

quite easy. You may be able to go with a friend or simply ask the instructor if you can sit in on a class 'to understand what it is like to be in this class' (focus of inquiry).

- 2 Go to the class equipped with paper and pens. If students can sit anywhere, try to sit in a place that is in the middle of things, rather than on the far outside edge or in the back of the room. Seating yourself outside the place where most students sit emphasizes your outsider status. On the other hand you may find that you have taken someone's seat, as it often happens that without any formal designation, students label a chair as theirs. In any case, notice what happens.
- 3 As you sit in the class, you will probably be more of an observer than a participant. Focus on what is going on and not on what you think about what is going on. Write down behavioural descriptions: No one raises their hand in response to the instructor asking, 'Anybody have any ideas about Sternberg's theory of intelligence?' Make a diagram of the classroom, including where students sit, where the instructor sits or stands, where the clock is, etc. Note the time you are taking notes and keep a running log of the time on your field notes (see Figure 7.1). Record what happens in the class in as much detail as possible. Use your diagram to locate students who talk or otherwise come to your attention. Chart the movement of the teacher throughout the class period. Capture in as much detail as possible what is going on. While it is not necessary to take precise notes about the course content, it would be helpful to note the progression of topics being presented and discussed.
- 4 You are likely to get ideas and wonder about what is happening in the setting, and your field notes can accommodate your thinking. For example, you may find yourself wondering why the instructor stands on the left side of the classroom while almost everyone else sits on the right. Or you may notice that a few people have their heads down, pen poised, but are actually asleep, and wonder whether the early hour of the class is an important factor in understanding what goes on. These types of observer comments can and should be entered into your field notes as you think of them by using parentheses, brackets, or O.C.: observer's comment (see Figure 7.1).
- 5 After completing the field observation, take some time to review your notes. Add any observations you have omitted. Study your notes. Then on a separate page respond to the following questions: What is important here? What is it that I need to find out more about? What would I want to focus on more closely if I returned to this setting?
- 6 Finally, evaluate your experience of being a participant observer and preparing on-the-spot fieldnotes. Were you able to separate description from interpretation? Could someone reading your notes (typed) gain some understanding of what was happening in the class? Positive responses to these questions reflect the skilled use of participant observation.

One female student who completed this exercise had an unusual and funny experience. While she was sitting in a large lecture hall, another student unknown to her, turned to her, addressing her correctly as 'Sue'. The student then proceeded to ask the research student researcher about the last lecture, which she had missed, and whether she could borrow her notes. This exchange went on for awhile (as the lecturer talked on), until the research student corrected the case of mistaken identity. The advice this student gave to the rest of us will serve any participant observer well: Be prepared for the unexpected!

#### *Research exercise #9: Reconstructing observations from the field*

Rather than being able to take notes as one observes, the participant observer is more often required to recall the setting, participants, events, and conversations in

detail after leaving the field. The purpose of this exercise is to practice this important skill.

- 1 Think about some settings or places you would like to know more about by being in that setting. A medical clinic? Backstage at a theater? A day care center? A senior citizen's community center? Make a list of these places.
- 2 Examine your list and identify a setting to which you have some reasonable chance of gaining access. Prepare a focus of inquiry statement that you can communicate to the gatekeepers of the setting. For example, 'I would like to know more about what it's like backstage while a performance is going on.' Or, 'I would like to understand what a senior center is like.'
- 3 Try to make the necessary arrangements to visit the setting for one hour. In some situations you will only need to ask; people will be delighted — flattered — at your interest in them. In other cases, it may be more difficult to gain entry into the setting. If you are unable to access the setting you are interested in through honest disclosure of your focus of inquiry, do not resort to covert or deceptive practices. Return to your list and find a setting that you can observe.
- 4 Spend one hour in the setting as a participant observer. Take a small note pad with you but do not take notes in the setting in which you are observing. If possible you can briefly excuse yourself from the setting and find a bathroom or other private location to jot down a few of your observations. Be alert and aware of what is going on there, trying to take in the whole situation, rather than arbitrarily picking some smaller corner, person or group to observe. Be aware of when you feel you need to be an observer and when you feel you need to participate, in order to gain an insider's view of this setting.
- 5 Immediately after leaving the setting and preferably before driving home or talking to anyone, reconstruct your observations. Begin by jotting down bits of what you heard and saw. Write down as closely as possible what people said. Record exact words and statements that you remember. Draw a detailed diagram of the setting. Then go back through your notes and develop a descriptive account of what happened in the setting while you were there, including such things as a description of the people you saw and heard, where you were, what happened and when, etc. Add observer's comments [OC]: your own musings, questions, and hunches about the place. Write clearly enough so that if you were lucky you could have someone else type up your field notes.
- 6 Carefully reread your field notes, guided by these questions: What is important here? What is it that I need to find out more about? What would I want to focus on more closely if I returned to this setting? Your responses to these questions would allow you to refine your focus on your next visit to the setting or in interviewing some of the people you saw there. In essence, you would be sampling from the possible settings, such as the day and time you observe and participants (people who seem to know what is going on) in order to understand what is important to know in the particular place you are studying.
- 7 Finally, evaluate your experience as a participant observer preparing field notes afterwards. How accurately were you able to recall the physical setting, events, and conversations? What strategies aided your recall? What will you do differently the next time you are in the field?

### **In-depth Interviewing**

As we noted in an earlier chapter, an interview is a conversation with a purpose (Berg, 1989; Dexter, 1970; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In qualitative studies, interviews often take place while one is a participant observer, although people in the setting may not realize that the informal conversations they have been engaged in are interviews. In the field it is sometimes possible to arrange interviews with people whom



the researcher believes may add to her or his understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Formal arrangements such as this also take place when interviews are the primary means of inquiring about some phenomenon. Participants agree to be interviewed to help the researcher pursue his or her focus of inquiry.

In his book *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*, Elliot Mishler highlights the difference between a qualitative research interview and other standard forms of interviewing, and proposes a reformulation of the process:

At its heart is the proposition that an interview is a form of discourse. Its particular features reflect the distinctive structure and aims of interviewing, namely, that it is discourse shaped and organized by asking and answering questions. An interview is a *joint product* of what interviewees and interviewers talk about together and how they talk with each other. The record of an interview that we researchers make and then use in our work of analysis and interpretation is a representation of that talk.

