

Exercise 3.7

This exercise encourages you to use the 'alternative' version of describing family life proposed by Gubrium and Holstein.

Imagine that you wish to do an observational study of the family. Now consider the following questions:

- 1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of obtaining access to the family household?
- 2 In what ways may families be studied outside the household setting? What methodology might you use and what questions could you ask?
- 3 What might observation tell you about the 'family' in each of the following settings:
 - law courts
 - doctor-patient consultations
 - television soap-operas?

Either do a study of one of these settings or write hypothetically about all three.

- 4 What does it mean to say you are studying the 'family' (i.e. within inverted commas)?

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Interviews

As I argued in Chapter 1, research topics never arise 'out of the blue'. Whether or not we are aware of it, any research topic will derive from particular *models* of looking at the world and/or from certain 'social problems' currently to the fore in society.

However, let us imagine that you have 'innocently' decided to gather some interview data as part of a research methods course. Making use of the accessibility and good nature of your fellow students, you decide to embark on a study of, say, students' perceptions of their future job prospects.

Because you have read a bit about research design, you decide to 'pre-test' some preliminary questions on a friend to find whether they are easily understood (in the way that you intend). Having sorted out your questions, you find half a dozen students and interview them. Now, you think, all you have to do is to summarize their answers and you will have a legitimate research report on your chosen topic.

Well, maybe. Perhaps, along the way, you failed to ask *yourself* a number of questions. These include:

- Why (and in what way) is your chosen research topic significant?
- How far do your topic and findings relate to other research?
- Why is an interview method appropriate for your topic: why not simply look at existing records of graduates' first jobs?
- Is the size and method of recruitment of your sample appropriate to both your topic and your model?
- Did you audio or video record your interviews? How did you transcribe them (if at all)?
- Did you need to interview your respondents face-to-face? Why not use e-mail?
- Did you think about using a *focus group*, where respondents are offered some topic or stimulus material and then encouraged to discuss it amongst themselves?
- What status will you accord to your data? For instance, are you seeking objective 'facts', subjective 'perceptions' or simply 'narratives'?
- How thoroughly have you analysed your data? For instance, have you just reported a few 'telling' extracts? Or have you worked through all your material, searching out examples which don't fit your original suppositions (*deviant-case analysis*)?

Without answers to these questions, your professor may disappoint you with a surprisingly poor grade for your interview project.

I will shortly set out different ways in which social scientists have addressed some of the questions above, paying particular attention to the varying status of interview data in different models of the research process. For discussion of e-mail interviews, see Mann and Stewart (2000); for focus groups, see Bloor et al. (2001).

For the moment, however, I want to illustrate the import of these issues with one helpful case study.

4.1 WHEN IS A 'TRIBE' (MOERMAN)?

As an anthropologist, Michael Moerman was interested in learning how a people categorized their world. Like most anthropologists and Chicago School ethnographers (see Chapter 3), he interviewed native informants. His aim was to elicit from them what 'being a Lue' (the name of the tribe) meant to them. So Moerman started to ask tribespeople questions like, 'How do you recognize a member of your tribe?'

He reports that his respondents quickly became adept at providing a whole list of traits which he called 'ethnic identification devices'. These included beliefs and actions which they regarded as unique to the Lue people (e.g. their approach to trading with their neighbours). The final list of such traits seemed to describe the tribe and to distinguish it from its neighbours.

However, Moerman was troubled about what sense to read into the Lue's own accounts. His questions often related to issues which were either obvious or irrelevant to the respondents. As he puts it:

To the extent that answering an ethnographer's question is an unusual situation for natives, one cannot reason from a native's answer to his *normal* categories or ascriptions. (Moerman, 1974: 66, my emphasis)

So Moerman started to see that ethnic identifications were not used all the time by these people, any more than we use them to refer to ourselves in a Western culture. This meant that, if you wanted to understand this people, it was not particularly useful to elicit from them what would necessarily be an abstract account of their tribe's characteristics given at the behest of an outsider. So, instead, Moerman started to examine what went on in everyday situations through observation.

However, it was not so straightforward to switch to observational methods. Even when ethnographers are silent and merely observe, their presence indicates to people that matters relevant to 'identity' should be highlighted. Consequently, people may pay particular attention to what both the observer and they themselves take to be relevant categorization schemes – like ethnic or kinship labels. In this way, the ethnographer may have 'altered the local priorities among the native category sets which it is his task to describe' (1974: 67).

What, then, was to be done? A clue is given by the initially opaque subheadings of Moerman's article:

- Who are the Lue?
- Why are the Lue?
- When are the Lue?

Moerman argues that there are three reasons why we should *not* ask: 'Who are the Lue?' First, it would generate an inventory of traits. Like all such inventories it could be endless because we could always be accused of having left something out. Second, lists are retrospective. Once we have decided that the Lue *are* a tribe, then we have no difficulty in 'discovering' a list of traits to support our case. Third, the identification of the Lue as a tribe depends, in part, on their successful presentation of themselves as a tribe. As Moerman puts it:

The question is not 'Who are the Lue?' but rather when, how and why the identification 'Lue' is preferred. (1974: 62)

Moerman adds that this does *not* mean that the Lue are not really a tribe or that they fooled him into thinking they were one. Rather their ethnic identity arises in the fact that people in the area use ethnic identification labels some of the time when they are talking about each other.

Of course, some of the time is not all the time. Hence the task of the ethnographer should be to observe when and *if* ethnic identification labels are used by the participants being studied. Moerman neatly summarizes his argument as follows:

Anthropology [has an] apparent inability to distinguish between warm . . . human bodies and one kind of identification device which some of those bodies sometimes use. Ethnic identification devices – with their important potential of making each ethnic set of living persons a joint enterprise with countless generations of unexamined history – seem to be universal. Social scientists should therefore describe and analyse the ways in which they are used, and not merely – as natives do – use them as explanations. (1974: 67–8)

So Moerman had changed his research question away from 'Who are the Lue?' and, therefore, abandoned his research design based on interviews. From now on, the issue was no longer who the Lue essentially were but when, among people living in these Thai villages, ethnic identification labels were invoked and what were the consequences of invoking them.

Curiously enough, Moerman concluded that, when you looked at the matter this way, the apparent differences between the Lue and ourselves were considerably reduced. For instance, turn-taking in conversation works in much the same way among Lue and English speakers. Only an ethnocentric Westerner might have assumed otherwise, behaving like a tourist craving for out-of-the-way sights.

Moerman's study reveals that any attempt to describe things 'as they are' is doomed to failure. Without *some* perspective or, at the very least, a set of animating questions, there is nothing to report. Contrary to the view of crude empiricists, who would deny the relevance of theory to research, the facts *never* speak for themselves.

4.2 IMPLICATIONS: THREE VERSIONS OF INTERVIEW DATA

Moerman's research points to the way in which idealized conceptions of phenomena like 'tribes' can, on closer examination, become like a will-o'-the-wisp, dissolving into sets of practices embedded in particular settings. The methodological import of this for interview data has been made clear by Carolyn Baker. As she writes:

When we talk about the world we live in, we engage in the activity of giving it a particular character. Inevitably, we assign features and phenomena to it and make it out to work in a particular way. When we talk with someone else about the world, we take into account who the other is, what that other person could be presumed to know, 'where' that other is in relation to ourself in the world we talk about. (Baker, 1982: 109)

Here Baker is questioning the attempt to treat interview questions and answers as passive filters towards some truths about people's identities (for instance, as members of a tribe). Instead, she is telling us, interviewer and interviewee actively *construct* some version of the world appropriate to what we take to be self-evident about the person to whom we are speaking and the context of the question.

Baker is raising a number of issues about the status of interview data, including:

- 1 What is the relation between interviewees' accounts and the world they describe? Are such accounts potentially 'true' or 'false' or is neither concept always appropriate to them?
- 2 How is the relation between interviewer and interviewee to be understood? Is it governed by standardized techniques of 'good interviewing practice'? Or is it, inevitably, based on conversational practices we all use in everyday life?

These issues are central to this chapter. Shortly, I will return to how Baker addresses them in her own interview study of adolescents. First, however, I want to set out three different ways in which most social scientists would answer Baker's questions.

According to **positivism**, interview data give us access to 'facts' about the world. The primary issue is to generate data which are valid and reliable, independently of the research setting. The main ways to achieve this are the

random selection of the interview sample and the administration of standardized questions with multiple-choice answers which can be readily tabulated.

According to **emotionalism**, interviewees are viewed as experiencing subjects who actively construct their social worlds. The primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences. The main ways to achieve this are unstructured, open-ended interviews usually based upon prior, in-depth participant observation.

According to **constructionism**, interviewers and interviewees are always actively engaged in constructing meaning. Rather than treat this as standing in the way of accurate depictions of 'facts' or 'experiences', how meaning is mutually constructed becomes the researcher's topic. Because of this, research interviews are not treated as specially privileged, and other interviews (e.g. media or professional-client interviews) are treated as of equal interest, i.e. interviews are treated as topics rather than as a research resource. A particular focus is on how interviewees construct narratives of events and people (see Section 5.2) and the turn-by-turn construction of meaning (see the discussion of conversation analysis in Section 6.3).

