2

Listening to people's stories: the use of narrative in qualitative interviews

Approximately fifty years ago, in 1956, Benney and Hughes stated that 'Sociology has become the science of the interview … by and large the sociologist in North America, and in a slightly less degree in other countries has become an interviewer. The interview is his tool; his work bears the mark of it' (Benney and Hughes, 1956: 137). In this editorial preface to a special volume of the *American Journal of Sociology*, dedicated to sociology and the interview, Benney and Hughes argued that interviews had become not only the *means* which sociologists used to find out about the world, but also the *object of enquiry*. They suggested that sociology could appropriately be understood as the science of the interview in the deep sense that sociology was concerned with social interaction and that the interview, as a form of social interaction, was therefore 'not merely a tool of sociology but a part of its very subject matter.' (Benney and Hughes, 1956: 138). This notion that the interview is not just a means for collecting data, but itself a site for the *production* of data and can become a focus for enquiry in its own right, has become central to epistemological and methodological discussions about interviewing over the past twenty years. It is these recent debates on qualitative method and more specifically those that focus on the role of narrative in qualitative interviews that form the central theme of this chapter.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, over the past twenty years there has been a dramatic increase in interest in narrative among those adopting qualitative approaches to research. In particular, it has been suggested that allowing respondents to provide narrative accounts of their lives and experiences can help to redress some of the power differentials inherent in the research enterprise and can also provide good evidence about the everyday lives of research subjects and the meanings they attach to their experiences. The emphasis in this chapter is therefore on the role of narrative in shaping new approaches to qualitative research interviewing over the past two decades. Rather than trying to provide instructions for conducting a specific type of qualitative interview, the focus is on the theoretical and epistemological

foundations of interview practices within qualitative approaches to research. Where this chapter will provide a more practical discussion, however, is in relation to the interview encounter itself: the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee and methods for eliciting narratives. It is here perhaps that the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of research practice are most evident or most explicitly realized.

The use of narratives in qualitative interviews: realist and constructivist approaches to research

It is well established that interviews are central to much research in the social sciences, and the distinctions made between in-depth, semi-structured, and standardized survey interviews have become commonplace (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Brenner, 1985; Seidman, 1998; Weiss, 1994). However, over the past two decades, qualitative research has arguably become more methodologically self-conscious and there has been a proliferation of discussions about the variations in approaches to in-depth interviews. This means that rather than simply contrasting the methodological foundations of in-depth interviews and structured survey interviews, it is important to recognize that there are also distinctions to be drawn within the group of researchers who advocate the use of in-depth interviews. As Gubrium and Holstein have argued, 'Qualitative research is a diverse enterprise. Perhaps because it is typically counterposed with the monolith of quantitative sociology, qualitative method is often portrayed in broad strokes that blur differences' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 5). Before embarking on a detailed exploration of the use of narrative within in-depth interviews, it is therefore helpful to bring the major differences *within* the qualitative research enterprise into sharper focus. This will make it easier to see how an emphasis on the methodological importance of narrative fits within existing debates about qualitative methods and qualitative research questions.

Gubrium and Holstein provide a clear exposition of the major differences within the qualitative research paradigm in their book *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). In particular, they contrast the naturalist approach which 'seeks rich descriptions of people as they exist and unfold in their natural habitats' with the constructivist or ethnomethodological approach which focuses on 'how a sense of social order is created through talk and interaction'.[1] This notion that there is a distinction between qualitative researchers who understand interviews as a resource and those who see the interview itself as a topic for enquiry has been echoed by a number of other authors (Hammersley, 2003; Harris, 2003; Seale, 1998). Both the naturalist approach and the constructivist approach are concerned primarily with individuals' everyday lives and experiences. However, while the naturalist view is that the social world is in some sense 'out there', an external reality available to be observed and described by the researcher, the constructivist view is that the social world is constantly 'in the making' and therefore the emphasis is on understanding the *production* of that social world.

18

Although both the constructivist and naturalist approach to interviewing may appear similar, the constructivist approach requires a much greater sensitivity to the interpretive procedures through which meanings are achieved within the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Harris, 2003).