(Mishler 1986: vii, italics added)

Qualitative studies that have employed Mishler's model of the research interview as the method of data collection have added substantially to our knowledge in many fields. In psychology, several important studies have illuminated important processes in women and men's intellectual development (Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1970), in adult identity development (Hancock, 1989; Whitbourne, 1986), in women's moral development (Gilligan, 1982), and in adolescence girls' psychological development (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). In education, in-depth interviewing has also been a fruitful method for better understanding children's educational experiences (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982), the lives of children and adults labeled *mentally retarded* (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975) and student life on college campuses (Kuh and Andreas, 1991). In cultural anthropology and sociology, the use of interviews to illuminate salient features of culture and human experience has a long and established history.

What characterizes the interviews presented in these research reports is the depth of the conversation, which moves beyond surface talk to a rich discussion of thoughts and feelings. Several features of the qualitative interviewing situation make this possible. First, qualitative interviews average one-and-a-half to two hours in length, allowing for *prolonged engagement* with the interviewee. This time frame allows the

competent interviewer to establish rapport with the interviewee and to foster a climate of trust. Second, in many studies the interviewee is interviewed more than once, pursuing in subsequent interviews topics that emerge as important from preliminary data analysis. This kind of persistent involvement with interviewees makes it more likely that the researcher will come to understand at a deeper level their perceptions related to the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research interviews are typically referred to as *depth* or *in-depth* interviews (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

The skill of interviewing has been the subject of numerous books since it is a skill that has wide applicability. In our day-to-day interactions at home, work and school, and in fulfilling the requirements of jobs such as personnel officer, social worker, and program evaluator, we learn by asking others to inform us by answering our questions. The characteristics of a good qualitative interviewer are much the same as those that characterize people who are able to tactfully inquire and hear what others are saying. But perhaps most critical to being a skillful qualitative interviewer is deep and genuine curiosity about understanding another's experience.

For the purposes of qualitative research, the shape that an interview may take has been described in various ways. Common to most descriptions is a continuum of interview formats ranging from a structured format to a relatively unstructured format. The structure of the interview has to do primarily with the extent to which the questions to be asked of the interviewee are developed prior to the interview. Three main formats for an interview provide a useful beginning to a discussion on interviewing: the unstructured interview, the interview guide, and the interview schedule<sup>1</sup>. Each interview format differs in the level of skill required of the researcher to maintain the conversation around its purpose. Each format, however, shares a critical commonality: The questions are open-ended and designed to reveal what is important to understand about the phenomenon under study.

### The Unstructured Interview<sup>2</sup>

Informal conversations initiated and guided by the researcher while in the field are a kind of unstructured interview. With one's focus of inquiry clearly in mind, the researcher tactfully asks and actively listens in order to understand what is important to know about the setting and the experiences of people in that setting. This purposeful conversation is not scripted ahead of time. Rather, the researcher asks questions



pertinent to the study as opportunities arise, then listens closely to people's responses for clues as to what question to ask next, or whether it is important to probe for additional information. Jean Piaget (1926), an early pioneer of this method of inquiry, called it the *clinical method*. His focus of inquiry was to understand more about how children think.

Some qualitative researchers use the unstructured interview as their primary or only data collection method. Interviews are particularly important when one is interested in gaining *participant perspectives*, the language and meanings constructed by individuals (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). The work of William Perry exemplifies this approach. Perry set out to investigate what is best summarized in the title of his research report, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*. Perry invited a sample of male students attending Harvard University to volunteer to be interviewed about their college experience. The letter inviting participation read: 'We feel that students with different views about education may experience their years in college in very different ways and that it is vital to know about the different paths of this existence' (1970: 17). This invitation to be involved in the study was extended at the end of the men's freshman year. In his account of the research methodology, Perry (1970) describes the importance of providing an opportunity for students to share their own perceptions and terms with the interviewer, rather than having the interviewer influence students' responses through a more structured interview format. After several trials, Perry settled on the way to go about conducting the interview:

We first welcomed the student, restated our interest in hearing from the students about their own experience, and asked permission (with assurance of anonymity) to [tape] record. We then said, in the general form developed by Merton (Merton, Fiske and Kendall, 1952): 'Why don't you start with whatever stands out for you about the year?'

(Perry 1970: 19)

Using this single open-ended question and then relying on the skills of the interviewer to elaborate and extend the contents of each interview, Perry was able to make extraordinary use of the unstructured interview to understand male students' thinking. The epistemological theory that was derived from the Harvard students' interviews has paved the way for additional qualitative studies of adult thought and development (Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

The value of a single important question in framing a qualitative

interview was evidenced in a study currently underway at a local middle school. The teachers and administrators were interested in understanding what school practices (including teaching practices) may be contributing to academic failure among students. The research team, made up of two university teacher-researchers and nine middle-school faculty members, set out to explore the perceptions of students, teachers and parents on this topic. After trying to develop an extensive set of open-ended questions to ask each of the constituency groups, the team came to the conclusion that one question captured the core of the inquiry: 'What school-based practices contribute to academic failure at this school?' Through relatively unstructured individual and group interviews the research team decided to pose this question as the basis for their study (Maykut and Erickson, 1992).<sup>3</sup>