These three positions are set out in Table 4.1. Let me now describe these three different approaches in greater detail, looking at the type of knowledge each pursues and the different research tasks they set themselves.

TABLE 4.1 Three versions of interview data

	Status of data	Methodology
Positivism	Facts about behaviour and attitudes	Random samples Standard questions Tabulations
Emotionalism	Authentic experiences	Unstructured, open-ended interviews
Constructionism	Mutually constructed	Any interview treated as a topic

4.3 POSITIVISM

In survey research, which is geared to a statistical logic, interview data give access to 'facts' about the world. Although these facts include both biographical information and statements about beliefs, all are to be treated as accounts whose sense derives from their correspondence to a factual reality. Where that reality is imperfectly represented by an account, checks and remedies are to be encouraged in order to get a truer or more complete picture of how things stand.

4.3.1 Type of knowledge

Here are the six kinds of topics to which, according to a standard text on survey research (Selltiz et al., 1964), interview questions are addressed. Notice

how these writers envisage problems and recommend remedies in relation to each topic.

- 1 *Facts* These relate primarily to biographical information about the respondent, to statements from informed sources about the structures, policies and actions of organizations, and to descriptions of an event or a community. In this last case, it is possible to weed out 'inaccurate' descriptions by comparing different people's statements: 'If respondents occupying widely different positions in the community agree on a statement, there is much better ground for accepting it as true than if only one of these respondents makes the statement. On the other hand, contradictions between the reports of apparently reliable informants provide important leads for further investigation' (1964: 245).
- 2 *Beliefs about facts* In questions about beliefs or attitudes, no interpersonal cross-checking of statements is appropriate. However, Selltitz et al. (1964: 246) point out that it is always important to check first whether the respondent has any beliefs about the topic in question, otherwise the researcher may put words into his mouth.
- 3 *Feelings and motives* Here, 'because emotional responses are frequently too complex to report in a single phrase' (1964: 248), Selltitz et al. recommend the use of open-ended questions, allowing the respondents to choose their own terms.
- 4 *Standards of action* These relate to what people think should or could be done about certain stated situations. Here it helps to link such standards to people's experiences. Where someone has actually faced a situation of the type described, his/her response is likely to be more reliable.
- 5 *Present or past behaviour* Again, specific questions related to actual rather than hypothetical situations are recommended.
- 6 *Conscious reasons* (for 1 to 5) Rather than simply ask 'Why?', Selltitz et al. (1964: 253) recommend that the researcher should examine broad classes of considerations that may have determined this outcome (e.g. 'the history of the actor's feeling', or 'the characteristics in a given entity that provoke a given reaction').

For each of these six topics, the task of the interviewer is to elicit a body of facts 'out there' in the world. For positivists, an observation that interview responses might be an outcome of the interview setting would be heard as a charge against the reliability of the technique. To the extent that this possibility arises, checks and remedies are built into the research design. Similarly, for positivists, the language of the interviewee serves primarily as an instrument for the communication of social or psychological facts.

4.3.2 Research task

The aim of interviews for positivists is to generate data which hold independently of both the research setting and the researcher or interviewer.

One way of achieving this is by attempting standardized interviews. Consequently, Selltitz et al. are rather suspicious of unstructured interviews which they see as inherently unreliable research instruments. Although they concede that unstructured or open-ended interviews are more flexible than prescheduled interviews and can allow more intensive study of perceptions and feelings, they have inherent problems for positivists:

The flexibility frequently results in a lack of comparability of one interview with another. Moreover, their analysis is more difficult and time-consuming than that of standardized interviews. (1964: 264)

Even more important for *reliability* than the type of interview selected, is the need to follow a standardized protocol. So Selltitz et al. offer an appendix entitled 'The Art of Interviewing' which provides a set of rules and taboos. Interviewers should ask each question precisely as it is worded and in the same order that it appears on the schedule. They should not show surprise or disapproval of an answer, offer impromptu explanations of questions, suggest possible replies, or skip certain questions. Similarly, Brenner offers a list of dos and don'ts ('basic rules of research interviewing', 1981: 129-30) which are defended in terms of the necessity of standardization:

In order to ensure adequacy of measurement in a data collection programme it is of primary importance to secure, as much as is possible, the equivalence of the stimulus conditions in the interviews. If these are not equivalent, measurement may be biased, and it may be unwarranted to group responses together for the purposes of statistical analyses. (1981: 115)

Although Brenner (1981: 156) is more sceptical than Selltitz et al. about the prospects of obtaining 'literal measurement' in the interview situation, the statement quoted indicates that he shares with them the same statistical and behaviouralist (or stimulus-response) logic. Following that logic, he calls for more research on social interaction in interviews as a means of:

improving the quality of research interviews . . . and increasing the degree of social control over the measurement process. (1981: 156)

Attempt Exercise 4.1 about now

4.3.3 The limits of positivism

For many years, positivist survey research provided the main source of data for sociology. For instance, Brenner (1981) reports studies which indicate that, during the 1960s, around 90 per cent of all the papers in the two leading American sociology journals were based on data derived from interviews and questionnaires.

From a critical position, Maseide (1990) summarizes the most significant premises of the *positivist* approach to interview data. According to positivists:

- 1 The aim of social science is to discover unknown but actual social facts or essentials.
- 2 Reality is supposed to be 'out there'. Thus it is a matter of finding the most effective and unbiased methods that, as precisely and objectively as possible, could bring out information about this reality.
- 3 The existence of typical respondents is explicitly presupposed. These respondents are implicitly supplied with standardized mental structures that match the analyst's reasoning and use of language.
- 4 Methodological problems are more technical than theoretical or interpretive (adapted from Maseide, 1990: 4).

As Maseide points out, positivists' 'belief in standardized forms of interviewing relies on an exclusive emphasis on the referential functions of language' (1990: 9). However, interview responses 'are delivered at different descriptive levels. The informant does different things with words and stories' (1990: 11).

We will later see that we can extend Maseide's critique of positivism. As Carolyn Baker's research shows, *both* informant *and* interviewer do many 'different things with words and stories'.

To what extent can we understand these 'things' if we switch away from the standardized interview forms of positivism towards more open-ended interviews or even conversations? To answer this question, we must review the arguments of emotionalists.

4.4 EMOTIONALISM

For positivists, interviews are essentially about ascertaining facts or beliefs out there in the world. Emotionalists switch this focus but only slightly. Their concern is not with obtaining objective 'facts' but with eliciting authentic accounts of subjective experience. To do so, emotionalists believe that interviewers should try 'to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 116).

The key here is to obtain rapport with respondents and to avoid manipulating them. So, while positivists regard departure from an interview schedule as a possible source of bias, emotionalists may actively encourage it. For instance, feminist interviewers are sometimes advised to take the opportunity to tell their own stories to respondents (Oakley: 1981).

4.4.1 Type of knowledge

Emotionalist interviewers want to access the *subject* behind the person given the role of interview respondent. The particular concern is with *lived experience*. Emotions are treated as central to such experience.

An example of this approach will show what this involves in practice. Schreiber (1996) describes an interview study with a snowball sample of 21 women who identified themselves as having recovered from depression. She sets out to establish an account of the depression experience which, she claims, is 'grounded in the real world of the participant' (1996: 471). This 'real world', we are told, contains six 'phases' of '(re)defining the self', each with between three and five 'properties' or 'dimensions'.

In this way, the author attempts to put her readers (and herself) in touch with what she calls 'the depression experience'. However, as Schreiber points out, this was a retrospective study, based on what her respondents told her on being invited to look back at their past. For instance, as she notes, what she calls the first phase of this experience ('My Self Before') 'is only seen upon reflection' (1996: 474).

For positivists, this would cast doubt on the reliability of Schreiber's data and the validity of her claim to access the 'depression experience'. But instead, true to her emotionalist position, Schreiber is less concerned with 'bias' than with 'authenticity'. From this point of view: 'there is merit in hearing the women's understandings of the people they were at the time' (1996: 474).

4.4.2 Research task

Emotionalists aim to access emotions by describing respondents' inner experiences, by encouraging interviewers to become emotionally involved with respondents and to convey their own feelings to both respondents and readers (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 58).

This means that emotionalists reject the positivist assumption that both interviewer and interviewee are properly treated as 'objects'. Instead, they depict both as (emotionally involved) subjects. This is set out in Table 4.2.

TABLE 4.2 Two versions of the interview relationship

	Positivism	Emotionalism
Interviewer	Object – following research protocol	Subject – creating interview context
Interviewee	Object – revealing items relevant to the research protocol	Subject – complying with or resisting definition of the situation

If interviewees are to be viewed as subjects who actively construct the features of their cognitive world, then one should try to obtain intersubjective depth between both sides so that a deep mutual understanding can be achieved. As Reason and Rowan argue:

Humanistic approaches favour 'depth interviews' in which interviewee and interviewer become 'peers' or even 'companions'. (1981: 205)

In this 'humanistic' version of the interview, *both* the type of knowledge gained *and* the validity of the analysis are based on 'deep' understanding. This is because 'the humanistic framework' supports 'meaningful understanding of the person . . . and wholeness in human inquiry' (1981: 206).