Within the naturalist approach, the central research questions are therefore *what* questions: 'what experiences have people had?', 'what is happening?', 'what are people doing?', 'what does it mean to them?' We might therefore expect those adopting this approach to be most interested in the complicating action and the evaluation elements of narrative, i.e. to be interested in the temporal and meaningful aspects of the narrative form. In contrast, the constructivist approach prioritizes *how* questions: the research focus is on identifying meaning making *practices* and on understanding the ways in which people participate in the construction of their lives (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). In other words, constructivists, such as ethnomethodologists, are interested in the ways that social activities are locally organized and conducted. They seek to answer the questions 'what does a social activity consist of and how is that activity recognizably produced?' (Hester and Francis, 1994: 678). For constructivists an interest in narrative would therefore stem from the fact that it is a social accomplishment, needing the collaboration of an audience.

In discussing the 'naturalist impulse' Gubrium and Holstein (1997) focus mainly on older studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, and contrast the classic studies of researchers such as Whyte and Liebow with a more recent ethnomethodological and constructivist focus on interviews as a site for the *creation* of meaning. However, this is not to deny that there are still researchers who are clearly operating within the naturalist or realist paradigm. Texts on the use of qualitative interviewing in social research routinely begin from the premise that semi-structured and in-depth interviews provide the ideal method for discovering more about individuals' lives and intimate experiences. For example, under the introductory heading 'Why we interview', Weiss writes:

> Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occupations and how people fashion careers, about cultures and the values they sponsor, and about the challenges people confront as they live their lives. We can learn also, through interviewing about people's interior experiences. … We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy through grief, that together constitute the human condition. (1994: 1)

In a similar vein, Arksey and Knight state that 'Qualitative interviewing is a way of uncovering and exploring the meanings that underpin people's lives' (1999: 32). These texts on how to conduct qualitative research interviewing therefore clearly belong within the naturalist approach.

Many research studies also still adopt a naturalist or realist perspective on the evidence collected. For example, in Kleinman's book *The Illness Narratives* (1988) he explicitly states that his interest lies in 'how chronic illness is lived and

responded to by real people' (Kleinman, 1988: xii). In addition, in a more recent study on the meanings of marriage for young people living in the Netherlands, Korteweg describes how she interviewed a small sample of heterosexual women and men in their twenties. She writes:

> Talking to them gave me insight into the extent to which the idea of marriage still had power in their lives. I was particularly curious about how people used the idea of marriage in the development of their relationships and asked them to tell be about the histories of their relational lives, listening for mentions of marriage. I evaluated the different, sometimes contradictory, sets of meanings people associated with marriage without trying to arbitrate among them. (Korteweg, 2001: 510–11)

In this recent study the focus is therefore clearly on the *content* of the interview, on *what* is said rather than on *how* it is said. The research can therefore be understood as following a naturalist approach. Indeed, with its roots stretching back into the Chicago school, the naturalist approach might still be thought of as constituting the mainstream approach to qualitative research.

There are some who view the naturalist and ethnographic approaches to qualitative interviews as in competition, or as mutually exclusive, so that researchers are expected *either* to treat interviews as a resource for collecting detailed information from respondents (the naturalist or 'realist' approach) *or* to focus on the interview interaction itself as a topic for investigation (the ethnomethodological or constructivist approach) (Seale, 1998). For example, Potter and Mulkay argue that the accounts provided in interviews can *only* be understood in relation to the specifics of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, and that these accounts cannot therefore be treated as an unproblematic window onto the social world (Potter and Mulkay, 1985). However, many treat interviews as both a topic and a resource (Seale, 1998). As will be discussed below, and returned to in subsequent chapters, many researchers advocate a reflexive approach to research in which the role of the interviewer, relevant aspects of his or her identity, and the details of the interaction between researched and researcher are understood as constituting an important part of the research evidence. In other words, the interactional form of the interview is seen as having an important relation to the content of the accounts provided by the interviewee. As such the form of the interview is a topic for inclusion in the research agenda. It is analysed in conjunction with the content of the interview, but does not replace the substantive content of the interview as the primary research focus. For example, as the following quotation demonstrates, Hollway and Jefferson are primarily interested in the content of the interviews they conducted on the fear of crime, but their extended reflexive discussion of the nature of the interview interaction demonstrates that they were also sensitive to the way that meaning was constructed as part of the interview interaction:

> The focus of our analysis is the people who tell us stories about their lives: the stories themselves are a means to understand our subjects better. While

> stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truths, story-telling stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanations. (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 32)

This slightly extended introduction to the theoretical and methodological under-pinnings of different approaches to qualitative research is necessary because it pro-vides a background to the variety of motivations behind the recent interest in narrative within qualitative research and particularly within in-depth interviewing. As will be discussed in more detail below and in Chapter 3, while some who advocate attention to narrative are primarily interested in the content of the stories provided by interviewees, and can therefore be aligned with the naturalist approach to qualitative research, others focus their attention on the research subject as an artful narrator and are interested in the interpretive effort required to con-struct coherent life stories. This clearly fits more closely with the constructionist approach.