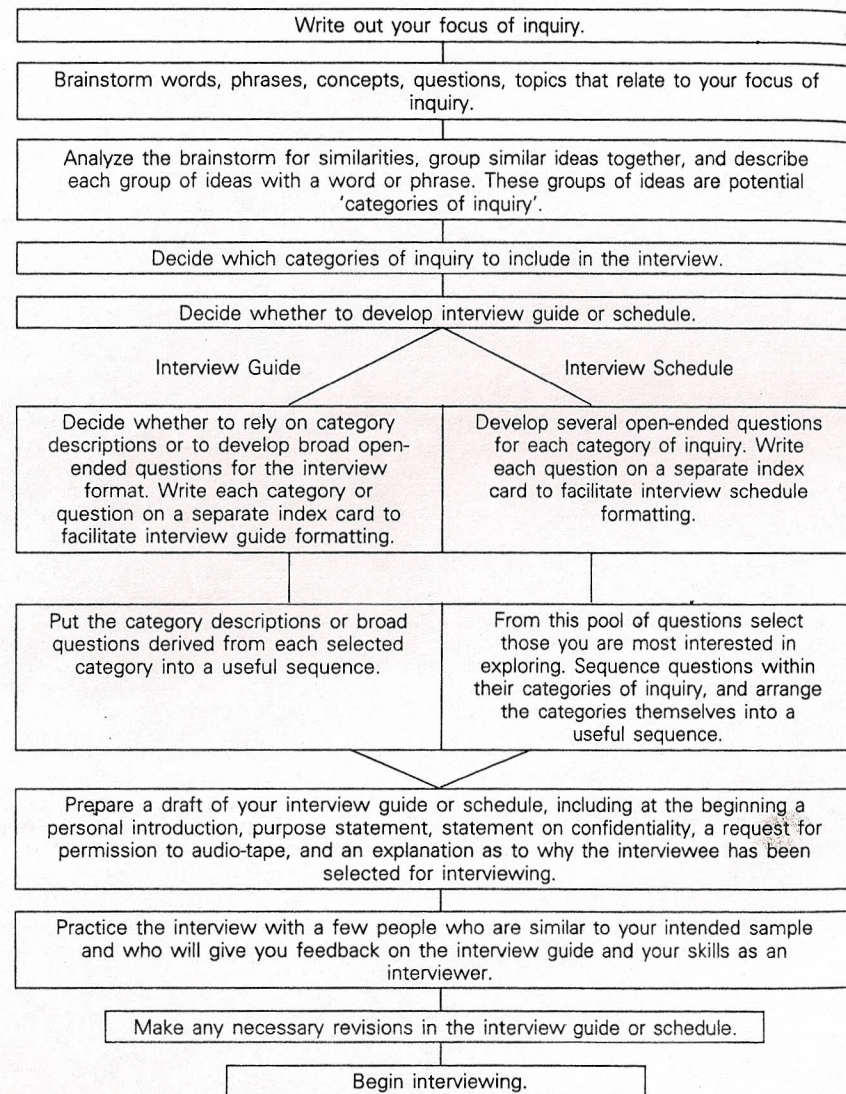
Whether unstructured interviews are conducted in the field or arranged, the contents of the interviews must be written down. Informal interviews in the field are reconstructed and entered into the researcher's field notes. Arranged interviews are frequently audio tape-recorded, and if tape-recording is not desirable or possible, the researcher may take some notes during the interview and then reconstruct the interview afterwards. We will discuss note-taking during interviews and transcribing interviews from tape-recordings in a later section of this chapter.

### The Interview Guide and Interview Schedule

It is quite possible that there is more than one key question that the researcher wants to pursue in a qualitative interview. A series of topics or broad interview questions which the researcher is free to explore and probe with the interviewee is usually referred to as an *interview guide* (Patton, 1990). An interview format consisting of a detailed set of questions and probes is called an *interview schedule*. In either situation, we have found the procedure illustrated in Figure 7.4 to be very helpful in developing an initial framework for the interview. In the actual interview situations, the skilled researcher will discover what is important to the interviewees, within the broad boundaries of the interview topics and questions, and pursue these new discoveries in the interview. Whether the researcher works alone or with a team, our procedure for developing a more structured interview guide has proven very useful. Team involvement in interview development can yield more interesting ideas than one might think of alone. We recommend that interview development work done with others be recorded as it happens



Figure 7.4: General procedure for developing an interview guide or an interview schedule



on large pieces of easel or banner paper. Individual researchers will also benefit from putting their thinking on paper. This kind of graphic approach to interview development fosters idea-generating, synthesis and problem solving, and provides a reusable record of the individual or team's work (Sibbet, 1981). By maintaining a record of interview

development, the researchers begin an 'audit trail' of their work, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the research outcomes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

### Brainstorming

The first step in interview development is to write out the focus of inquiry. Recall from our earlier discussion that the focus of inquiry can be stated as a sentence or as a question. Next, we have found it useful to conduct a brainstorming session for the purpose of idea generation. The brainstorming session asks the researcher to freely consider what he or she might want to explore with people in order to understand the phenomenon being studied. Words, phrases, concepts, questions, and topics are quickly recorded without judging their worth to the inquiry. We suggest writing all over the paper, avoiding list-making that may restrict creative thinking (Rico, 1983; Sibbet, 1981). It is also useful to set a time limit for the brainstorming; approximately ten minutes is usually sufficient.

### Developing categories of inquiry

Following a productive brainstorming session, the researcher usually has many ideas recorded. The next step toward interview development is to examine the ideas for similarities, and to group similar ideas together. This can be done directly on the brainstorming session paper by circling similar ideas with the same colored marker, or a new sheet of paper can be used to list similar ideas together. Next, develop a word or phrase that describes each cluster of ideas. We refer to these clusters of similar ideas as potential categories of inquiry for the interview. Note that the categories of inquiry are *inductively* derived from the working knowledge and ideas of the researcher. Finally, among your categories of inquiry select those which you are most interested in pursuing in the interview.

### Deciding on a format

At this point the researcher needs to decide whether to develop an interview guide or a more elaborate interview schedule. There are several factors to consider in this decision: one's skill as an interviewer, one's



working knowledge of the focus of inquiry, and whether the interviews are being conducted by more than one researcher. Beginning interviewers are more likely to find an interview guide providing too little direction for the interview. Supplementing an interview guide with possible questions, probes and cues can be quite useful, although a more structured interview schedule may be the better alternative. Experienced interviewers may like the freedom offered in the interview guide to ask questions and probe for information in their own way.

The interview guide format is especially suitable for exploring phenomena through interviewing when little is known about the topic. For example, we are currently conducting a qualitative study with two colleagues concerning the experience of US National Guard members who served in the Persian Gulf War in 1991 (Schafer, McClurg, Morehouse and Maykut, 1991). While Schafer and McClurg had considerable experience working with other war veterans, we had relatively little reliable information on men and women soldiers' experience in this recent war. We had the opportunity to conduct group interviews with interested soldiers during their first weekend of guard duty after the war. We developed the following interview guide to be used for the group interviews.

*Desert storm interview guide: the experience of coming home*

- What is it like to be back together as a unit?
- What was it like to be in the [recent homecoming] parade?
  - What did you notice?
  - What did it feel like?
  - What did you hear?
- What surprises did you experience in coming home?
  - Were you surprised at anything *you* did?
  - Were you surprised at what other people did?
  - Did anything appear completely different to you upon returning?

[Ask for specifics: How? What? When? Where?]

- What are some of the most important photos that you took while you were there?
- What pictures do you wish you had but do not?
- How do you feel about the way others behave or are responding to you?
- What's next for you?

Although we each had considerable skill in interviewing, we decided to co-conduct each group interview to allow us to more fully attend to the relatively large groups (13–23 people in each group). We began the group interview with the focus of our study: Understanding more about the experience of men and women who had served in the war, particularly that of coming home. There were brief introductions and then one of us asked the first question from the interview guide. The lively and far-ranging conversation that ensued, with our occasional requests for clarification, covered each of the questions in our guide, and more importantly, revealed many unexpected experiences and issues of importance among the veterans. The interview guide provided us with a framework for exploring experiences about which we were quite unfamiliar.