Similarly, Burgess (1980) in his chapter, significantly 'entitled' 'The unstructured interview as a conversation', the interview is seen to give greater depth than other research techniques. This is because, Burgess claims, it is based on 'a sustained relationship between the informant and the researcher' (1980: 109).

For this reason, most emotionalists tend to reject prescheduled standardized interviews and to prefer open-ended interviews. Norman Denzin (1970: 125) has offered three reasons for this preference:

- 1 It allows respondents to use their 'unique ways of defining the world'.
- 2 It assumes that no fixed sequence of questions is suitable to all respondents.
- 3 It allows respondents to 'raise important issues not contained in the schedule'.

4.4.3 The limits of emotionalism

These positions might seem to be a welcome alternative to the purely technical version of interviews espoused by positivists. After all, isn't it both more valid and more ethical to recognize that interviews are encounters between human beings trying to understand one another?

This 'humanistic' position is seductive. It seems to blend a self-evident truth about humanity with political correctness about the need for mutual understanding and dialogue. However, it *neglects* three issues which I want briefly to explore:

- the assumptions made in preferring open-ended interviews
- the difference between a 'humanistic' and a social science position
- the role of common-sense knowledge, rather than 'empathy', in allowing us to conduct and analyse interviews.

I will consider each issue in turn.

Open-endedness

As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 110–11) point out, it is somewhat naive to assume that open-ended or non-directive interviewing is not in itself a form of social control which shapes what people say. For instance, where the researcher maintains a minimal presence, asking few questions, this can create an interpretive problem for the interviewee about what is relevant. Moreover, the passivity of the interviewer can create an extremely powerful constraint on the interviewee to talk (as seen in 'non-directive' styles of psychotherapy and counselling: see Peräkylä, 1995).

I would also add that this preference for a particular form of interview can be defined in terms of avoiding bias which is entirely appropriate to a

positivist approach. Conversely, in certain feminist writings, where value freedom is rejected, structured interviews are criticized on political grounds as maintaining a hierarchical relationship in research (see Stanley and Wise, 1983).

Humanism

Why are interviews so self-evidently based on an exchange of unique human experiences? Indeed, may not this self-evident 'truth' derive not from social science but from a widespread cultural assumption?

Think of our fascination with interviews with celebrities on television news or 'chat shows'. Or consider the way in which sporting events or even Nobel Prize ceremonies are now incomplete without 'pre-match' and 'post-match' interviews. Do the latter give us insights into 'unique' experiences or do they simply reproduce predictable forms of how it is appropriate to account for sporting or academic success or failure (see Emmison, 1988; Mulkey, 1984)?

Only occasionally do sportsmen and women resist their depiction as heroes or villains. For instance, the British decathlete Daley Thompson was well known for nonplussing the media by producing the 'wrong' account – claiming he was 'over the moon' when he had failed and 'sick as a parrot' when he had won. Again, in this vein, a British boxer was recently termed 'arrogant' by a reporter because he had refused to engage in the usual pre-fight slanging match with his next opponent.

This, of course, is the irony. The media aim to deliver us immediate 'personal' experience. Yet what they (we) want is simple repetition of familiar tales. Perhaps this is part of the postmodern condition. Maybe we feel people are at their most authentic when they are, in effect, reproducing a cultural script.

Those approaches in social science which, to some extent, take on board the media's approach and imply that people's experiences are individually meaningful and authentic raise many questions. For instance, from what do these experiences derive? If you can see uniformity in even the most intimate kinds of account, I think there we would see a job for the social scientist.

The well-meaning 'humanistic' social scientist may thus have uncritically taken on board a common-sense assumption about the immediacy and validity of accounts of human experience. This leads to analytic laziness in considering the status of interview data.

Common sense

Although positivists and emotionalists seek to document different orders of reality (respectively, 'facts' and 'emotions'), there is a surprising degree of tacit agreement between them about one issue. Both are aware of 'traps' in their path which must be overcome if their preferred order is to be properly documented.

So, in an early text, Denzin (1970: 133–8) lists a number of 'problems' which can 'distort' interviewees' responses:

- respondents possessing different interactional roles from the interviewer
- the problem of 'self-presentation', especially in the early stages of the interview
- the problems of 'volatile', 'fleeting' relationships to which respondents have little commitment and so 'can fabricate tales of self that belie the actual facts' (1970: 135)
- the difficulty of penetrating private worlds of experience
- the relative status of interviewer and interviewee
- the 'context' of the interview (e.g. home, work, hospital).

However, to speak of 'distortions' is to play the positivist's game. For positivists are equally concerned with 'misunderstandings' between interviewer and interviewee (or respondent).

By contrast, interviews can also be seen to possess basic properties of all social interaction. These properties derive from both parties' employment of their everyday, common-sense knowledge of social structures to engage in such business as recognizing a question and providing an answer which will be heard as 'appropriate' for a particular identity (see my discussion in Sections 4.7 and 4.8 of the studies by Baker and Baruch). It follows that such properties should be *investigated* rather than treated as a 'problem' standing in the way of accurate reporting of 'facts' or 'experiences'.

4.4.4 Emotionalism: summary

For the emotionalist, the open-ended interview apparently offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even for a politically correct dialogue where researcher and researched offer mutual understanding and support. The rhetoric of interviewing 'in depth' repeatedly hints at such a collection of assumptions. Here we see a stubbornly persistent romantic impulse in contemporary social science: the elevation of the experiential as the authentic – the selfsame gambit that can make the TV chat show or news interview so appealing.

There are also real methodological doubts about the emotionalist project which relate to emotionalists' claims to depict the 'authentic' reality they want to access. These doubts have been forcefully presented by Gubrium and Holstein:

Do we have any evidence of emotion other than its expression? Can researchers give us access to 'real' emotion simply by re-presenting or reenacting subjects' expressions of these emotions? Do emotions exist apart from culturally available modes of expression? (1997: 74, emphasis in original)

Attempt Exercise 4.2 about now

4.5 CONSTRUCTIONISM

While positivists acknowledge that interviewers interact with their subjects, they demand that such interaction should be strictly defined by the research protocol. Consequently, positivists only become seriously interested in interviewer–interviewee interaction when it can be shown that interviewers have departed from the protocol (Brenner, 1981).

Conversely, for emotionalists, interviews are inescapably encounters between subjects. As Norman Denzin has put it:

I wish to treat the interview as an observational encounter. An encounter ... represents the coming together of two or more persons for the purpose of focused interaction. (1970: 133)

What distinguishes constructionists from emotionalists is the former's attempt to treat what happens in what Denzin terms 'focused interaction' as a *topic* in its own right, not as something which can stand in the way of 'authentic' understanding of another's experience. This has a direct impact on the type of knowledge which constructionists want to access.

4.5.1 Type of knowledge

Accounts are not simply representations of the world; they are part of the world they describe. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 107)

Emotionalists help us to see that interviewee respondents are active sense-making subjects. However, they persist in the positivist rhetoric in which accounts are 'simply representations of the world'. By contrast, constructionists are interested in documenting the way in which accounts 'are part of the world they describe'.

What does this mean in practice? The type of knowledge we are concerned with here is how interview participants actively create meaning. This lies behind Holstein and Gubrium's idea of 'the active interview':

Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details. The respondent can hardly 'spoil' what he or she is, in effect, subjectively creating. (1997: 117)

The implication is that methodology texts which advise on 'good' interview technique should only be taken seriously if we are positivists. If not, we need to recognize that the skills involved in bringing off a successful interview are shared by both interviewer *and* interviewee. Ultimately, whatever these methodology texts say, both are drawing upon shared properties of common-sense knowledge.

The earliest attempt to set out this version of interview data was made by Cicourel (1964). For Cicourel, previous advice about good interview technique offers a revealing insight into our dependence on everyday knowledge of social structures. As he writes:

The subtleties which methodologists introduce to the novice interviewer can be read as properties to be found in the everyday interaction between members of a society. Thus the principles of 'good and bad interviewing' can be read as basic features of social interaction which the social scientist presumably is seeking to study. (1964: 68)

For Cicourel, the remedies recommended by methodologists derive from the very knowledge of the social world which should be made problematic. Moreover, the 'errors' they detect are not really obstacles to social research but rather exhibit basic properties of social interaction. We must learn, he suggests, to 'conceive of the error as evidence not only of poor reliability but also of "normal" interpersonal relations' (1964: 74).