Narratives in qualitative interviews

A good starting point for understanding the link between in-depth interviewing and narratives is Mishler's *Research Interviewing: Context and narrative* (1986). In this frequently cited book, Mishler argues that paying attention to the stories that respondents tell potentially leads to a radical re-examination of the standard prac-tices adopted in qualitative interview research. He emphasizes the need to under-stand that the discourse of the interview is jointly constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee and, at the same time, draws attention to the ubiquity of narratives in unstructured interviews. Although telling stories is common in every-day conversation (Gee, 1986; Polanyi, 1985), Mishler argues that many forms of research interview suppress stories either by 'training' the interviewee to limit answers to short statements, or by interrupting narratives when they do occur. This is perhaps clearest in the case of structured interviews where the respondent is encouraged to give succinct answers to relatively closed questions. However, even in the context of semi-structured and in-depth interviewing Mishler suggests that there has been a tendency to suppress stories or to treat them as problematic in the analysis phase of research.

Although Mishler makes it clear that variations across interviews and between interviewers should not be understood as errors or technical problems but as data for analysis, he does not go so far as to suggest that the whole focus of the research should shift towards an ethnomethodological interest in the practical accomplish-ment of the interview interaction. Rather he retains an interest in using in-depth interviews as a means for collecting data about individuals' lives, experiences, and perceptions while advocating that the role of the interviewer in producing the data should be taken seriously (Mishler, 1999).

Almost a decade later, many of Mishler's arguments were echoed and developed by Holstein and Gubrium in *The Active Interview* (1995). They also focus on the quality of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee as central

to qualitative in-depth interviewing. They stress that conventional approaches to interviewing treat respondents as epistemologically passive and as mere vessels of answers. In contrast, and in line with Mishler, they suggest that the aim of an interview should be to stimulate the interviewee's interpretive capacities and that the role of the interviewer should be to 'activate narrative production' by 'indicating – even suggesting – narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 39). The interview therefore becomes a site for the production of data and an opportunity to explore the meaning of the research topic for the respondent.

Reliability and validity

There is a growing body of work on the issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research and also, more specifically, in relation to research which focuses on individuals' narratives in interviews (Kvale, 1989). While reliability is generally defined as the replicability or stability of research findings, validity refers to the ability of research to reflect an external reality or to measure the concepts of interest. As Kerlinger succinctly expresses it, 'The commonest definition of validity is epitomized by the question "are we measuring what we think we are measuring?"' (1973: 456). In addition, a distinction is usually made between internal and external validity, where internal validity refers to the ability to produce results that are not simply an artefact of the research design, and external validity is a measure of how far the findings relating to a particular sample can be generalized to apply to a broader population. These terms originate in quantitative research methods such as surveys and experiments, which are frequently characterized as belonging within the positivist paradigm. There are some authors who argue therefore that these criteria for good research are less appropriate for evaluating qualitative research with a naturalist or hermeneutic emphasis (Becker, 1996). In particular the concept of 'measuring' sits uneasily with much in-depth interviewing, where it is more usual for the researcher to be aiming to provide a detailed description of individuals' experiences and the meanings made of those experiences. The notion of measurement clearly has connotations of quantification and comparison, which is rare in qualitative research.

However, even if the focus is shifted from measurement to description, the researcher must still confront the question of whether the accounts produced in a qualitative interview study are 'accurate' or 'valid' representations of reality. The scope or specificity of the description is another important issue to address. In qualitative studies it is common to interview a small, relatively homogeneous sample of individuals living in a specific geographic area. This immediately raises questions about the extent to which descriptions based on those interviews can be extended to cover a wider population. It is clear therefore that all researchers must pay attention to the stability, trustworthiness, and scope of their findings even if the terms 'reliability' and 'internal and external validity' are seen as problematic in relation to qualitative or naturalistic enquiry.