The decision to use an interview guide or an interview schedule is also influenced by the number of researchers involved in conducting interviews. When more than one researcher is involved it is often desirable to develop a more detailed interview format to ensure that interviewees are asked about the same topics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). However, with skillful interviewing, unexpected topics are still allowed to emerge even out of the more structured interview schedule.

If the researcher chooses to develop an interview guide, the next decision is whether to simply list the categories of inquiry to be pursued in the interview or whether to pose a series of broad questions based on the categories of inquiry (see Figure 7.4). When using only the categories of inquiry, without prepared questions, the researcher must rely on her or his question-asking and other communication skills to conduct the interview. Many qualitative researchers prefer the openness of this approach. However, we strongly recommend some question preparation prior to any research interview, particularly for beginning researchers. In our study of Persian Gulf War veterans, we decided to pose several broad open-ended questions for our interview guide to help us articulate more clearly what we wanted to find out, and to provide some continuity across interviews conducted by different researchers.

*Research exercise #10: Beginning the development of an interview*

Examine the focus of inquiry that you developed in *Research exercise #6*. Would individual interviews with members of a relevant sample yield potentially useful information? If so, use this focus of inquiry for the exercises on interview development (#10–13). If your original focus of inquiry does not lend itself to interviewing as a means of data collection, develop a focus of inquiry that is better suited to interviewing. For this exercise we will be following the first few steps of the procedure for interview development outlined in Figure 7.4.



You will need several sheets of paper and pen or marker to complete this exercise.

- 1 The first step of this exercise returns us to the skills of brainstorming and concept mapping. On a plain sheet of paper, write your focus of inquiry in the center and circle it. A large piece of paper is helpful.
- 2 For the next five minutes, brainstorm words, phrases, concepts, questions and topics that you would like to pursue in an interview about your focus of inquiry. Write these words, concepts, etc., on the paper around your focus of inquiry, in the same way that you constructed a concept map for *Research exercise #5*.
- 3 Review the product of your brainstorming and cluster together similar ideas. Next, develop a word or phrase that describes each cluster. You can do this clustering by drawing in connections on your concept map, or by using a clean sheet of paper to record your work. These clusters are your *categories of inquiry* for developing interview questions. Review the categories of inquiry that you have developed and eliminate any categories that do not really interest you. Additional categories of inquiry can be added later as their importance becomes evident.
- 4 At this point it is useful to decide whether you want to develop an interview guide or a more structured interview schedule. Review the discussion above, *Deciding on a format*, to help you make your decision.

### Preparing interview questions

As Stanley Payne (1951) noted, question-asking is an art, and like most art forms it is improved through practice and persistence. Whether the researcher is preparing questions for an interview guide or an interview schedule, there are many factors to consider. The primary consideration for qualitative research is that the questions be open-ended, inviting the interviewee to participate in a conversation. Open-ended questions often begin with the word such as, 'What do you think . . . ?' 'How do you feel . . . ?' 'In what way . . . ?' 'How might . . . ?' An open-ended question is one which is not easily answered with a discrete response, such as 'yes' or 'no', or a brief word or phrase. Questions that are designed to yield discrete responses of short answers are referred to as closed questions. They close down the conversation, and provide little opportunity for gaining participant perspectives. In order to conduct an interview that is experienced by both researcher and interviewee as 'a conversation with a purpose', it is essential to ask open-ended questions.

An example will help illustrate the difference between open and closed questions. In the dialogue below, a college teacher is trying to understand from a student how she might improve the second half of a semester-long course.

*Question:* How do you think the course is going?

*Answer:* Fine, just fine.

*Q:* Have there been enough interesting classes to keep you coming to class?

*A:* Sure.

*Q:* What about the textbook? Do you find it worthwhile reading?

*A:* Yeah. It's not too bad.

*Q:* Do you think I require too many assignments or too few?

*A:* Definitely not too few!

*Q:* Do you think other students in the class share your views?

*A:* I think so.

*Q:* How would you grade your own work in the course so far?

*A:* Between a 'B' and 'C'.

*Q:* I've found your work very interesting to read. Thanks for the feedback on the class. See you Monday.

(Student thinks, 'That was quick.' Teacher thinks, 'Students just don't want to tell you what they really think.')

In the above example, the teacher asks the student a string of closed questions requiring little more than brief discrete responses. In normal conversation we often ask closed questions, while expecting and often getting the elaboration that is really implied in the question. In the above example, the teacher wants the student to tell her what it is *about* the course, the textbook, and the classes, what it is that makes the course 'OK'. This intention is lost on the student who simply responds to the questions as they are asked. The dialogue might have taken a different turn if the teacher had employed open-ended questions when talking with the student:

*Q:* I'm interested in knowing what students think about my teaching and course readings and assignments. Thinking back over the semester so far, how would you describe this course to others?

*A:* Hmm . . . Well, I would describe the course as usually quite interesting and involving. In lots of classes I just sit there, even if I have something to say. I don't know why, but I participate more in your class. Maybe it's because you have us do so many group things.

*Q:* Well, it is my intention to get students involved. We all tend to learn more that way. I'd like to ask you a little



about the textbook. How do you go about reading a chapter and preparing for discussion in class?

A: (Pause) I started off reading it like I do other textbooks: a lot at one sitting and doing lots of highlighting. But that didn't really prepare me for the kind of questions you ask in class. And I didn't do too well on the first test, so I changed my way of reading. I'm reading it in smaller chunks and doing that thing you talked about in class. You know, where you write down questions you would like to ask the author if she were sitting right by me. It's helped a little, though sometimes it feels a sort of silly.

Q: I notice that you have done quite well on the class assignments. How do you manage that?

A: I found that to be pretty hard, because there are so many assignments. I've done OK so far, but as I look ahead at my schedule I don't know if I'll be able to keep it up.

Q: And what about the other students in the class? What do you think is the general opinion of the class regarding the number of assignments?

A: I can only speak for the group of students in the class I'm friends with. We are all concerned about the amount of work.

Q: I appreciate your candor. Your feedback has been very helpful. Thanks. See you Monday.

(Student thinks, 'I really had a chance to say what was on my mind, and I felt like she listened and cared about what I said. I also learned something about myself: I *like* to participate in class when the opportunities are there.' Teacher thinks, 'This is the kind of information I need to seek out more often. I'm getting a clear idea of what I might change and what I want to continue in the course.')

