to enable you to respond to the interview situation. Personally, I have a topic or two that is the focus of the interview. This is broken down into a list of questions that I hope to cover, and these are broken down into sub-questions to help me if I am not getting the depth I hoped for. The list never goes over one page as this looks rather daunting to the participant. But I often find that responses to one or two questions will lead to a conversation that covers many of the others. A guide is there to help you if a conversation does not flow, and as a checklist if you need it, but should not restrict free-flowing conversation. Certainly, do not be afraid to ask questions that are not there, and do not feel every question you have listed must be covered. If you don’t need a guide don’t use one, especially for chats that go on within participant observation. When you have pre-arranged an interview, some participants, however, feel more comfortable when they see you have a list of things to cover.

In preparing for the interview, the degree of naivety which may help you find things out during participant observation may be something of a hindrance. You will usually get nowhere unless you know a little about your subject first (whether that be a topic or a person). ‘Busy people will not consent to be interviewed repeatedly by the manifestly inept’ (Rock 2001: 34). Even a life story interviewer has usually read a little about the person’s life, town, area of interest. It is a sign of respect, giving value to the person. But knowing too much can leave the participant with nothing to tell you. The best advice I can give is to be knowledgeable with regard to background information, but naïve with regard to the precise topic you are wanting the participant to tell you about.

### *Finishing*

Do not try to cover too many topics and do not feel you have to cover everything you planned to. The interview should be



enjoyable for both (or all) of you, not overwhelming. You should try to move away from emotional topics as you come to the end of the interview, by steering people off gently on to other topics. Try to end on a cheerful note (incidentally this goes for all types of interview, including quantitative ones). I usually finish by resuming the informal chat I began with, then thank the participant, and ask if I can stay in touch, either for clarification of points or to share findings, or even the transcript. Check points of confidentiality, sharing of notes, etc. Remind them if necessary of what you said at the beginning about confidentiality. If someone was being taped and said some very sensitive things, check that it is okay to use it.

### **Recording the interview**

You might want to video or tape record an interview. Videos are especially good for discussion groups, for example. Or you might take notes, or you might write notes up afterwards. Whether or not you decide to tape record an interview depends on the amount of detail needed and the potential effect on the participants. It depends how much recording equipment might disturb the interview, and on the comfort of the interviewer and interviewee with recording equipment. This means you also have to account for the feelings of the interviewer – you! Judith's (chapter 5) older participants were initially cautious about talking to her and she felt it was inappropriate to ask to record interviews she had insisted were informal and confidential. The British Consul, whom I interviewed about British migrants in Spain, did not mind being recorded but said much more after I had turned the recorder off than when it was on. Interestingly, when I asked if I could use the material that had not been recorded he agreed happily. It also depends on the circumstances of the interview, where you are, how long you have had to prepare, what the reception (sound) would be like. There is also the nature of the material to be taken into account. Some topics are far more sensitive than others and the presence of a tape recorder may make some people feel very uncomfortable. Frederick (chapter 8) had no problem asking those men who were

caring for their children full time for taped interviews; Gail, who did ethnographic research amongst her boyfriend's mates, felt very uncomfortable to ask if she could record interviews. Rubin and Rubin (1995) note how incongruous it appears to ask to record an interview when you have simply asked someone for an informal chat; however, since a distinct advantage is that you are then free to listen and think, this is what I explain to participants as my main reason for wanting to record.

Of course if you want to donate your data to an archive so that they can be analysed by subsequent researchers, you will need to tape record as much as possible, and of course you have to think about what to do with the information you gleaned when the tape recorder was off, and what it could not see. The advantages of recording are that you get all of the interview, but you should not forget about what happened before and after the tape was on. You can then keep the tape or transcription for future reference and you don't have to worry about memory. However, do not leave it too long before listening to it, making sure the tape worked, making additional notes, noting the context and body language and adding any other explanatory notes. Recording can also be useful in indicating to the interviewee that you are taking a professional approach, or that you are taking the interview seriously. I began one interview with my recorder off as we were in a busy bar and the interview was somewhat opportunistic, but the man I was interviewing stopped and asked me 'are you going to switch that on, then?' I said I thought it might be better for me to take notes afterwards and he said 'well, I've got a lot to tell you, you'd be better recording it'. I switched the recorder on and the interview flowed much better from that moment. It turned out to be a very good thing that I had turned it on because two other people joined us, and as we spoke some Spanish and some English it would have got very difficult for me to continue remembering what was said. Recording also allows you to concentrate rather than having to keep notes, thus leaving you free to plan follow-up questions. You can relax more and listen better rather than worrying about missing bits. You might, nevertheless, be glad to have a pen and paper handy so that you can jot down thoughts

