Introduction

The purpose of this book is to assist newcomers to qualitative research methods to think about the variety of ways that qualitative interviews have been used by researchers working from different theoretical approaches, and how these might be applied in their own research studies. Interviews are a format to which we are so accustomed in contemporary society that it is difficult to imagine a world without them. Excerpts from interviews published in newspapers and magazines provide evidence for claims about what happens in our world. At work we interview others in order to gain information about their professional capabilities. Children conduct interviews in order to find information to present in school projects; journalists interview politicians; nightly news anchors interview journalists; parents interview teachers; and physicians interview their patients. We participate as witnesses to others' interviews, as well as take part in interviews as interviewers and interviewees. There are few places, it seems, where we are immune from the questions and answers that characterize the interview as a particular kind of social interaction. By making visible the assumptions underlying the different ways in which qualitative interviews have been theorized in social research, in this book I aim to assist researchers using interviews for the first time to consider the connections between theory and practice and to examine critically the use of interview data for research purposes.

The approach that I outline in this book entails the researcher's consideration of three interrelated issues:

> the researcher's theoretical conception of the research interview;
> the researcher's subject positions in relation to the project and participants; and
> methodological examinations of interview interaction to inform research design.

I argue that reflection on each of these issues will contribute to advancing the practice of both qualitative interviewing and qualitative inquiry. Through developing sophisticated understandings of qualitative interview practice, qualitative researchers are better positioned to design and conduct quality research projects that provide researchers and communities with significant findings concerning social problems.

Background

In academic work, the interview has been used extensively by social researchers as a method for generating data concerning research problems (for

a selective history of the interview see Platt [2002]). For social researchers, there is a wide range of methodological literature that provides guidance on how to design and conduct all kinds of interviews – from standardized structured protocols conducted by telephone, to open-ended conversations. Yet, our everyday exposure to the 'Interview Society' in which the interview is central to the construction of the modern individual obscures the complexity of conducting interviews for research purposes (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). It is easy to see the research interview as simply a series of questions followed by responses – all we need to do as researchers is to ask the right questions of willing interviewees and we will extract the information we need to answer our research questions. This perspective of interviewing has been seriously questioned in the methodological literature and there are longstanding critiques of social researchers' use of the interview method.

Critics of qualitative interviews maintain that research interviewers who contribute their personal perspectives in interview interaction *bias* data and produce studies that lack *validity*. Some researchers argue that human subjects cannot be relied upon to provide *accurate* or *truthful* accounts. This view is supported by studies that have found mismatches between what people say in interviews and what they do in everyday life. Methodologists have also critiqued the quality of research in which interview data has been insufficiently analyzed and under-theorized (see for example, Atkinson and Coffey, 2002). Radical critiques of interviewing (see Potter and Hepburn, 2005, for an example, and Hammersley, 2003 for a review) criticize reports from qualitative interview studies on epistemological and methodological grounds. These critiques of interviewing reject the notion that peoples' talk accurately represents what they are thinking (that is, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions), are skeptical that interview accounts can actually reflect either what is *inside* people's heads, or what actually happens out there in a *real* world, and posit that interviews are not satisfactory substitutes for direct observation and are heavily context-dependent, making them unreliable sources of evidence (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). Finally, postmodern critiques of qualitative interview studies and methodological writing question the modernist assumptions of the human subject embedded in theorizations of interviewing, and analyses and interpretations of interview data (Scheurich, 1995).

Should researchers give up on the qualitative interview? David Silverman (2005: 238–40, 2007), for example, calls on qualitative researchers to take care to justify their use of interviews as the preferred method for gaining access to people's experiences; and, like Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn (2005), makes the case for the use of naturally occurring data (Silverman, 2005: 119–21). Martyn Hammersley (2003: 124) suggests that it would be ill advised to either uncritically adopt radical critiques of interviewing, or to ignore the problematic methodological issues inherent in the use of qualitative interviews. Yet, given the proliferation of methodological advice concerning qualitative interviews, how might beginning researchers proceed? This book

provides novices to qualitative research methods with some starting points by offering a theoretically informed guide to interview practice that will assist researchers to develop as reflective interviewers, and showing how the design of research projects might be approached to ensure quality work.