Given that the researcher seeks to develop open-ended questions, the task before him or her is to decide what questions to ask. We have the question typology presented by Patton (1990) to be useful as a guide to questions we might pose. Patton outlines six types of questions that may be asked in an interview:

- experience/behavior questions;
- opinion/value questions;
- feeling questions;
- knowledge questions;

- sensory questions; and
- background/demographic questions.

Experience/behavior questions ask about what people do or have done, such as 'What kinds of things do you do on this job?' Experience/behavior questions are quite useful to begin an interview, particularly when they ask people to describe what they are currently doing. This is clearly something the interviewee knows about and can offer to begin the conversation.

Patton makes a useful distinction between opinion/value questions and feeling questions. The former tap into beliefs which are primarily cognitive in nature, such as, 'What do you think about the company's new leave policy?' or 'What is your opinion about renegotiating the new contract?' In contrast, feeling questions ask about affective states, such as, 'What kinds of feelings did you experience when you heard about the plant closing?' Interviewers should be clear about what kind of information they are seeking — thoughts or feelings — and provide appropriate questions and cues to the interviewees.

Knowledge questions ask interviewees to tell what they know about a particular topic, tapping into their factual knowledge, such as 'What is contained in the company's position description for this job?' or 'What is the procedure at your office for filing a sexual harassment complaint?' This type of question can be especially threatening if interviewees believe they should know the answer and do not. Interviews can be derailed if the interviewees begin to see the session as a grilling on topics for which they cannot supply the necessary information.

Sensory questions are designed to tap into what the interviewee sees, hears, touches, smells and tastes, and can provide the researcher with a kind of vicarious experience. The interviewee may be able to let interviewer 'stand in his shoes' by descriptively responding to such questions as, 'What do you notice first when you walk onto the stage?' or 'What does the psychologist say to you when you enter his office?'

Background/demographic questions may be important in helping the researcher characterize each interviewee, as well as the sample that eventually comprises the study. Sociodemographic information should not, however, be gathered ambiguously it is routinely gathered in other types of research. These questions should be asked if they are potentially useful to understand the phenomenon under study. If included, information such as age, years of experience, marital status, residence, etc., which is factual, brief, and sometimes perceived as quite intrusive, is usually best gathered at the end of the interview. Occasionally, the interviewer may have the opportunity to gather background information



unobtrusively at various points in the interview. For example: 'So, you've been at this job for five years. How old were you when you started here?' allows this interviewer to calculate the person's current age without asking directly.

Another feature of Patton's question typology is the time frame of each question. A question can be posed in the present, past, or future tense. The types of questions asked and the time frame reflected by each question will be broadly determined by the researcher's focus of inquiry.

Patton's question typology provides a useful place to start developing a few broad questions for an interview guide or for formulating the many questions that comprise an interview schedule. Patton's typology is especially useful for the latter. But before you prepare an interview guide or schedule, it is helpful to practice developing interview questions.

#### Research exercise #11: Developing interview questions

Your work in the previous exercise will prepare you for this practice activity. Whether or not you have decided to develop an interview guide or an interview schedule, use your focus of inquiry and categories of inquiry from *Research exercise #10* for this activity.

You will need several sheets of paper (or index cards) and pen or marker to complete this exercise.

- 1 Your categories of inquiry now serve as the framework for developing interview questions. To gain practice in preparing questions, try to develop an example (or two!) of each type of question Patton (1990) identifies: a) experience/behavior questions; b) opinion/value questions; c) feeling questions; d) knowledge questions; e) sensory questions; and f) background/demographic questions. To begin, select any one of your categories of inquiry and develop an experience/behavior question; then develop other types of questions for this same category of inquiry. Or, use other categories of inquiry as the basis for developing various types of questions. The point is to expand your skill at developing useful interview questions, so prepare several different questions. We recommend writing each question on a separate sheet of paper or index card for later use. Also indicate the type of question you have asked, using Patton's typology. The format illustrated below is helpful in organizing the many features of interview question development. The example shown was part of the pool of possible questions developed by students for a study exploring the experiences and perspectives of high-achieving college students (Anderson *et al.*, 1991).

- Category of inquiry: *Approaches to learning inside the classroom*
- Interview question: *If I was in the same classes with you, what would I see you doing during a lecture?*
- Type of question (experience/behavior, opinion/value, feeling, knowledge, sensory, demographic): *experience/behavior*
- Time frame of question (past, present, or future): *present*

- 2 Review each of your practice questions and determine the time frame indicated by each question: past, present or future. Write down the time frame of each question on your paper.

Good interview questions, ones that will draw the research participant into conversation and yield useful information, can be challenging

to develop. There are three major pitfalls that beginning researchers encounter in developing questions for a research interview: the closed question, the unclear or vague question and the complex question. The closed question sometimes appears as a multiple-choice question, requiring the participant to respond to an implied response set. The question, 'To what extent does this academic program meet your needs?' is a closed question, directing the individual to reply in some variation of the following: a) to a large extent; b) to some extent; or c) not at all. Another type of closed question identified by Patton is the dichotomous question, one whose wording suggests that a 'yes' or 'no' response is desired, such as 'Were you satisfied with the academic supports provided by the school's learning center?' Closed questions can cut off conversation unless they are followed by related questions or probes. It is advisable practice to try to open up the question rather than to rely heavily on the use of follow-up questions or probes.

Interview questions that are unclear or vague are likely to result if the intent of the research study is unclear to the researcher. A clear focus of inquiry is essential for both preplanned and on-the-spot opportunities to gather information. In addition, trying out questions with interested others and asking for frank feedback will help you fine-tune the clarity of your questions.

The third major pitfall in developing interview questions is making them too complex. Each interview question should be one singular question, not a string of embedded questions that the participant has to hold in his or her mind. The question, 'How did you go about solving that problem, and how did you feel about the outcome?' is a complex question, easily divided into two questions. Your research participants will appreciate your simplicity.

Review the interview questions you developed for *Research exercise #12*. Do your questions relate to your focus of inquiry? Have you clearly identified the type of questions you have developed, using Patton's typology? Have you identified the time frame of each question: past, present or future? Are each of your questions open-ended? Is the meaning of each question clear? Is each question a singular question? In qualitative interviewing the wording of the questions affects the kind of responses the research participant gives and the richness and quality of the interview itself.