Cicourel parallels Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology with its awe at the 'amazing, practical accomplishment' of research findings. For Garfinkel and Cicourel, such findings are reflexively linked to everyday procedures for 'looking' and 'finding'. Ironically, this makes Cicourel full of praise for methodology texts like Hyman (1954), which is dubbed 'excellent' on two occasions (Cicourel, 1964: 85, 93). The irony arises because he wants to utilize their desired success in achieving a degree of invariance not as a resource but as a topic:

In spite of the problem of interviewer error, 'somehow' different interviewers with different approaches produce(d) similar responses from different subjects. The question then becomes one of determining what was invariant or, more precisely, how were invariant meanings communicated despite such variations. (1964: 75)

For Cicourel, there is no distinction between the practical skills of methodologists, researchers and interviewers. All are uniformly concerned with what he calls 'the synchronization of meaning'. All use 'rules of evidence' deriving from a single conceptual scheme based on assumed common relevances, stocks of knowledge, typifications, recipes, rules for managing one's presence before others, and so on. These shared 'commonsense devices for making sense of the environment' (1964: 100) are presupposed in conducting or analysing interviews. We must, therefore, learn to 'conceive of the error as evidence not only of poor reliability but also of "normal" interpersonal relations' (1964: 74).

4.5.2 Research task

Cicourel's position derived from ethnomethodology, an approach we have already encountered in earlier chapters of this book (most notably in Chapter 3).

Constructionists share ethnomethodologists' focus on how people assemble sense in situations like interviews. This is seen in Holstein and Gubrium's constructionist account of 'the active interview':

Respondents' answers and comments are not viewed as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead, they are considered for the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled. (1997: 127)

However, most constructionists also want to preserve a concern with *what* interviewees are saying as well as with *how* they get to say it. So Holstein and Gubrium continue:

The goal is to show how interview responses are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that condition the meaning-making process. The analytic objective is not merely to describe the situated production of talk, but to show how what is being said relates to the experiences and lives being studied. (1997: 127)

By reinstating a reference to 'the experiences and lives being studied', some ethnomethodologists might say that Holstein and Gubrium are taking us back to the emotionalist position. The issue of whether interview data can tell us anything beyond the local construction of meaning is very much alive today. It leads to two very different criticisms of how constructionists want to treat interviews.

4.5.3 Criticisms of constructionism

Narrowness

Although the constructionist critique of both positivism and emotionalism may appear to be convincing, its own position seems to have problems and inconsistencies. Cicourel's ethnomethodological concern with the basic properties of social interaction would seem to deny the value of treating interview data as saying anything about any other reality than the interview itself.

Put simply, many interview researchers would complain that, if we follow Cicourel's ethnomethodologically inspired position, we would simply focus on the conversational skills of the participants rather than on the content of what they are saying and its relation to the world outside the interview.

Two responses have been made to this criticism. Those sympathetic to ethnomethodology argue that such content is only to be found through how it is made available by the participants to an interview. Therefore, by focusing closely on the co-production of interview talk, we can say a great deal about content without *importing* our own sense of what content is important (see Schegloff, 1997).

By contrast, many constructionists accept that there is some justification for the alleged 'narrowness' of ethnomethodology and claim that it is possible to combine a concern with both form (how?) and content (what?). Holstein and Gubrium have been the principal exponents of this position, claiming that it is necessary to treat interview data as reporting on both what they call *how* and *what* questions.

In a project on the quality of care and quality of life of nursing home residents (Gubrium, 1997), interview responses were, in part, analysed to address 'what' questions. Here the researcher attempted to:

link . . . the topics to biographical particulars in the interview process, and thus produce . . . a subject who responds to, or is affected by, the matters under discussion. (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 121)

But such a focus on 'what' did not, it was claimed, mean that 'how' questions were neglected:

The standpoint from which information is offered is continually developed in relation to ongoing interview interaction. In speaking of the quality of care, for example, nursing home residents, as interview respondents, not only offer substantive thoughts and feelings pertinent to the topic under consideration, but simultaneously and continuously monitor who they are in relation to the person questioning them. For example, prefacing her remarks about the quality of life in her facility with the statement 'speaking as a woman', a nursing home resident informs the interviewer that she is to be heard as a woman, not as someone else – not a mere resident, cancer patient, or abandoned mother. (1997: 122)

So, in what Holstein and Gubrium call 'the active interview':

data can be analyzed to show the dynamic interrelatedness of the *whats* and the *hows*. (1997: 127, emphasis in original)

Inconsistency?

Holstein and Gubrium's answer to the charge of 'narrowness' leaves them open to a different criticism. Aren't 'what' questions precisely the concerns of emotionalists and positivists? If so, aren't constructionists who want to use interview data to answer such questions simply taking us back to earlier positions?

This is an important and complex issue with no easy answer. So that my readers can try to make up their own minds, most of the rest of this chapter will be used to give telling examples. Each example takes a different position on the appropriateness of using interview data to answer 'what' questions. The first two studies derive from interviews with adolescents.

4.6 ADOLESCENT CULTURES: COMBINING 'WHAT' AND 'HOW'

Jody Miller and Barry Glassner (1997) describe a study involving in-depth, open-ended interviews with young women (aged 13 to 18) who claim affiliation with youth gangs in their communities (Miller, 1996). These interviews follow the completion of a survey interview administered by the same researcher.

Here is how they describe the purposes of each form of data:

While the survey interview gathers information about a wide range of topics, including the individual, her school, friends, family, neighborhood, delinquent involvement, arrest history, sexual history, and victimization, in addition to information about the gang, the in-depth interview is concerned exclusively with the roles and activities of young women in youth gangs, and the meanings they describe as emerging from their gang affiliation. (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 105)

So far Miller and Glassner are focusing on how we can use interviews to understand the meaning of these young women's identity (what Holstein and Gubrium call 'how' questions). To see how this works out in practice, let us focus on the data that Miller obtained from her in-depth interviews. This is one example:

Describing why she joined her gang, one young woman told Miller, 'well, I didn't get any respect at home. I wanted to get some love and respect from somebody somewhere else'. (1997: 107)

Here is another respondent's explanation of why she joined a gang:

'I didn't have *no* family . . . I had nothin' else.' (1997: 107)

Another young woman, when asked to speculate on why young people join gangs, suggested:

'Some of 'em are like me, don't have, don't really have a basic home or steady home to go to, you know, and they don't have as much love and respect in the home so they want to get it elsewhere. And, and, like we get, have family members in gangs or that were in gangs, stuff like that.' (1997: 107)

Let us assume that you have gathered these data and now want to begin analysis. Put at its starkest, what are you to do with it?

In line with the positivist or emotionalist approach, you may start by coding respondents' answers into the different sets of reasons that they give for participation in gangs (perhaps using qualitative software programs such as ETHNOGRAPH or NUD•IST; see Seale, 2000). From these data, two reasons seem to predominate: 'push' factors (unsupportive families) and 'pull' factors (supportive gangs).

Moreover, given the availability of survey data on the same respondents, you are now in a position to correlate each factor with various background characteristics that they have. This seems to set up your research in good shape. Not only can you search for the 'subjective' meanings of adolescent gangs, you can relate these meanings to 'objective' social structures.

Both positivist and emotionalist approaches thus have a high degree of plausibility to social scientists who theorize the world in terms of the impact of (objective) social structures upon (subjective) dispositions. Moreover, the kind of research outputs that it seeks to deliver are precisely those demanded by 'users' in the community, seeking immediate practical payoffs from social science research.

Calling their approach a 'methodology for listening', Miller and Glassner are centrally concerned with emotionalism's desire to 'see . . . the world from the perspective of our subjects' (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987: 37).

However, Miller and Glassner (1997: 103-4) are not entirely satisfied by the apparent plausibility of emotionalism. They now move in a social constructionist direction. For them, this involves thinking about how their respondents are using culturally available resources in order to construct their stories. As Richardson suggests:

Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other. (1990: 24)

How, then, can the data above be read in these terms? The idea is to see respondents' answers as *cultural stories*. This means examining the rhetorical force of what interviewees say, as:

interviewees deploy these narratives to make their actions explainable and understandable to those who otherwise may not understand. (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 107)

In the data already presented, Miller and Glassner note that respondents make their actions understandable in two ways. First, they do not attempt to challenge public views of gangs as bad. But, second, they do challenge the notion that the interviewee herself is bad.

However, Miller and Glassner note that not all their respondents glibly recycle conventional cultural stories. As they put it:

Some of the young women go farther and describe their gang involvement in ways that directly challenge prevailing stereotypes about gangs as groups that are inherently bad or antisocial and about females roles within gangs. (1997: 108)

Here are some of the respondents' accounts that they have in mind:

'It was really, it was just normal life, the only difference was, is, that we had meetings.'

'[We] play cards, smoke bud, play dominoes, play video games. That's basically all we do is play. You would be surprised. This is a bunch of big kids. It's a bunch of big old kids in my set.' (1997: 109)

In accounts like these, Miller and Glassner argue that there is an explicit challenge to what the interviewees know to be popular beliefs about youth gangs. Instead of accepting the conventional definition of their behaviour as 'deviant', the girls attempt to convey the normalcy of their activities.