A Proposal for Advancing the Practice of Qualitative Interviewing

The theoretical assumptions of the researcher – whether explicit or not – inform the design of interview studies and interview questions, as well as the analysis and representation of data. Researchers need to consider various theorizations of the interview as they design their studies in order to grasp the implications of their theoretical assumptions for the generation, interpretation, and representation of data. Thinking about these issues during data analysis may be too late. The danger of overlooking the important links between theory and practice in the planning and conduct of interviews is that resulting research reports can be – as critics have pointed out – undertheorized and of poor quality. It is crucial for qualitative researchers to have an understanding of and an ability to theorize the application of qualitative interviews to investigate research problems in social science research, and the researcher–relationships inherent in each research study. But what does it mean to 'theorize,' and how might a researcher go about doing that? Figure I.1 illustrates one model of the necessary components for researchers to accomplish this task.

Theories are simply statements that explain connections between concepts, and tell us something about the way things work and how things happen (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993: 118). Theorizing, then, is the process by which we go about constructing these statements in relation to what is already known about an issue. In relation to the issues concerning interviewing listed above, to 'theorize' means to consider relevant issues and implications for research design related to what interview data can tell us about a specific topic; how interview data are generated; who the interviewer is in relation to the research topic and the study's participants; how the theoretical assumptions underlying the research design relate to data analysis, interpretation, and representation; and finally, how the quality of the final report will be judged within a particular field of inquiry.

Theory and Interviewing

There is no shortage of literature discussing the theory and methods of qualitative research. Novice researchers, however, may have difficulty in synthesizing and applying what may be learned from the rapidly growing literature on theory and methods to their interview practice. Too much emphasis on theory may

Theories of interviewing

The reflective interviewer understands:

• Researcher subjectivities
• Subject positions occupied by researcher in relationship to research participants and implications for research design and conduct of research
• Theoretical perspectives and assumptions that relate to interviewing and implications for research design and conduct of research
• How to analyze interview interaction to inform data analysis and interview practice

Interview interaction

The researcher

Research design and methods
The researcher's selection of interview methods, analytic methods, and representational strategies are consistent with researcher's theoretical assumptions and meet appropriate criteria for quality.
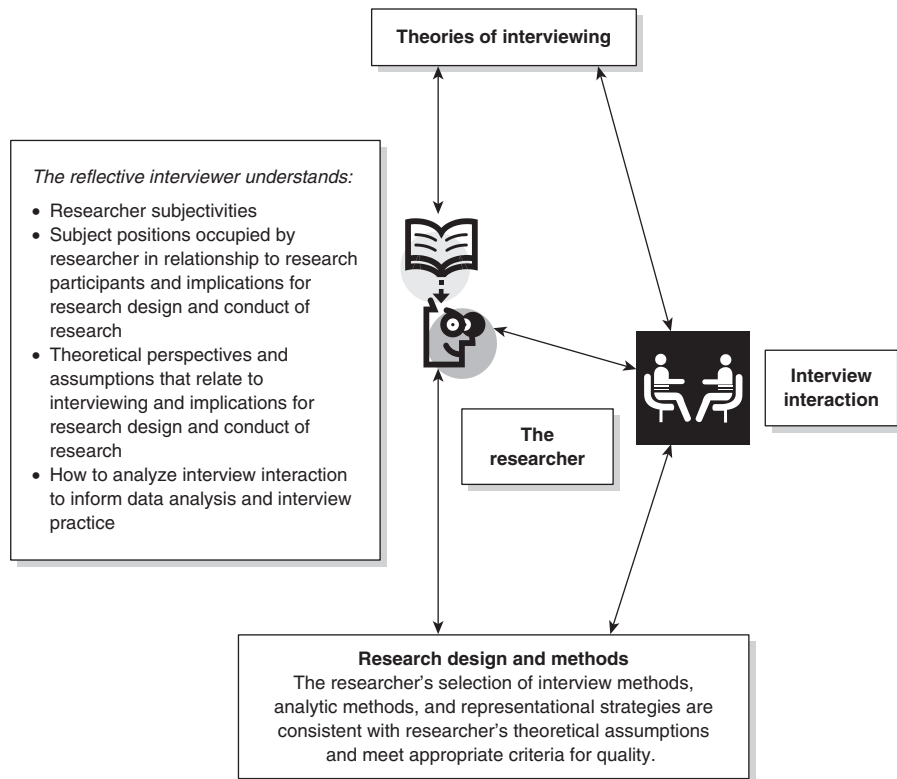
Figure I.1   The reflective researcher