#### Drafting the interview guide or interview schedule

In our discussion of interview development, we have examined several important steps: developing a focus of inquiry; brainstorming and refining



categories of inquiry; deciding on a format, either an interview guide or a schedule; and preparing interview questions. With practice developing interview questions, you probably have a better idea about which interview format you would choose if you were actually going to pursue your focus of inquiry. If we return to the procedural diagram outlining interview development (see Figure 7.4), we see that the decision to prepare an interview guide means you will either use your categories of inquiry as your guide for the interview, or you will develop a small set of broad open-ended questions, based on your categories of inquiry. If you choose to develop an interview schedule, you will need to develop a larger set of open-ended interview questions, and organize them into a useful sequence. As we indicated above, it is especially helpful to write out each potential question on a separate sheet of paper or index card. Each question in your pool of possible questions can then be easily omitted or added, and selected questions can be easily sequenced within categories of inquiry. Categories of inquiry themselves can then be put in a reasonable order for the interview.

Although there is no single best way to sequence questions in an interview schedule, Patton (1990) again offers some useful suggestions. One, begin the interview with noncontroversial questions framed in the present, focusing on the interviewee's experiences or behaviors. Two, save potentially threatening knowledge questions until some rapport has been established with the interviewee. Three, minimize the number of background and demographic questions, and intersperse them throughout the interview, as appropriate. Careful attention to the ordering of questions will increase the likelihood of a productive interview. However, in the process of conducting a research interview there is no substitute for knowing your interview questions well. The sequence of questions is really set by the interviewee, and it is the qualitative interviewer's job to be alert and responsive, to sense an opportune time to ask a question, and to know when a question has been answered out of sequence.

In preparing a draft of the interview guide or an interview schedule, it is important to begin the interview with several important features: a *personal introduction*; a *statement of purpose*, including what will be done with the results of the study; a statement indicating the *confidentiality* of the interview; a statement regarding *note-taking* that may take place during the interview; a request for *permission to audio-tape record* the interview, should taping be possible; and a statement *informing the interviewee* why he or she is being interviewed. Two interview schedules are included in the Appendix. The first interview schedule was developed to understand more about the role of television

among college students. The second interview schedule was designed to explore young adults' experience with cross-sex friendships in a joint interview conducted with pairs of friends. We chose the interview schedule format because several student researchers were involved in each study.

It is possible to combine the features of an interview guide with an interview schedule to suit the purposes of the study. The interview schedules that appear in the Appendix are highly structured, providing the questions to be asked, possible probes, and additional directions to the interviewer. Both interview schedules were designed in large part by undergraduate students in our qualitative research course. These students come into the course with different levels of interviewing experience and expertise, and a structured interview schedule allows beginners to fully participate on a research team. Student researchers can choose to restate questions in their own words, vary the order of topics in order to be responsive to the interviewee, and explore and probe topics broadly related to the focus of inquiry.

### *Using probes in qualitative research interviews*

An important skill for qualitative researchers is the use of probes or follow-up questions in a research interview. For more information on probes, we turn again to Patton's work. He defines a probe as 'an interview tool used to go deeper into the interview responses' (1990: 238). Since the purpose of the qualitative research interview is to gain a deep understanding of the interviewee's experience and perspective, using probes effectively is an important qualitative research skill. By probing an interviewee's response, we are likely to add to the richness of the data, and end up with a better understanding of the phenomenon we are studying.

Patton (1990) identifies three types of probes: detail-oriented probes, elaboration probes, and clarification probes. These probes are not usually written into an interview guide or schedule; they are held in the interviewer's 'back pocket' and used as the need arises.

1. *Detail-oriented probes.* In our natural conversations we ask each other questions to get more detail. These types of follow-up questions are designed to fill out the picture of whatever it is we are trying to understand. We easily ask these questions when we are genuinely curious.

- Who was with you?
- What was it like being there?
- Where did you go then?



- When did this happen in your life?
- How are you going to try to deal with the situation?

2. *Elaboration probes.* Another type of probe is designed to encourage the interviewee to tell us more. We indicate our desire to know more by such things as gently nodding our head as the person talks, softly voicing 'un-huh' every so often, and sometimes by just remaining silent but attentive. We can also ask for the interviewee to simply continue talking.

- Tell me more about that.
- Can you give me an example of what you are talking about?
- I think I understand what you mean.
- Talk more about that, will you?
- I'd like to hear you talk more about that.
- That's helpful. Can you talk a little more about that?

3. *Clarification probes.* There are likely to be times in an interview when the interviewer is unsure of what the interviewee is talking about, what she or he means. In these situations the interviewer can gently ask for clarification, making sure to communicate that it is the interviewer's difficulty in understanding and not the fault of the interviewee.

- I'm not sure I understand what you mean by 'hanging out'. Can you help me understand what that means?
- I'm having trouble understanding the problem you've described. Can you talk a little more about that?
- I want to make sure I understand what you mean. Would you describe it for me again?
- I'm sorry. I don't quite get. Tell me again, would you?

You can become skillful at using probes by becoming aware of your use of them in day-to-day conversation and also by practicing using them in more formal situations. Tape-recording interviews and replaying them to examine your use of probes is a helpful skill-building technique. Simply rehearsing different probes that you can use in an actual interview can be extremely helpful. You might also want to pencil in possible probes on your interview guide or schedule that you could use in the actual interview.

#### *A note on structure*

In qualitative research a structured interview does not replace the human as the instrument of the study. The qualitative posture is one of

flexibility and responsiveness to the expected emergence of unanticipated twists and turns in the content of the interview. It is quite possible that once the interview is begun, it becomes clear that what is important to pursue about the phenomenon under study is not reflected in the prepared questions. The human instrument expects the unexpected and adapts and probes the salient aspects with the interviewee. As these new aspects are revealed to the researcher, she or he refocuses the inquiry and subsequent interviews. In Patton's words, 'The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which the respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms' (1990: 290). The contrast between the emergent design of qualitative studies and the fixed a priori design of traditional quantitative studies is striking.

#### *Research exercise #12: Drafting an interview guide or an interview schedule*

This exercise builds on the work you did for the two previous exercises. If you completed these exercises you have in hand a focus of inquiry, several categories of inquiry, and several practice interview questions. You may or may not be able to use your practice questions for this exercise (be willing to give them up!). Look through your categories of inquiry and select those you are most interested in pursuing in an interview. Now you are ready to draft either an interview guide (see Part A below) or an interview schedule (see Part B below). Keep in mind that the qualitative research interview is an attempt to conduct an in-depth interview, designed to last one-and-a-half to two hours. The content and number of questions should be designed accordingly.