Internal validity

Among those with an interest in the use of narratives in research there are two rather different views on the relationship between the use of narrative interviews and the internal validity of the information obtained. As was discussed above, some researchers have advocated the use of narrative interviews because they empower the respondent to set the agenda and prevent respondents' experiences from becoming fragmented (Graham, 1984; Mishler, 1986). Both of these considerations imply that interviews that attend to individuals' narratives would produce data that are *more* accurate, truthful, or trustworthy than structured interviews that ask each respondent a standardized set of questions.

However, others who are explicitly interested in the use of narratives in interviews stress that narratives are never simply reports of experiences, rather they make sense of and therefore inevitably distort those experiences. While for some this is itself almost an advantage of narrative-based research, as the focus of interest is on individuals' subjective interpretations and the meanings they make of their lives, others are more concerned that narrative obscures a clear description of life as it is lived. This will be discussed with examples in more detail below.

For some authors, internal validity is therefore thought to be improved by the use of narrative because participants are empowered to provide more concrete and specific details about the topics discussed and to use their own vocabulary and conceptual framework to describe life experiences. For example, in a chapter on the experiences of mature women students, Susan Smith demonstrates that the use of in-depth interviews and a focus on women's narratives gave a radically different and, to her mind, more accurate, view of the support they received from their husbands and partners compared with earlier quantitative work on the same topic. In her conclusions she writes:

> By enabling women to tell their own stories and creating a context in which they felt comfortable exploring their feelings and experiences I was able to learn more about those aspects of their lives which crucially affect their chances of success when they return to study. (Smith, 1996: 71)

Smith suggests that by asking for women's stories about how *they* met their husbands or partners and then for the details about how their husbands felt about the returning to education as mature students, it was possible to 'unpack' the notion of the support they received with their studies. She argues that the women's 'private accounts revealed the reality of the preconditions of their husbands'/partners' support' (Smith, 1996: 67). Cox (2003) takes a similar approach to the issue of internal validity in in-depth interviews. In a discussion of her interview study of individuals who had decided to have a genetic test for Huntingdon's disease, she writes:

> [P]articipants were encouraged to talk about what they felt was most important and to frame this in whatever ways seemed most appropriate to them. This enhanced validity by allowing participants to pattern the timing, sequence and context of topics discussed. (Cox, 2003: 260)

23

In common with Smith, Cox argues that the qualitative and narrative approach she adopts to interviewing results in more accurate or 'valid' evidence.

However, other researchers emphasize that narratives do not transparently reflect experience, rather they give meaning to it (Ferber, 2000). In order to provide the details of life experiences in the form of a story, individuals are forced to reflect on those experiences, to select the salient aspects, and to order them into a coherent whole. It is this process of reflection and 'making sense' out of experience that makes telling stories a meaning making activity. For some this evaluative or 'meaningful' dimension of narratives is understood as an important advantage for the qualitative researcher. For example, drawing on the work of Polanyi (1985), Chase (1995a) argues that there is a major distinction between a 'report' and a 'narrative' in that stories are told to make a point, and it is the narrator who assumes responsibility for making the point of the telling clear. She argues that by shifting the narrative responsibility to the interviewee, researchers can gain a better understanding of the perspective and life world of their research subjects.

A further important issue in determining the validity of narrative interview evidence is the question of whether narratives are produced specifically for the researcher in a qualitative interview or whether the narratives told in interviews are closely related to those which occur spontaneously in conversation and other aspects of daily life. Some authors have explicitly argued for attention to narratives in interviews because they are ubiquitous in everyday life. As Cox succinctly phrases it, 'Stories are in life as well as about life' (Cox, 2003: 259). In addition, Linde has argued that, 'in the case of the life story, interview data can be used because the life story, as a major means of self presentation, occurs naturally in a wide variety of different contexts (including interviews) and is therefore quite robust' (1993: 61). She suggests that the fact that the social science interview is not the only kind of interaction in which individuals would expect to give an account of their life means that it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between the interview and 'real life'. This would lead to greater confidence in the validity of interview studies. However, depending on the nature of the research and the topics covered in the research interview, it is not necessarily the case that narratives similar to those recounted in interviews will have been told by the interviewee before. In particular, although it is common to tell brief anecdotes in everyday life, it is rare that anyone is given the opportunity to provide an extended account of their life experiences of the type elicited in a research interview.