These narratives directly challenge stereotypical cultural stories of the gang. Following Richardson, Miller and Glassner refer to such accounts as 'collective stories' which:

resist the cultural narratives about groups of people and tell alternative stories. (Richardson, 1990: 25)

Miller and Glassner's sensitive address of the narrative forms from which perspectives arise suggests that interview analysis can, as Holstein and Gubrium suggest, be used to answer both 'what' questions (concerned with identity) and 'how' questions (concerned with matters such as narrative construction).

4.7 MEMBERSHIP WORK IN ADOLESCENT-ADULT TALK

Carolyn Baker's (1982) work shows another way of analysing interviews with adolescents. Baker's research is based on her comparative studies of interviews with teenagers in Canada and Australia. Like Miller and Glassner, her initial concern was to use her interviews to learn about how adolescents see themselves relative to children and adults.

However, she soon saw that the participants themselves were constructing a version of adolescent-adult relations for each other. As she puts it:

at the same time as these passages contain comment about adolescent-adult talk, they are instances *themselves* of adolescent-adult talk. They are conversations between a researcher who could commonsensically be understood to be an adult, and persons who could similarly be describable as adolescents, given their age. (1982: 111)

For Baker, then, it became increasingly clear that the question 'In what ways do adolescents perceive their identity?' is loaded and unhelpful. Instead, she prefers to address the 'how' question: how do people locally construct particular identities?

To show how Baker proceeds, let us take just one extract from one of her interviews (Extract 4.1). Unlike the data given for the previous study, note how Baker's extracts inform us about both interviewee *and* interviewer's talk.

Extract 4.1 (Baker, 1984: 316)

(P = Pam, aged 14; I = interviewer)

- 1 I: Are there any ways in which you consider yourself to still be partly a child?
- 2 P: Well, I like to watch TV and, uh,
- 3 I: Well, adults do that
- 4 P: Yeah, I still read the comics ((laugh))
- 5 I: Adults do that
- 6 P: That's about, only thing I can think of

Note how I assigns P to a place between childhood and adulthood (line 1) and how P enters into the discussion in these terms. Moreover, as Baker (1984: 317) notes, in lines 3 and 5, I treats as invalid P's nominated instances of 'childish' behaviour. By showing that a valid response would involve depicting something exclusive to children, I proceeds on the basis that, although child-adolescent overlap can properly arise (being 'partly a child'), child-adult overlap constitutes an unacceptable answer. The interview continues as in Extract 4.2.

Extract 4.2 (Baker, 1984: 317)

(// = overlap)

- 7 I: Do you notice any leftovers of childhood in your personality?
- 8 P: Well, my food tastes have all changed differently, like I used to hate lots
- 9 of things, now I like most, almost everything. I used to really hate
- 10 vegetables, and now I'd rather have vegetables than anything else!
- 11 And um, when I was a child, I used to really be worried about what I
- 12 looked like and that an now I don't, I don't really care. If peop//
- 13 I: // You really don't care?
- 14 P: Pe, I don't care what people think, I just, think well I like this, and if no
- 15 one else does, that's too bad
- 16 I: At what point were you, so terrible self conscious about your appearance?

Baker draws our attention to the way in which I picks up and pursues the topic of P's feelings about her appearance, while paying no attention to what P says about vegetables. In this way, she shows P that her tastes in food are not entirely compatible with I's attempt to depict overlaps between childhood and adolescence. As Baker suggests:

by doing this, [the interviewer] shows Pam how adolescence should be done in the interview. While Pam's 'vegetable eating' is passed by, her 'not caring' about her appearance becomes the basis for an identity rich puzzle and solution whose pursuit by the interviewer binds this activity to her category 'adolescence'. (1984: 317-18)

Anssi Peräkylä (personal correspondence) has also pointed out that I's first question, in both extracts, treats P as a subject who might be puzzled by her identity. This can amount to treating P as a *non-child* (because children are not supposed to have that kind of self-consciousness about their identity) and simultaneously as a *non-adult* (because adults are not supposed to be puzzled

about who they are). So, straight off, I constitutes P as neither child nor adult (i.e. as an 'adolescent').

This focus on what the interviewer is doing is very different from other approaches to interview data. Positivists treat the interviewer as a possible source of bias, and emotionalists may make assumptions about the role of 'empathy' or 'political dominance' in interviews. However, social constructionists like Baker, who focus on 'how' questions, must address, without prior conceptions, the actual interplay between the interviewer and the interviewee. Moreover, Baker goes further than Glassner and Miller by treating matters of 'identity' as only available through the ways it is locally constituted by all parties.

Baker's analysis draws upon an approach (Harvey Sacks's membership categorization device analysis) that will be presented in Section 5.4. For the moment, we need only note that **membership categorization devices** (MCDs) are used by participants to group together collections of 'similar' identities or categories. Any category is a potential member of more than one MCD. One MCD that can be heard in these attempts to position people as 'children', 'adolescents' or 'adults' is 'stage of life'.

Stage of life is addressed by Pam and the interviewer in both the extracts above. First, in Extract 4.1, in the exchanges between line 1 and 6, I requests and P attempts to provide a set of activities hearable as bound to the category 'still partly a child'. I's comments at lines 3 and 5 now may be heard as attending to the unclear category bounding of activities such as 'watching TV' or 'reading comics'. Similarly, I's pursuit of P's comment about her looks makes sense in terms of the association between the way in which the activity 'being concerned about one's appearance' is category-bound to the category 'adolescent'.

Second, the hierarchical relationship between each of these stage of life categories is attended to by both speakers. For instance, in Extract 4.2, I uses the term 'leftovers' to describe elements left behind from childhood, while P describes her 'non-childlike' self in terms of greater independence and maturity. By reporting her activities in this way, P can be heard to be acting more like an adult than a child.

Most stage of life categories are mutually exclusive, i.e. you are either an 'adult' or a 'child' but, usually, cannot be both at the same time. Hence to refer to an 'adult's' behaviour as 'childish' is hearable as quite a powerful charge.

People recognizable as 'adolescents' may, therefore, want to set up a mutually exclusive framework between such categories. In Extract 4.2, notice how Pam makes a sharp distinction between the past ('when I was a child') and the present (when she has more 'adult' qualities).

At the same time, as Baker notes:

'adolescence' can be made to overlap with 'childhood' or 'adulthood' by discovering 'childness' or 'adulthood' in the 'adolescent'. (1984: 303)

The interviewer's question about 'leftovers' (Extract 4.2, line 7) depends precisely on the availability of this sense of overlap. Indeed, people can use

both 'childness' or adulthood' as simultaneous descriptions of the 'adolescent'. Indeed, as Baker notes, 'this is a classic "problem of adolescence"' (1984: 304) to be found in everyday life just as much as in this interview.

It is worth noting how Baker's analysis departs from positivist approaches to interview data. According to this approach:

- 1 Standardized sets of questions are part of 'good interview practice', designed to ensure that the interview is a reliable research instrument, free from interviewer error.
- 2 Any similarities in interviewees' answers are to be explained in terms of 'face-sheet variables' (e.g. social class, gender, ethnicity) external to the interview context.

Conversely, Baker shows that:

- 1 Standardized questions (and follow-up questions) derive their sense from commonly available conceptions about people's behaviour. Hence, whatever 'scientific' character they have builds upon common-sense knowledge about how the everyday social world operates.
- 2 Similar answers relate to the interviewees' skills in deploying shared knowledge about this shared social world.

The contrast is very clear. While many interview studies define their approach by technical criteria and treat 'society' simply as an external social fact, Baker shows how *both* interviewer and interviewee rely upon their conversational skills and common-sense knowledge of social structures in order to produce locally 'adequate' utterances. The former approach can be characterized as interview-as-technique; the latter can be called the interview-as-local-accomplishment. This is shown in Table 4.3.

TABLE 4.3 Two versions of interview data

Version of interview	Questions	Answers
Interview-as-technique	Technical criteria (e.g. pre-testing of questions)	Reflect respondents' place in the social structure
Interview-as-local- accomplishment	Common-sense knowledge of social structures used to produce 'adequate' utterances (e.g. to produce a hearable question at an 'appropriate' location)	(e.g. to produce answers which define morally adequate identities)

From the point of view of interview-as-local-accomplishment, interview data are not 'one side of the picture' to be balanced by observation of what respondents actually do, or to be compared with what their role partners say. Instead, such data show how participants sensitively reproduce and rearticulate identities within the interview. Although such identities (e.g. young person, mother) undoubtedly exist outside the interview in the many

contexts of social interaction, the interview-as-local-accomplishment approach encourages us to study the skills used as the parties construct identities and move between them.

Attempt Exercise 4.3 about now

4.8 MORAL TALES OF PARENTHOOD

I will give a final example of how we can treat the interview-as-local-accomplishment. The example is taken from a study of 'parenthood' which adopts a similar approach to Baker's discussion of the 'adult-adolescent' relationship.

One of the striking aspects of Baker's data is the way in which her interviewees' accounts have recurrent features in common. This parallels Baruch's (1982) comments about studies of parents' responses to different congenital illnesses in their children.