*Part A: Drafting an interview guide.* Recall that an interview guide is comprised of a relatively short set of topics (categories of inquiry) or a short set of broad open-ended questions. For this exercise, we suggest you develop a short set of questions for your guide. Select four to six categories of inquiry on which to base your interview questions. For each selected category of inquiry, develop one or two broad open-ended questions. Then sequence all the questions, taking into consideration the information provided above on sequencing, and your own sense of the possible. Be sure to include a personal introduction, a statement of purpose, assurances of confidentiality, etc., at the beginning of your interview guide. Draft a complete interview guide.

*Part B: Drafting an interview schedule.* An interview schedule is comprised of many carefully constructed questions, follow-up questions or probes, and possibly other information for the interviewer. It is substantially longer than an interview guide and is an especially useful method of data collection for beginning researchers and research teams, to achieve some consistency in the topics of information pursued. For this exercise, select several categories of inquiry on which to base your interview questions. These categories will provide an overall framework for your interview schedule. For each selected category, develop several open-ended questions. Depending on your focus of inquiry, these questions may cover some or all of the types of interview questions described by Patton (1990) and one or all three time frames. It is helpful to prepare a large pool of possible questions from which to select the most promising ones for the interview schedule. Once you have selected the best questions, sequence them within their respective categories of inquiry, and sequence the categories themselves. You may need to eliminate some questions or categories of the interview because of its unwieldy length. Recall that you are trying to design an interview that will last about one-and-a-half to two hours. After you have settled on the final items, be sure to add a personal introduction, a statement of purpose, assurances of confidentiality, etc., at the beginning. Prepare a complete draft of your interview schedule.



*Refining the interview format*

After developing the complete draft of an interview, particularly if several questions are being asked, it is helpful to practice the interview with a few people who are similar to the people who will make up the research sample. It is quite beneficial to practice the interview with people who will provide constructive feedback on the contents and format of the interview itself and on your skills as an interviewer. Necessary changes can be made in the interview format and content, and you can identify interviewing skills that need further development.

*Interviewing equipment*

Qualitative researchers have taken quite extreme positions on whether it is appropriate to audio-tape record an interview, ranging from 'not tape recording unless there are legal or training reasons for doing so' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 272), to valuing the tape recorder as 'part of the indispensable equipment' of the qualitative interviewer (Patton, 1990: 348). We are in agreement with Patton on the importance of tape recording whenever allowable to obtain the best possible record of the interviewee's words. Tape-recording is essential if one plans to use interviews as the main source of data. In most cases, the presence of the tape recorder quickly fades to the background, particularly if the interviewer is adept at using the machine and the participants in the interview are engaged in the experience.

*Conducting the interview*

The responsibility for establishing and maintaining a positive interviewing climate rests with the interviewer. Moreover, 'the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer' (Patton, 1990: 279). An interviewer who knows his or her questions well, who listens more than talks, and who is genuinely curious about the topic and what the interviewee has to say about it will maximize the chances of a good interview. More importantly, an interviewer who communicates, through words and behaviors, that the interviewee is a *collaborator* in the research process begins to reduce the power differential between the two. According to Mishler, this kind of empowerment in the interviewer-interviewee relationship can assist people in 'their efforts to construct coherent and reasonable worlds of

meaning and to make sense of their experiences' (1986: 118). When the balance of power is shifted, notes Mishler, interviewees are more likely to tell their own stories.

A prepared and curious interviewer committed to involving his or her interviewees as research collaborators is still likely to need some help with the logistics of the research interview. The following set of guidelines can help organize the interviewing experience and ensure a complete transcript:

- 1 Gather together the materials and equipment you will need to conduct the interview, including tape recorder (batteries, electrical cord, extension cord), cassette tapes, interview guide, and pen and paper for note taking. It is helpful to gather these materials together into a data collection kit for this and future interviews.
- 2 Meet your interviewee promptly at the scheduled time and place. Note whether there is potential background noise that might interfere with a clear recording. Test the tape recorder with the interviewee, replay your test comments, and suggest adjustments, such as speaking more loudly, if necessary. Conduct the interview.
- 3 Immediately after you have completed the interview, reflect on the interview in writing. The interviewer's notes prepared following the interview are part of your data. Write down the things that the tape recorder did not capture, such as facial expressions, body posture, mood, and any other observations that can contribute to making sense of the interviewee's perspective. Here is a short excerpt from an interviewer's notes written after a joint in-depth interview with a pair of opposite-sex friends:

Throughout the interview Ellie and Dan maintained a great deal of eye contact. They appeared very interested in each other's responses, maintaining their attention on each other. This interest was particularly intense when they talked a few times about their romantic attraction to one another at different times in their friendship. As they stated in the interview, some of the details of this attraction were new to each of them.

It is also a good idea to record your own feelings during the interview, to keep in front of you how you may have



influenced what was conveyed during the session. For example, when might you have been leading? Talking too much? Cutting off the interviewee? Really 'clicking'? Also, write down your insights, hunches, ideas, questions, etc., that relate to the focus of inquiry. Reflect on what you are learning that can help focus your subsequent data collection efforts. Write these notes down right away!

We strongly suggest avoiding conversation about the interview until after you have transcribed it. Then, if you do talk to anyone about it afterwards, be sure to adhere to the confidentiality agreement.

### Guidelines for Transcribing Interviews

Preparing a complete transcript from an audio-taped interview is especially important when interviews are a main source of data for a qualitative study. This is a time-consuming and demanding task. For a one-and-a-half to two hour interview, you should plan on at least twenty hours of transcribing, although this will vary depending upon the length of the interview and whether you print or type the transcript. We strongly recommend transcribing an interview soon after it has occurred, while it is still fresh in the researcher's mind. The process of timely transcription often reminds the researcher of important behaviors that were not captured by the tape recorder.

It is preferable to type the interview transcript using a word processing program on a microcomputer. Headphones and an on-off pedal for the tape recorder speed the process considerably. Computer-stored work allows for easy editing, a backup copy, and easily made multiple copies on a computer printer. Typed copy makes analysis much easier, particularly when working with a research team. However, for beginning researchers, if typing presents a significant hardship, it is possible to very clearly print the transcript in dark ink. Whether you type or print, we suggest following these guidelines for clarity and greater ease during data analysis:

- use only one side of the paper
- use clean-edged paper to facilitate photocopying
- use a dark ribbon or pen
- use 1 1/2 inch margins on all sides of the paper
- single-space when the same person is speaking
- double-space between speakers
- double-space between paragraphs of the same speaker

There are several important items of information to include at the beginning of the interview transcript. Begin the transcript noting the pseudonym you have given to the person you interviewed and the initial you will use in the transcript to indicate when your interviewee is speaking. An excerpt from an interview with a man in our study of the lives of older adults is shown in Figure 7.5 (Maykut *et al.*, 1992). In the transcript the student researcher indicates that *Ben* is the interviewee's pseudonym, and a *B* will be used to show when Ben is speaking. The first page of the transcript should also include the interviewer's name and the initial that will be used when he is speaking, the date of the interview, the time when it occurred (start and finish) and where it took place.