This in turn implies that the meanings and understandings that individuals attach to their experiences are not necessarily pre-formed and available for collection, rather the task of making sense of experiences will be an intrinsic part of the research process. As was discussed above, this is the main tenet of Holstein and Gubrium's approach to qualitative interviewing described in their book *The Active Interview*. They argue that while the traditional approach to qualitative research viewed interviews as 'a pipeline for transmitting knowledge', the interview is better understood as a site for the production of knowledge. In other words, as Halford et al. have written, 'In-depth interviews do not allow any

privileged or unmediated access to people's thoughts and feelings, but rather produce specific accounts designed to meet the particular situation' (1997: 60). Halford et al. describe how in their research on the careers of men and women in banking, nursing, and local organizations, many respondents used the research interview as an opportunity to 'let off steam' in what they perceived to be a 'safe' and confidential environment. Although this provided interviews that were full of incidents and anecdotes, Halford et al. question the validity of some of this material in that it may not reflect the respondents' feelings and attitudes as they would be expressed outside the research interview.

One way of resolving this issue about whether narrative approaches produce more 'valid' evidence is to understand that the validity of evidence in qualitative interviews is crucially dependent on the type of research question that is being asked (Kvale, 1989, 1996). In other words, in order to decide whether an interviewee is telling us 'the truth' we need to consider what questions or topic are being addressed in the research, and what type of truths or insights we are hoping to gain from an interview. To illustrate this point, Kvale uses a short extract from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which the Prince Hamlet is questioning or 'interviewing' Polonius, a courtier in a medieval court:

Hamlet:	Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius:	By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.
Hamlet:	Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius:	It is back'd like a weasel.
Hamlet:	Or like a whale?
Polonius:	Very like a whale.
Hamlet [aside]:	They fool me to the top of my bent.
	(Act III, Scene 2)

As Kvale demonstrates by use of this example, if Hamlet is really interested in finding out which animal Polonius thinks the cloud represents, this is a very poor method of interviewing and the leading questions are likely to produce distorted responses. However, if the research question is not the shape of the cloud but rather the form or nature of Polonius's personality then the interview provides a great deal of valid information on this topic. Hamlet's final aside summarizes his own interpretation of the exchange that has just taken place, and clearly in the context of the play, it is Polonius's untrustworthiness that is the subject of Hamlet's investigation.

A further, telling, example of this same point is provided by Portelli's oral history work on the murder by the police of a young steel worker, Luigi Trastulli (Portelli, 1991). In his analysis of the narrative accounts of workers in an industrial town in the north of Italy, Portelli demonstrated that the individual narratives produced by his respondents contained many factual errors. In particular, while some gave the correct date of the murder as 1949, others reported that it had happened in 1953 in the same year as a mass strike. The variation in the date given for the murder could be interpreted as evidence that the accounts were not valid, i.e. they did not provide a trustworthy account of the past. However, an alternative

approach is to recognize that these accounts may not provide the best data about *the date* of the murder (which can be ascertained from other sources in any case). Portelli argued that many people reported the murder as taking place in 1953 because they understood the mass strikes that took place in that year to represent the workers' revenge for the death of Trastulli. Portelli suggests that the people interviewed found it too painful to believe that a worker had died for no reason and that his death had not been avenged. By interpreting the accounts in this way, Portelli vividly demonstrates that they can provide important insights into the importance attached to dignity and pride in the lives of these workers. As he writes: 'Oral sources … are not always reliable in point of fact. Rather than being a weakness, this is however, their strength: errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings' (Portelli, 1991: 2).

The centrality of the research question in determining the validity of the evidence produced in narrative interviews clearly resonates with the point made above about the differences in research questions asked by naturalists and constructivists. If the focus is on providing a realist description of the social world and of individuals' experiences then it must be acknowledged that narratives in qualitative interviews are unlikely to provide an unproblematic window on to what happened. A narrative will not capture a simple record of the past in the way that we hope that a video camera might. However, if the research focus is more on the meanings attached to individuals' experiences and/or on the way that those experiences are communicated to others then narratives provide an ideal medium for researching and understanding individuals' lives in social context.