When parents of handicapped children are first interviewed, they often offer 'atrocious' stories, usually about the late discovery or inadequate treatment of their child's condition. It is tempting to compare what they say with observations of what has happened and with medical workers' accounts. However, as Baruch (1982) notes, such a comparison is based on the positivist assumption that interview responses are to be valued primarily because of their accuracy as objective statements of sets of events. Conversely, we might address the moral forms that give force to 'atrocious' stories, whatever their accuracy. Right or wrong, biased or unbiased, such accounts display vividly cultural particulars about the moral accountability of parenthood.

Baruch begins by looking at data extracts from Burton's (1975) study of parents of children with cystic fibrosis. In Extract 4.3, one such parent tells about an early experience at a baby clinic.

Extract 4.3 (quoted by Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2)

Parent: I went to the baby clinic every week. She would gain one pound one week and lose it the next. They said I was fussing unnecessarily. They said there were skinny and fat babies and I was fussing too much. I went to a doctor and he gave me some stuff and he said 'You're a young mother. Are you sure you won't put it in her ear instead of her mouth?' It made me feel a fool.

Baruch compares this data extract with another from his own study, as in Extract 4.4.

Extract 4.4 (Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2, 1)

Parent: When she was born, they told me she was perfectly all right. And I accepted it. I worried about her which most mothers do, you know. Worry about their first child.

Int: Hm

Parent: She wouldn't eat and different things. And so I kept taking her to the clinic. Nothing wrong with her my dear. You're just making yourself... worrying unnecessarily, you see.

Despite the different illnesses, there are striking similarities in the content of what each mother is saying. Both mothers report their concern about the baby's eating habits. Both complain that the clinic doctor dismissed their worries as groundless.

Nonetheless, Baruch notes that each account is treated very differently by each researcher. More specifically:

Burton treats her findings as an accurate report of an external event and argues that parents' early encounters with medical personnel can cause psychological damage to the parents as well as lasting damage to the relationship with doctors. On the other hand, I see parents' talk as a situated account aimed at displaying the status of morally adequate parenthood. In this instance, the display is produced by the telling of an atrocity story. (Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2, 2)

If we return to Table 4.3, we can find the basis for this difference of approach. Burton treats parents' answers as deriving from the social structure of mother-doctor interactions, coupled with a given psychological reality to do with parents' feelings of guilt and responsibility. For Burton, then, the interview is a technique used by social scientists to get closer to such 'facts'.

Conversely, Baruch is arguing that mothers are trading on common-sense knowledge of 'what everyone knows' about the concerns of young mothers. Treating the interview as a local accomplishment, he invites us to see how the construction of an 'atrocity story' is an effective way for mothers to display their moral responsibility.

It might appear that Burton and Baruch are offering *competing* versions of mothers' behaviour. Burton seems to be stressing the mothers' goodwill in difficult circumstances, while Baruch appears to be offering a more cynical account which seems to argue that mothers are mainly concerned with how they will look in the eyes of others. However, it must be stressed that, for Baruch at least, the two accounts are *not* competitive.

This is because Baruch is not treating what his mothers tell him as either true or false accounts of what actually happened to them when they took their babies to the clinics. Consonant with his view of these interviews as 'local accomplishments', he is instead focusing on how, in telling their story to a stranger, mothers skilfully produce demonstrably 'morally adequate' accounts.

Notice how, in both extracts, the mothers' report that their babies had eating problems *prior to the disease diagnosis* specifically implies and contradicts the possible identity 'mother who did not monitor her baby sufficiently'. Coupled with their reports that doctors had, at first, played down their fears, this effectively produces the identity of 'mother who thoroughly monitored her baby but was spurned by the doctor'.

So Baruch is asking about the *functions* of the mothers' accounts rather than casting doubt on their motives. He is not competing with what Burton says about the reality of what happens in mother-doctor encounters because he is refusing to treat interviewees' accounts as simple *reports* on such an external reality.

If anything, however, Baruch's analysis offers a more human account of the capacities of his respondents. While Burton's mothers' responses seem determined by social and psychological structures, Baruch reveals that human subjects actively participate in the construction of social and psychological realities.

So far, however, we have been depending on brief extracts to show how such an analysis works. As I shall argue in Chapter 8, a danger of depending on such extracts is that one can use them to support a preconceived argument rather than to test it.

Baruch (1982) overcomes such dangers by two effective strategies:

- tabulating many cases
- investigating deviant cases.

Let me briefly review each strategy in turn.

Baruch used only the parents' initial responses to the interviewer's opening question: 'So could you just tell me the story?' Following Sacks, Baruch was interested in the membership categorization devices (MCDs) employed by respondents. The MCDs used by Baruch's parents were mainly 'parent', 'child' and 'medical professional'. Baruch then tabulated these responses in terms of pairs of MCDs. His analysis showed that these MCDs were grouped in various pairs at different parts of the account according to who had a duty towards the other (e.g. parent-child, professional-parent).

Table 4.4 indicates the pairs identified. In each case, the category mentioned first is described by the parent as having an implied duty towards the second category.

TABLE 4.4 *Membership categories*

Categories	Number	%
Parent-child	160	51
Parent-professional	86	28
Professional-child	49	16
Professional-parent	16	5
Total	311	100

Source: Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2, 17

Baruch notes that earlier studies (e.g. Voysey, 1975) have stressed the perceived importance of parental responsibilities towards their children. Table 4.4 supports this finding, showing that:

Parent-child norms are central to parents' accounts and, on their own, amount to all the other norms put together. Thus, when parents provide an account of their responses, they are heard to attend to their duties, rights and obligations towards their child, even though they might have been expected to emphasise the medical aspects of their child's career, e.g. professional-child relationships. (Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2, 18)

In Sacks's terms, each of these pairs of MCDs implies common expectations about what sort of activities are appropriate. For instance, the parent-child pairing implies a standard obligation of parental responsibility such that we can describe the collection 'parent-child' as a standardized relational pair (SRP).

Looking just at the SRP 'parent-child', Baruch finds the kinds of activities described in the interviews to be as shown in Table 4.5.

TABLE 4.5 *Parent-child activities*

Type of activity	Number	%
Emotional responses to the child's illness and treatment	101	63
Action taken in relation to the child's illness	38	24
Taking responsibility for the child's illness	11	7
Showing knowledge about the child's development and illness	10	6
Total	160	100

Source: Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2, Table 3

We see from Table 4.5, as Baruch puts it, that:

One of the central features of these stories is the way parents appeal to their emotionality as a normal, moral response of anyone who is in their situation. (1982: Appendix 2, 21)

This emotional response (described in 63 per cent of all such descriptions of parents and children) appears to set the backdrop for the other accounts of action taken (24 per cent) in the context of responsibility (7 per cent) and knowledge (6 per cent). Thus parents describe their relationship to their children as primarily grounded in emotion but leading to actions embodying the more cognitive dimensions of responsibility and knowledge.

Using such tabulations, Baruch demonstrates that the construction of what he calls 'moral tales' (see also Baruch, 1981) is not just an isolated feature of one or two extracts but runs throughout his corpus of data. When grounded on MCD analysis, Baruch's tabulation of data is possible without violating the recognition of the interview as a situated encounter.

Nonetheless, as in all datasets, there are always exceptions. As already mentioned, Baruch stringently seeks to identify such exceptions and, through

the method of **deviant-case analysis**, uses them to refine his analysis. The most important deviant case is discussed briefly below.

One set of parents, when asked to tell their story, responded entirely in terms of descriptions of what medical professionals had done for their child. They made no mention of their own emotional responses, or of their own actions as parents. Extract 4.5 gives a brief taste of their response.

Extract 4.5 (Baruch, 1982: Appendix 2, 28)

- 1 Parent: Well the story really started with him going in for a minor op last year
- 2 and the anaesthetist just er investigations discover a murmur which
- 3 she wasn't very happy about and referred us to a paediatrician after the
- 4 op who agreed that it was an unusual sight and um murmurs are
- 5 commonplace really
- 6 Int: um
- 7 Parent: But on the sight and nature of it, it sort of wanted further investigation.

While Baruch's other interviews contained several descriptions of parent-child SRPs, they are totally absent here where the tale is told simply in terms of professional-child activities. If you compare this extract with the ones given earlier, the absence here of references to parents' worries is quite striking.

Baruch suggests that the key to understanding this deviant case lies in the parent's statement on lines 4-5 that 'murmurs are commonplace really'. As he notes, this involves:

the use of a technical language ... which is never heard in other parents' accounts at this stage of the child's career. (1982: Appendix 2, 29)

It turns out that these parents are themselves medical professionals and are treating the interviewer's question as a request for a reasonably 'objective' account of events seen from a medical point of view. This 'deviant case' thus highlights the way in which, for parents without these medical resources, the request for a story is heard as an opportunity to display that one is still an adequate parent.

Two points of clarification perhaps need to be made. First, this extract is being viewed as deviant purely in a statistical sense. As Baruch argues:

we are not viewing [the parent's] account as deviant in terms of pre-conceived assumptions about what constitutes adequate parenthood. Rather, the claims we are making about its status are based on a comparison of the considerable differences between its normative character and that of the rest of the sample. As Strong (1979) has argued, such limiting cases are extremely valuable in illuminating consistent features of social life. (1982: Appendix 2, 30)

The second point derives from this: it might be suggested that Baruch is arguing that the occupation of these parents is the *cause* of why they give their account in this way. If so, Baruch would be treating the interviewees' account as stemming from their place in the social structure and, thereby, be reverting to a version of the interview-as-technique (see Table 4.3).