result in beginning researchers experiencing paralysis in the creative process, through striving to first know everything of relevance concerning theory in relation to their prospective studies. The problem here is one of difficulties in getting to the practicalities of doing research. For students with little interest in engaging in academic discourses on theory, too little theory may result in simplistic interview studies in which an unreflective researcher produces naïve analyses of data. Seeing interviews as merely a sequence of questions followed by answers – a transparent stimulus–response medium for gathering facts, opinions, and beliefs – and failing to understand the complex nature of interview interaction between interviewers and interviewees, the researcher who does not consider theory may generate data that does not inform his or her research questions. Yet, other beginning researchers, in attempting to follow innumerable prescriptions concerning what to do in order to generate rich descriptions, become entangled in agonized reflective dialogues about what happened in their interviews, their relationships with their participants, and the ethical issues of doing qualitative research with human subjects. Thinking about the possible theorizations of qualitative interviewing will assist beginning

researchers to contextualize their use of interviews within the broader array of social theory that qualitative researchers use to inform research design. Another key step is to consider the place of the researcher in relation to the research project.

Theorizing the Researcher

Researchers bring different conversational styles to their research interviews with unique individual participants on diverse topics, and researchers approach their work from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Any guidelines for 'good' interview practice, therefore, must be taken up with respect to each researcher's particular context and his or her subject positions (that is, race, class, gender, culture, language, status in relation to each interviewee; and prior experiences and relationships with the participant among other social locations). This is not news – indeed Lewis Dexter wrote many years ago that 'What may be suicidal or impractical for one interviewer or in one situation may be feasible or even the best way to proceed for another interviewer or in another situation' (1970: 24). In this book, I offer suggestions for how researchers can become more mindful of what they bring to their research project, and how that intersects with particular participants in the process of conducting interview research.

Examining Interview Interaction Methodologically

A next step in learning about interviewing is for researchers to reflect critically on their interaction with others within the research setting through close examination of their interview transcripts. Qualitative methodologists have frequently used models and transcripts of both exemplary and problematic interviews in teaching beginning researchers the skills of interviewing. In this book I argue not only for the continued usefulness of data sets that exemplify common problems faced by novice interviewers, but that researchers themselves be encouraged to look at problematic moments in their own interviews to unpack them. Rather than discarding this kind of data as worthless, in this book I outline an approach to developing an interview practice that researchers might use to think about research interviews methodologically and theoretically. Problematic interactions and difficult data provide rich materials for examination and further development of one's own interview practice through asking questions concerning *how* data are collaboratively generated by speakers. Researchers can reflect on the answers to these questions and inform decision-making concerning research design and methods, the formulation of interview questions, and appropriate ways to analyze and represent interview data.