External Validity

In comparisons with discussions of internal validity, much less has been written about the external validity of qualitative studies or the implications of the use of narrative for the generalizability of qualitative evidence. For some researchers there is simply a trade-off between depth and breadth, i.e. researchers must make a decision about whether to prioritize detailed descriptions and contextualized data or whether to aim for breadth in the form of large samples of cases which yield more generalizable findings. For those adopting this perspective, the particular strength of the qualitative approach has been that it allows the researcher to 'create a deeper and richer picture of what is going on in particular settings' (Goodwin and Horowitz, 2002: 44). Many would therefore argue that it is mistaken for qualitative researchers to try to produce law-like statements that are expected to hold true across a wide range of historical and cultural contexts.[2] However, it would clearly be pointless to do research if findings were considered to be completely ungeneralizable. Qualitative research therefore often adopts what we might call a 'common-sense' view of generalizability such that the reader is left to make up his or her own mind as to how far the evidence collected in a specific study can be transferred to offer information about the same topic in similar settings. For example, Cox (2003) describes a study in which she interviewed sixteen individuals, living in both urban and rural British Columbia, who had

decided to request predictive testing for Huntingdon's disease. Although she does discuss the fact that her sample is restricted to those who had made the decision to request the test, and does not cover those deciding *not* to request the test, she does not give any further discussion about the generalizability of her findings. However, implicit in the description of the sample is the idea that by including those from both urban and rural areas the results are more widely generalizable than if they had focused only on those in a very specific geographical location. It is, however, left to the reader to decide whether the description she provides of the decision-making process could also apply to individuals living elsewhere in Canada, across North America, or to all individuals at risk of Huntingdon's disease in countries where genetic testing is available.

Other writers have also stressed the problems of generalizing on the basis of qualitative research (Denzin, 1983; Ward-Schofield, 1993; Williams, 1998). As Williams (1998) has argued, qualitative researchers who prioritize the interpretation of the actions and meanings of agents are caught in a dilemma. If they argue that the variability between individuals and situations makes generalization impossible then 'research can suggest nothing beyond itself'. However, if it is accepted that at least some generalization is possible, then it is not clear on what basis these generalizations can be made (Williams, 1998: 9). As Williams writes:

> In empirical research the conclusion that the intentional nature of individual consciousness produces far too much variability for generalizations to be made from one interaction to another has never really embarrassed interpretivists, whose attitude is somewhat akin to that of the Victorian middle classes toward sex: they do it, they know it goes on, but they never admit to either. Almost every classic interpretivist study, while acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher and the uniqueness of the repertoire of interactions studied, nevertheless wishes to persuade us that there is something to be learned from that situation that has a wider currency. (1998: 8)

It is important to be aware, however, that different questions about the external validity of qualitative interview evidence arise if the focus of research is not on respondents' *individual* beliefs, attitudes, and subjective understanding of their experiences but rather, to use a term coined by Charles Taylor, on the 'intersubjective' meanings that constitute a community. Taylor makes a persuasive argument that the social or 'human' sciences should concern themselves not simply with the interior life of individuals but with those aspects of human experience that are socially constructed; that is, those social practices that are not reducible to the individual subjective experiences of the people that make up a society or community (Taylor, 1987). It is these social practices that he terms 'intersubjective meanings'. Using as an example the concept of negotiation he writes:

> The actors may have all sorts of beliefs and attitudes which may be rightly thought of as their individual beliefs and attitudes, even if others share them; they may subscribe to certain policy goals or certain forms of theory about the policy, or feel resentment about certain things and so on. They bring these

> with them into negotiations, and strive to satisfy them. But what they do
> not bring into the negotiations is the set of ideas and norms constitutive of
> negotiations themselves. These must be the common property of the society
> before there can be any question of anyone entering into negotiation or not.
> Hence they are not subjective meanings, the property of one or some individ-
> uals, but rather intersubjective meanings which are constitutive of the social
> matrix in which individuals find themselves and act. (Taylor, 1987: 57–8)

It is beyond the scope of Taylor's article to discuss the practical implications of the
need to focus on intersubjective meanings. His emphasis is on theory rather than
techniques or methods of research. However, within the burgeoning methodolog-
ical literature on narrative in qualitative research there are several authors whose
discussion of the use of narrative resonates with the arguments made by Taylor.
For example, in the following extract, Chase is clearly arguing that narratives do
not simply provide evidence about individuals, but provide a means to understand
more about the broader culture shared by a community of individuals:

> Life stories themselves embody what we need to study: the relation
> between this instanciation (this particular life story) and the social world the
> narrator shares with others; the ways in which culture marks shapes and/or
> constrains this narrative; and the ways in which this narrator makes use of
> cultural resources and struggles with cultural constraints. (1995a: 20)

In narratives become the focus of research not simply because they provide an
insight into individuals' experiences and the meanings they make of them, but
because their form tells us something about the cultural framework within which
individuals make sense of their lives, then the close analysis of narratives produced
by a relatively small sample of individuals may produce evidence that is consid-
ered to provide an understanding of the intersubjective meanings shared by the
whole of a community. The external validity or generalizability of this evidence
will therefore depend on a demonstration of how widely those intersubjective
meanings are shared or in other words what delineates the boundaries of the com-
munity or culture that is being studied. This difficult issue is one that has, as yet,
received very little discussion in the literature on qualitative research.