However, although Baruch is not explicit on this matter, his method would suggest that this is *not* his argument at all. Following Sacks, we must recognize that any person can describe themselves (or be described) in a multiplicity of ways. These parents could have elected to have heard the interviewer's request for 'the story' to be addressed to them purely as 'parents' rather than as 'health care professionals who happen to be parents'. By choosing the latter format they display other, equally moral, qualities, e.g. as people who are, for the moment, able to put their feelings on one side and seek to offer an admirably 'objective' account.

In neither case do we have to see an external, pre-given social structure as the determinant of the account. Rather, all the interviewees invoke a sense of social structure in order to assemble recognizably 'sensible' accounts which are adequate for the practical purposes at hand.

Attempt Exercise 4.4 about now

The implications are clear-cut. First, in studying accounts, we are studying displays of identities which arise as part of members' artful practices (e.g. in telling a particular kind of 'moral tale'). Second, there is no necessary contradiction in seeking to study *both* identities and practices. Sacks himself, for instance, seeks to establish the norms at work in children's stories in order to give an account of the artful practices through which they are assembled. It is equally possible, as Baruch has shown, to study the cultural norms at work within a narrative and to understand how their power derives from *both* their cultural base *and* their use in relation to a set of formal rules with an apparently inexorable logic.

As Sacks acknowledges, the *content* of his formal membership categorization devices is cultural through and through, arising, for instance, in how the collection 'family' is put together in a particular society. However, as he points out, once a category from one collection is used there are powerful pressures to draw on the same collection in subsequent descriptions. This can have unintended consequences: slanging matches, for instance, can get locked into a pattern of mutual insult once the first insulting term is used.

Following Sacks, Baruch's research reveals that, for analytic purposes and in real life, form and content depend upon each other. In this way, the debate between different kinds of constructionism (focused on either 'what' or 'how' questions) may be resolvable.

4.9 THE THREE MODELS: A SUMMARY

4.9.1 The value of interview data

Positivists argue that interviews based upon pre-tested, standardized questions are a way of increasing the reliability of research. However, both

emotionalism and constructionism bring into question the value of data derived from standardized, survey research style interviews.

Some constructionists, like Glassner and Miller, assume that people's cultural worlds are more complex than most positivists will allow. Consequently, it is insufficient simply to 'pre-test' an interview schedule by asking questions of a few respondents. Instead, for Glassner and Miller, it is more appropriate to engage in systematic observation *before* any interviewing takes place.

Ethnomethodologists take the argument far further, rarely using interview methods as a way of gathering data. Instead, ethnomethodologists tend to concentrate on purely 'naturally occurring' settings which are observed and/or recorded at first hand.

It should at once be noted that the critique of the value of interview data unknowingly shares an assumption with more traditional approaches. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) have pointed out, an attachment to 'naturally occurring data' is a kind of 'naturalism'. Naturalism, they argue, unwittingly agrees with positivism that the best kinds of data are somehow 'untouched by human hands' – neutral, unbiased and representative. In some senses, then, naturalists are the inheritors of the positivist programme, using different means to achieve the same unquestioned ends.

So, despite the power of naturally occurring data, it does not follow that it is illegitimate to carry out our own research interviews. Everything depends on the status which we accord to the data gathered in such interviews.

4.9.2 The 'truth' of interview data

One important dimension which distinguishes both positivists and emotionalists from constructionists is whether interviews are treated as straightforward reports on another reality or whether they merely report upon, or express, their own structures.

According to the former ('externalist') position, interviews can, in principle, be treated as reports on external realities. The only condition for positivists is that strict protocols are observed. For emotionalists, the condition is that the interviewer should seek to overcome the presumed power imbalance with her interviewee.

According to the latter ('internalist') position, interviews do present interesting data. But these data express interpretive procedures or conversational practices present in what both interviewer and interviewee are *doing* through their talk and non-verbal actions (Baker, 1982; see Section 4.7).

As already noted, there is a tension in constructionism between internalist and externalist versions of interview data. Put in simpler terms, some constructionists, like Miller and Glassner, are not too sure whether interviews are purely local events or express underlying external realities.

The debate is seen in its clearest form in discussions about whether interview data can be biased. Within positivist work, there is an assumption that bias is a problem because of both bad interviewers *and* bad interviewees.

Thus we hear about the inability of 10 per cent of the adult population to fill out 'even simple questionnaires' (Selltiz et al., 1964: 241), and about the untrustworthiness of some respondents and their unfortunate lack of comprehension of social scientific language (Brenner, 1981: 116-17).

These fears of bias are reflected when constructionists worry about how informants may be concealing what the interviewer most wants to know (Denzin, 1970: 130). Both positivists and some constructionists may then find a common concern in the various ways in which interviewees are not fully moral or not intellectually up to scratch.

However, there are exceptions. For instance, in what is largely a positivist argument, Brown and Sime claim that:

an account is neither naive nor an apology for behaviour, but must be taken as an informed statement by the person whose experiences are under investigation. (1981: 160)

Equally, there is a more helpful tendency in constructionism. This suggests that we need not hear interview responses simply as true or false *reports* on reality. Instead, we can treat such responses as *displays* of perspectives and moral forms.

The need to preserve and understand the reality of the interview account is central to the argument of many constructionists. Indeed, the ethnographic tradition (see Section 3.1) contains a way of looking at respondents' accounts which goes beyond categorizing them as 'true' or 'false'. William F. Whyte has observed:

In dealing with subjective material, the interviewer is, of course, not trying to discover the *true attitude or sentiment* of the informant. He should recognise that ambivalence is a fairly common condition of man - that men can and do hold conflicting sentiments at any given time. Furthermore, men hold varying sentiments according to the situations in which they find themselves. (1980: 117)

Unlike Burgess and Denzin, but like Miller and Glassner, Holstein and Gubrium and Carolyn Baker, Whyte shows us how it is not always necessary to treat respondents' accounts as if they were scientific statements and subject them to possible refutation. This leads Whyte to ask questions about the causes of respondents' accounts ('the events and interpersonal relations out of which (they) arise'; 1980: 117).

Of course, this pays scant attention to the form and structure of such accounts, as discussed by Baker. However, in a paper first published in 1960, we can forgive Whyte neglecting the study of the interview as a narrative. An alternative approach, following Gilbert and Mulkay (1983), would be to treat interviews as giving us access to the *repertoire* of narratives that we use in producing accounts (see my discussion of discourse analysis in Section 6.4).

The question remains whether any bridging position is possible between these two apparently incompatible perspectives. Must we choose between seeing interviews as *either* potentially 'true' reports *or* situated narratives?

Let me make two observations which I hope are helpful. First, everything depends on our purposes at hand. Sometimes, as in Baker's work, it makes sense consistently to concentrate on the local or situated character of interview talk. At the other extreme, for instance in quantitative studies of voting intentions or patient satisfaction, it becomes appropriate to treat what interviewees say as potentially 'true' reports. And again, sometimes, not without some difficulty, one can try to follow up both issues, using Miller and Glassner's and Holstein and Gubrium's apparently 'twin-track' approach.

My second observation relates to Baruch's and Baker's studies discussed earlier. It might seem that if, like them, we focus on the local character of interview talk, we have privileged form over content. However, this is yet another misleading polarity. By analysing how people talk to one another, one is directly gaining access to a cultural universe and its content of moral assumptions. Such a position is intrinsic to Garfinkel's (1967) argument that accounts are part of the world they describe.

4.10 THREE PRACTICAL QUESTIONS - AND ANSWERS

In the light of the discussion above, I suggest here three questions that interview researchers might ask themselves.

What status do you attach to your data?

Many interview studies are used to elicit respondents' perceptions. How far is it appropriate to think that people attach a single meaning to their experiences? May not multiple meanings of a situation (e.g. living in a community home) or of an activity (e.g. being a male football fan) be represented by what people say to the researcher, to each other, to carers and so on (Gubrium, 1997)?

This raises the important methodological issue about whether interview responses are to be treated as giving direct access to 'experience' or as actively constructed 'narratives' involving activities which themselves demand analysis (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Both positions are entirely legitimate but the position taken will need to be justified and explained.

Is your analytic position appropriate to your practical concerns?

Some ambitious analytic positions (e.g. ethnomethodology, discourse analysis) may actually cloud the issue if your aim is simply to respond to a given social problem like 'students' perceptions of their future job prospects'. If so, it might be simpler to acknowledge that there are more complex ways of addressing your data but to settle on presenting your research as a *descriptive* study based upon a clear social problem.

Do interview data really help in addressing your research topic?