Learning about Qualitative Interviewing

A common approach to introducing qualitative interviewing to novice researchers is that of providing advice based on the researcher's personal experience as an interviewer. This is so whether the researcher is based in anthropology (McCracken, 1988), education (Seidman, 2006), educational anthropology (Wolcott, 1995), psychology (Kvale, 1996; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Moustakas, 1994), social psychology (Mishler, 1986), sociolinguistics (Briggs, 1986), or sociology (Douglas, 1985; Weiss, 1994; Wengraf, 2001). It is clear from these accounts that qualitative interviewers and social researchers learn by doing, and reflection on doing. Newcomers to research are no different to their more experienced qualitative colleagues. Thus any program for developing research skills must involve novice researchers in conducting authentic interviews, and reflecting on those experiences. To assist with this task, throughout the book I include suggested practical activities that can be used in coursework, or, alternatively, by individual researchers. In short, this book recommends that researchers ask questions – of their theoretical assumptions about interviews, of themselves, and of what happens in their interview interaction with others.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 reviews the question–answer sequence as the basic unit of interviews, as well as different approaches to thinking about individual interviews. This includes the 'structure' of the interview, as well as the approaches to asking questions that have developed in ethnographic, phenomenological, feminist, oral and life history, and dialogic traditions.

Chapter 2 provides a series of considerations for researchers who would like to use group interviews or focus groups in their studies. The chapter draws distinctions between group interviews and focus groups and reviews focus groups in more detail. Excerpts of talk from focus groups to illustrate various issues that arise in the facilitation of group interaction are included.

Chapter 3 discusses various theoretical assumptions that underlie different conceptions of interviewing. I include examples of research demonstrating six conceptions of the research interview: neo-positivist; romantic; constructionist; postmodern; transformative; and decolonizing. I discuss how each conception of the research interview relates to different theoretical assumptions about human subjects and interview data, the implications for data analysis and representation of findings, and provide examples of research exemplifying different approaches.

Chapter 4 reviews steps entailed in the research design process, including identifying research topics, formulating research questions, and selecting and sampling populations. Given that researchers must consider how judgments

concerning the value, or quality of research are made, this issue is discussed in relation to the conceptions of interviews outlined in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5 discusses some of the procedural issues to do with conducting interview research. Before interviewing, researchers must gain consent for the study, and follow appropriate procedures for conducting ethical research. Recruitment of participants, preparation for interviews, and issues arising in conducting interviews are discussed. Recording options, transcription practice, and considerations concerning the use of translated data are reviewed. Suggestions for further reading concerning interviewing specific populations are included.

In Chapter 6, I explore methods that individual researchers might use to examine themselves as researchers. Here I consider reflection as an integral feature of well-designed research, and provide a number of different strategies that researchers can use to develop a reflexive research practice. These include examining subject positions as researchers through writing subjectivity statements, keeping researcher journals, being interviewed as a researcher, and analyzing the interviewer's 'work' in interviews. The chapter provides further reading concerning reflexive practices in social science research.

Chapter 7 outlines an approach that interviewers can use to develop an increased awareness of what they do and say in interaction through inspecting both problematic and effective moments in interview transcripts. A series of interview excerpts are used to show how interviewers can use methods drawn from conversation analysis to examine their interview practice. I argue that this approach assists interviewers to see possibilities for how they formulate and ask questions in future research interviews, as well as to think about research design and the use of interview data.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of different approaches to the analysis of interview data. I provide brief reviews of a selection of approaches to the analysis, interpretation, and representation of interview data. These include thematic analysis, grounded theory analysis, ethnographic analysis, phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis, and ethnomethodological and conversation analysis. I conclude the chapter by reviewing resources one might turn to in order to learn more about poststructural and postmodern approaches to the analysis of data, as well as the use of arts-based approaches to representation.

Chapter 9 concludes the book with accounts of interviewing practice from experienced researchers, as well as advice for beginning interviewers.

The aim of this book is to provide guidance to researchers about how they might develop interview skills in keeping with their theoretical assumptions. Throughout the book, readers will find multiple data excerpts that illustrate the different kinds of events that occur in research interviews, reflections on interviewing from qualitative researchers who use interviews, and suggestions for further reading.

I have employed two approaches to transcription of interview excerpts included. When the focal point of attention is *how* the talk-in-interaction was generated, paralinguistic features of talk such as pauses, hesitations, and slips are notated using transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (Psathas and Anderson, 1990; see Appendix 1). Where these features of talk are not relevant to the discussion, they are not included. Activities that might be either incorporated into course work on qualitative research methodology or used by individual researchers are included at the conclusion of each chapter to assist readers with developing their interview practice.