In the upper right-hand corner of every page of the transcript, it is important to indicate the type of data contained in the manuscript; in this case it is a transcript (T), as compared to observations (O) from the field. Next to the type of data, the researcher puts the interviewee's initial and the page number of the transcript. In the example in Figure 7.5, the code in the top right-hand corner, T/B-1, indicates that this is the first page of the transcript of the interview with *Ben*.

The record of the interview itself is preceded by a brief paragraph that sets the stage for the interview: a description of the physical setting, a description of the interviewee, and a description of how the researcher came to interview this person, for example, arranged through a mutual friend.

Words are the data of qualitative research, and it is important to carefully and completely transcribe the audio-taped interview. Although many qualitative researchers have their interviews transcribed for them, preparing one's own transcripts provides an important opportunity to relive the interview and become substantially more familiar with the data. We recommend writing down everything that has been recorded on the tape. No short-cuts. Start a new line for each speaker and indicate by initial who is speaking. When the interviewee is talking for long segments of time, break the monologue into paragraphs. Start new paragraphs often, as ideas change. You do not, however, have to transcribe every 'umm' and 'ah'! It is sufficient to note the first 'um' or 'ah' in a series, and then proceed to the words.

There are a few other well-established conventions for transcribing that are helpful to use. As noted above, brackets indicate an addition to the recorded interview by the researcher. In the transcript example shown in Figure 7.5, the student researcher has used brackets to set apart his own commentary from the recorded words. His additions are intended to improve understanding, such as clarifying the places the



Figure 7.5: An excerpt from the transcript of an in-depth interview conducted by a student researcher

T/B-1

Pseudonym for interviewee: Ben (B)

Cities and other places described in the interview have been changed in the transcript in order to protect the identity of the interviewee.

Name of interviewer: Jeff (J)

Date of interview: 4/31/92

Time: 2:45-4:00 pm

Setting: Ben's home

Ben is a retired priest affiliated with the diocese of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Ben is 74-years-old. The interview took place in Ben's home located on the northern edge of the city. We were sitting in his living room with the tape recorder located between us on the coffee table. A mutual friend, who is also a priest, asked Ben if he would be interested in doing an interview with me. He agreed.

J: Ben, do I have your permission to tape record this interview?

B: Yes, you have my approval. You can record the interview.

J: O.K. Ah, to start out I'd like you to tell me a little bit about how long you've lived here and what brought you to this area.

B: Are you talking about the area here in Iowa?

J: Yes.

B: I came to Iowa in 1950, in December, so I've been here ever since.

J: Was that due to your work, or just —

B: I became incardinated in the diocese later, but you have to be out three years, so I came here and I first went to, ah, St. Thomas Moore parish, with Father Alfred Engler. And I was there a short time and then was transferred to Blessed Sacrament [parish]. And at that time I taught at Cathedral [high school], religion.

J: I went to Cathedral for high school.

B: Did you really?

J: Yes.

B: Well, I taught there from Blessed Sacrament, and then I was transferred to St. Patrick's [St. Patrick's parish in Cedar Rapids], and I was there for six years, and taught part-time at Cathedral for awhile, two or three years.

J: Um, so how do you spend your free time now then? Well, what do you do every day, your daily routine, things like that?

B: [laughing] Well, I have — If I'm home I have mass. I set up an altar right there [pointing to a counter in the kitchen] — it's on the counter. I have mass intentions, but actually at least three or four times a week I am saying mass elsewhere right now, either at St. Catherine Convent, sometimes there, especially on Sundays, and at St. Peter's Hospital. [?] Either during Lent or noon mass or the 3:15 pm mass. I'm on call quite often because they're down to one priest now — they used to have two, Father Simolski and Father John. Now they're down to Father John so they have to get someone to fill in. So you are on call for eight hours at a time and very often they'll join to that one or two masses, or they will have mass at the St. Catherine Home, which is joined to them, or the home on Gardner Street. So I can say mass there very often. So, about three or four times a week I am busy saying mass elsewhere.

J: So you keep pretty busy?

B: Right. That's just the mass part. [I laugh a little.]

J: So, on your free time, do you have any hobbies or interests you pursue?

B: Well [laughs], I cut fire wood, mow the lawn, try to do anything I can around here. My hobby used to be fishing until I moved right down next to the lake. Now I don't do much fishing anymore, right here.

interviewee, Ben, is referring to by certain proper nouns. This bracketing of the researcher's comments is the same procedure used in field notes to separate the researcher's observations from his or her commentary (see Figure 7.1).

For various reasons, words or phrases in an audio-taped interview sometimes cannot be deciphered. In these instances it is acceptable to print: /?/. Other useful conventions: A dash following a word indicates that the speaker cut off the word or phrase, which often is a parenthetical comment or a false start. Three unspaced periods indicate a pause (...). Three spaced periods show that several lines have been omitted (...). *Italics* indicate emphatic stress. In a recent study we interviewed pairs of opposite-sex friends who sometimes overlapped each other's statements. We have indicated overlap by using vertical lines:

Female: There are some things that I don't tell | Nick about.

Male: | What do you

mean? I thought we could talk to each other about everything. Now you tell me you can't.

When you have completed the transcript, make a complete photocopy. Many qualitative researchers recommend the practice of providing the interviewee with a draft of the transcript so that corrections can be made if necessary. The goal here is not to transform the interview from normal conversation, with its usual dysfluencies, but to clearly understand the meaning the interviewee was trying to convey. Most interviewees appreciate the importance given to their interview. Field notes from participant observations are also typed using the general format outlined above, such as initialing each page, using 1 1/2 inch margins on all sides, etc.

## Group Interviews

For student-researchers as well as for ourselves, group interviews have often presented us with the unexpected — unexpected interactions, insights, ideas, and information. But perhaps this is what we should have expected! As researcher David Morgan (1988) emphasizes, the purpose of doing a group interview is to bring several different perspectives into contact. It is the very nature of the group experience that sets this method of qualitative data collection apart from the others. However, like individual interviewing and participant observation, the purpose of conducting a group interview is to understand what people experience and perceive about the focus of inquiry, through a process that is open and emergent.