If you are interested in, say, what happens in school classrooms, should you be using interviews as your major source of data? Think about exactly why you have settled on an interview study. Certainly it can be relatively quick to gather interview data, but not as quick as, say, texts and documents. How far are you being influenced by the prominence of interviews in the media (see Atkinson and Silverman, 1997)?

In the case of the classroom, couldn't you observe what people do there instead of asking them what they think about it? Or gather documents that routinely arise in schools, e.g. pupils' reports, mission statements, and so on?

Of course, you may still want to do an interview study. But whatever your method you will need to justify it and show you have thought through the practical and analytical issues involved in your choice.

4.11 CONCLUSION

Interviews share with any conversation an involvement in moral realities. They offer a rich source of data which provide access to how people account for both their troubles and their good fortune.

Such observations are hardly surprising since the evidence for them is immediately before our eyes in our everyday experience. Only by following misleading correspondence theories of truth could it have ever occurred to researchers to treat interview statements as only potentially accurate or distorted reports of reality.

KEY POINTS

There are three different models relevant to interview data: positivism, emotionalism and constructionism.

Each model provides different answers to questions about whether we should gather interview data and, if so, how to analyse them.

These different answers were illustrated by three case studies of interview-based research.

Recommended Reading

The best short introduction to analysing interview data, written from a constructionist perspective, is Holstein and Gubrium (1995). Silverman (1997a) contains important chapters by Miller and Glassner, Holstein and Gubrium and Baker. Fontana and Frey (2000) provide a recent survey of the literature which is sympathetic to many of the issues raised in this chapter.

Interviews have always been used to elicit autobiographical tales. For an introduction to the life history approach, see Miller (2000). The advent of the Internet now means that researchers need no longer be face-to-face with interviewees. Mann and Stewart (2000) provide a collection of papers on this issue, and Ryan and Silverman (2000) give an example of research based on e-mail interviews. The best discussion of the focus group method is provided by Bloor et al. (2001).

Exercise 4.1

This exercise gives you an opportunity to think through the debate about whether it is appropriate to assess whether interview accounts are true or false. The following extract is taken from a study in which scientists were interviewed about the factors that influence changes in scientific theories (quoted by Gilbert and Mulkay, 1983: 10).

(S = scientist)

- 1 S: To make changes you have to be highly articulate, persuasive, and
- 2 devastating. You have to go to the heart of the matter. But in doing this
- 3 you lay yourself open to attack. I've been called fanatical, paranoid,
- 4 obsessed . . . but I'm going to win. Time is on my side.

- 1 How might this extract be used to support the view that scientific research is largely influenced by scientific politics?
- 2 Why might you *not* be convinced by this view on the basis of this extract?
- 3 Why might it be important to understand the different *social contexts* in which scientists give an account of their work?
- 4 Can it be said *definitively* whether or not science is *essentially* a political process? If not, why not?

Exercise 4.2

Below is an extract from an interview with an adult daughter who is caring for her mother – a victim of senile dementia – at home (Halstein and Gubrium, 1997: 124). The daughter is employed part-time, and shares the household with her employed husband and their two sons. The extract begins when the interviewer (I) asks the adult daughter (R) to describe her feelings about having to juggle so many needs and schedules.

- 1 I: We were talking about, you said you were a member of the, what did
2 you call it?
3 R: They say that I'm in the sandwich generation. You know, like we're
4 sandwiched between having to care for my mother . . . and my grown
5 kids and my husband. People are living longer now and you've got
6 different generations at home and, I tell ya, it's a mixed blessing.
7 I: How do you feel about it in your situation?
8 R: Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm being a bit selfish because I
9 gripe about having to keep an eye on Mother all the time. If you let
10 down your guard, she wanders off into the back yard or goes out the
11 door and down the street. That's no fun when your hubby wants your
12 attention too. Norm works the second shift and he's home during the
13 day a lot. I manage to get in a few hours of work, but he doesn't like
14 it. I have pretty mixed feelings about it.
15 I: What do you mean?
16 R: Well, I'd say that as a daughter, I feel pretty guilty about how I feel
17 sometimes. It can get pretty bad, like wishing that Mother were just
18 gone, you know what I mean? She's been a wonderful mother and I
19 love her very much, but if you ask me how I feel as a wife and mother,
20 that's another matter. I feel like she's [the mother], well, intruding on our
21 lives and just making hell out of raising a family. Sometimes I put myself
22 in my husband's shoes and I just know how he feels. He doesn't say
23 much, but I know that he misses my company, and I miss his of course.
24 [Pause] So how do you answer that?

- 1 What do we learn here about R's feelings?
- 2 How do R and I together construct a story? What do you learn from that?
- 3 What have you learned from your analysis about the uses and limitations of emotionalism?

Exercise 4.3

The extract below is taken from Carolyn Baker's study of 'adolescents' (1984: 308–9).

(I = interviewer; V = Victor, age 12)

- 1 I: Are there any ways in which you consider yourself still to be a child, or
2 to have child-like interests or habits or attitudes?
3 V: Yeah I still like doin' things that I did when I was a kid you know like,
4 y'know, Lego 'n that just building stuff you know like when I, I was a
5 kid you know
6 I: Yeah. You still take pleasure in that kind of thing.
7 V: Yeah, I get a friend over and we just build a, great big house 'n that,
8 it's still just like doing it.
9 I: Do you feel at the same time that you're too – really too old for it or do
10 you not feel it's too
11 V: Well when people say 'ah, he's still doin' that stuff' I don't really care. I
12 just do it in the living room 'n that, 'n it's still fun. Pretty soon I'll, I'll stop
13 doin' it but, when I get too old for it.
14 I: Or when you no longer think it's fun.
15 V: Yeah.
16 I: Which one?
17 V: How do you mean?
18 I: What would make you stop, feeling you were too old for it or
19 V: Yeah, like everyone buggin' me too much y'know 'n, it's not really that
20 bad just building a house or something y'know like, just show my mom
21 it'n everything just take it apart y'know, sort of something to do on a
22 rainy day

- (1) In what sense does this interview give us reliable information about how Victor sees himself?
- (2) With close attention to the text, show:
 - (a) how Victor accounts for potentially childlike activities
 - (b) how the interviewer identifies childlike activities
 - (c) how both Victor and the Interviewer attend to the implications of what the other is saying

Exercise 4.4

This exercise gives you an opportunity to work with some of Baruch's data and to compare his approach with others. Here are some extracts from interviews with mothers of children with congenital heart disease:

Well um . . . the first thing the nurse who delivered him said was: 'Don't worry, it's alright. Everything's alright.' And I didn't even realize there was anything wrong with him to start with.

When she was born they told me everything was perfectly alright. And I accepted it.

He was very breathless and I kept saying to midwives and doctors and various bods that came round, um I said to the midwife look, I said, he's breathing so fast.

He was sitting in his buggy just looking absolutely lifeless. So I thought right up to the doctor's and see what she says.

Now answer the following questions:

- 1 Is it helpful to check the accuracy of what these mothers are saying (e.g. by comparing them to case notes, medical accounts etc.)? Explain your answer.
- 2 Attempt a psychological interpretation of what these mothers are saying (refer to the discussion of Burton in Section 4.8).
- 3 Now attempt to show how these mothers construct their own moral adequacy using Baruch's concept of 'atrocious stones'. Is the same strategy used in every story?

5

Texts

Having a separate chapter on 'texts' may look a little artificial. After all, to treat an interview as a narrative can mean looking for the same textual features as researchers working with printed material. Indeed, the mere act of transcription of an interview turns it into a written text.

To make things clearer, in this chapter I use *text* to identify data consisting of words and/or images which have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher (e.g. through an interview). For presentational purposes, the chapter will focus on written texts. The analysis of images will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Written texts and interviews have one more thing in common. Both underline the linguistic character of many qualitative data. Even if our aim is to search for supposedly 'external' realities in our data (e.g. class, gender, power), our raw material is inevitably the words written in documents or spoken by interview respondents.

Yet British and American social scientists have never been entirely confident about analysing written texts. Perhaps, in (what the French call) the Anglo-Saxon cultures, words seem too ephemeral and insubstantial to be the subject of scientific analysis. It might seem better, then, to leave textual analysis to literary critics and to concentrate on definite social phenomena, like actions and the structures in which they are implicated.

This uncertain attitude to language is also reflected in the way in which quantitative researchers sometimes begin with fairly arbitrary but measurable definitions of their 'variables'. The classic model is Durkheim's *Suicide* which offers a 'conclusive' definition of the phenomenon in its first few pages and then rushes off to investigate it in these terms. As Atkinson (1978) has pointed out, this method rules out entirely any analysis of the very social processes through which suicide is socially defined – particularly in the context of coroners' own definitions of the meanings of particular acts (see also my discussion of Blau and Schoenherr in Section 2.2).

Even in qualitative research, texts are sometimes only important as 'background material' for the 'real' analysis. Where texts are analysed, they are often presented as 'official' or 'common-sense' versions of social phenomena, to be undercut by the underlying social phenomena apparently found in the qualitative researcher's analysis of her interviewees' stories. The model is: the documents *claim* X, but we can *show* that Y is the case.