and points you want to follow up. I would conclude by saying that to tape record is the best option if it is possible. It can be made more palatable by offering transcripts of the interview to participants. But, if you cannot record then it is better to do the interview unrecorded than forget it simply because you cannot record it.

One disadvantage is that the interview can take longer. You need longer to get into a conversation if either you or the other person feels at all uncomfortable. Some interviews work better without recording, for example some official interviews work better without a tape recorder, since the presence of such equipment can stilt conversations and encourage guarded behaviour. There is also a tendency for you to think less about the interview and the themes that are emerging from it when you are recording or have recorded because there is the security of knowing you have it all on tape. Yet, taking the time to listen to it all again or to read through the transcript adds to your workload. Thinking during an interview is crucial, if ethnographic research is to be iterative. If you do tape, get the technology right, know your equipment and make sure you have enough batteries or access to power to last! Don't be tempted to do a series of tapes without looking at the material in between. You should check it has recorded properly, and in an iterative research design you need to be thinking about what you will ask the next person in light of what the last one said.

### ***Transcribing***

If you have recorded an interview then it makes sense to transcribe fully, and verbatim, if you have got the time and/or money. Verbatim transcripts enable a range of later analyses (and archiving for secondary analysis). Verbatim transcripts are not selective, as your memory and notes would be. You may not yet know what themes are significant for your research and so verbatim transcripts enable the storage of themes you had not considered. But transcribing is very time-consuming and costly if you pay someone to do it. One hour of tape can take six to eight hours to transcribe (and more for discussion groups). Many people get around these problems by transcribing early interviews fully and then taking

themes from later ones. You should always do some of the transcribing yourself as the process enables you to start identifying themes and making connections. You become very familiar with the data and know later exactly where to find the bit you were looking for. Keep a note pad handy to write down thoughts as you transcribe.

You must always ask permission from participants before tape recording and mention that you might record, in notes, more than is on the tape. You can offer copies of the transcripts and should alert respondents to sensitive discussions by saying afterwards 'that was very frank – is it okay to use it?' Liz Kelly (1988) makes the point that a transcription of an interview is important since even one word left out can make a huge amount of difference to the meaning, but on the other hand, meaning is also conveyed in tone and gesture, and we need somehow to make sure these are recorded too or accept that someone reading a transcript will never get the full meaning.

### ***Note-taking during interviews***

If you decide not to record an interview, you have to take notes. Note-taking requires skill and practice. You need shorthand or quick writing and a good memory. It takes time to write things down, however quick you are, and sometimes the most you can manage is to jot down a few points. Immediately afterwards reread your notes and write them up in full. Add points of context, and pad out your notes to as full a record as you can achieve. This process also enables you to think about what you heard and plan your next set of questions. To help you reconstruct from memory, jot down all the main points as soon as you can and leave space to pad them out as you remember more and more. Some people talk into a dictaphone as soon as they leave the interview. This can work for participant observation too, making comments whenever you have the opportunity and then writing it all up later. Where possible, do *not* wait until after another conversation before writing up your notes (or at least making whatever notes you can) from an interview. If an interview is tiring anyway,

doing one and taking notes can be exhausting. During the interview your concentration will be very high, listening, extracting themes, asking for clarification or depth, remembering points to raise later. Note-taking can stilt the conversation, and can be open to accusations about lack of validity, or of putting words in the respondent's mouth because you have no proof. On the other hand, I have found that when I conduct an interview the notes I compile from it afterwards can be almost as full as the length of an interview transcript. With practice, it is amazing how much you can remember. Of course, you will never be sure if you have remembered something as it was said or have slightly altered phraseology or wording. For this reason in a report or write up I find it more honest not to use a direct quote unless I am absolutely sure that's what it is, and to find some way of indicating (for example, by using different font styles) where a quote is from memory or from a transcript.

### **Interpretation of results**

Always remember that people may be answering what you want to hear, or what they think you want to hear, or even what they want you to hear (they may have a political agenda of their own). The person could be deliberately misleading or even lying or being purposely evasive. Validity can be checked by the following means:

- using internal triangulation (eliciting the same data from the same person using different techniques);
- by external triangulation, or comparing reports of various informants;
- by comparing reports with own observations.

You can take note of contradictions between when the tape recorder is off and on (if you use one), watch for facial expressions, and if necessary probe for more information. But, ultimately, the lies people tell, the myths they live by or the contradictions they express are data in themselves. You should ask yourself what you are trying to get at: how people feel or what really happened?

Samuel and Thompson (1990) for example, draw on life history data to show how, in the telling of their stories, people reshape their memories, and recycle their traditions in order to make sense of the past in the context of the present. People tell their stories as fictions, for example as the successful business woman, the coping mother, the second-generation Muslim. The issue is whether what people tell you should be seen as a direct report of their experiences or as 'actively constructed narratives' (Silverman 2000: 32). Rosie (1993) for example, through a case study of how one young boy uses stories to achieve specific aims, suggests a way narratives can be interpreted even if they are clear fantasies. I recently interviewed some children in an international school. They told me stories of racism from Spanish children. I am not sure whether all the stories were true; certainly some sounded exaggerated. I could check using various techniques, but what is important to me is that if these children feel so aware of racism, and are constructing it as a story to talk about their relations with Spanish kids, this may well affect the form relationships actually take in the future. Finding out what is really going on may well be a way of addressing this as a problem.

### **Summary**

This chapter has attempted to outline some prescriptions and guidelines for conducting planned ethnographic interviews. The first step, of course, is arranging an interview, which may require a phone call or letter or, even better, a face-to-face invitation. In encouraging people to participate it is important to think about why it is in their interest and show due respect for their point of view. It is nice to be able to present potential interviewees with some kind of summary of your research that they can read at their leisure (and show to their friends). The chapter suggested guidelines for the conduct of an interview. An in-depth interview normally takes between forty-five minutes and two hours, and should take place in a small and comfortable setting. You should conduct yourself sensitively, not trying to cover too many topics, and not dominating the situation. No more than two in-depth

interviews should be attempted in one day and notes should be written up and recordings checked as soon as possible after the interview. An interview normally begins and ends with informal chat.

You may want to record and transcribe interviews. I argue that it is better to record if possible but it is not essential (as are none of the prescriptions above – ethnography should take a flexible and reflexive approach to all data collection). However, taking notes in an interview that is not recorded requires skill and effort. Finally, there are ways you can check the validity of what people are telling you, but depending on your philosophical position you may be as interested in the role and construction of stories and myths.

### **Further reading**

As with chapter 4, practical issues are best considered through practice and reading reports of other researchers' practice. There are several references throughout this chapter you can follow up and a considerable amount of research has been done using qualitative interviews, from which you can learn. Rubin and Rubin (1995) have very good practical tips from design through to conducting and analysing interviews, and have very good advice about interview guides.

Technology for recording and transcribing interviews changes so fast a book cannot remain up to date but I have found journalists to be better than social scientists at being at the cutting edge with information about what is being developed and how it is used.

## **7 Visual data and other things**

We noted in chapter 1 that Malinowski advised not simply the collection of observations and words but also the collection of other forms of data. There may be any number of things that we would want to collect that would enable us better to understand the group of people we are coming to know. For Malinowski this included collecting and making your own statistical summaries, collecting artefacts, taking photographs, making lists, documenting habits, drawing maps and much more besides. It was argued that in some ways this reflected his positivism-informed need to collect evidence and facts, but in contemporary ethnography the collection of things other than words and observations need not be a positivist exercise. You may want to make use of or collect memos, photographs, advertisements, gossip, diaries, letters. The point of this chapter is to make you think about what else might be out there that is worthy of including as 'data'. I will start by thinking about visual data and then briefly consider other forms of data, before exploring two very specific approaches to the analysis of 'texts': semiotic and content analysis.

### **Visual data**

Given that ethnography is an observation-based method of studying society it is interesting to note the relative underuse of visual images even today. Maybe we can explain this with reference to the historical prevalence of the use of words and texts as both