Eliciting stories in interviews

Asking the right questions

Having established *why* social scientists might be interested in hearing people's
narratives in the context of research interviews, it is appropriate to turn to a con-
sideration of *how* researchers might best elicit narratives from interviewees. Authors
such as Graham (1984), Mishler (1986), and Riessman (1990) have each empha-
sized that interviewees are likely spontaneously to provide narratives in the context
of interviews about their experiences, unless the structure of the interview itself or

the questioning style of the interviewer suppresses such stories. Most people like telling stories and with a little encouragement will provide narrative accounts of their experiences in research interviews. For example, Mishler explicitly links the notion of obtaining narratives in interviews to the aim of empowering respondents as he succinctly explains:

> Various attempts to restructure the interviewer-interviewee relationship, so as to empower respondents, are designed to encourage them to find and speak in their own 'voices.' It is not surprising that when the interview situation is opened up in this way, when the balance of power is shifted, respondents are likely to tell 'stories.' In sum, interviewing practices that empower respondents also produce narrative accounts. (1986: 118–19)

However, in contrast to this view that narratives will emerge naturally during in-depth interviews (if only researchers are prepared to hear them), some authors have described situations in which they failed to obtain narratives from respondents even though this was the primary aim of the interview. This raises questions about the most effective ways of encouraging respondents to provide detailed storied accounts of their experiences in interviews.

Qualitative researchers are in general agreement that questions in interviews should be framed using everyday rather than sociological language. Chase (1995a) provides a telling account of how the failure to adhere to this principle prevented respondents from providing the narratives about their work experiences that she was hoping for. She explains that in a research project on women's experiences in the white- and male-dominated profession of public school superintendents in the United States she and her co-researcher Colleen Bell wanted to hear about the concrete experiences of women school superintendents. In the early interviews they included a series of questions specifically about what it is like to be a woman in a male-dominated profession and, in the spirit of developing an egalitarian relationship with these women professionals, these questions were introduced with a few statements about the sociological thinking behind them. Chase describes how eventually they realized that they needed to drop these 'sociological questions', and the discussion of their sociological interests, in favour of asking much more straightforward and simple questions. For example, a brief request for an individual's work history proved to be effective in encouraging the respondents to tell stories about their professional lives. Chase explains that the problem with sociological questions is that 'they invite reports. They do not invite the other to take responsibility for the import of her response because the weight of the question lies in the sociological ideas' (1995a: 8). From her own experiences of interviewing, Chase therefore concludes that we are most likely to succeed in eliciting narratives from our research subjects when we ask simple questions that clearly relate to their life experiences.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) also describe their unsuccessful attempts to get interviewees to give narrative responses in their pilot interviews for a study on the fear of crime. They suggest that although their questions were open ended and

framed in everyday language they were still too focused on the interests of the researcher and were not broad enough to allow respondents to provide the detailed narrative accounts they were hoping to elicit. As they write:

> Our opening question to Ann, 'What's the crime you most fear?' is open but in a narrow way, which may account for its failure to elicit much from her. In linking fear with crime it reveals what sort of fear interests the interviewer, but in so doing, it may work to suppress the meaning of fear to Ann, which may have no apparent connection to crime. To learn about the meaning of fear to Ann a more open question such as 'What do you most fear?' would be necessary. The presumption of the biographical method is that it is only in this way, by tracking Ann's fears through her meaning frames, that we are likely to discover the 'real' meaning of fear of crime to her – how it relates to her life. (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 34)

Following careful analysis of the transcripts of pilot interviews, Hollway and Jefferson revised their interview guide to make the questions more open. The seven main questions that structured their first interviews with respondents are presented in Box 2.1. It can be seen that each of these questions asks the interviewee to talk directly about his or her experiences. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) comment that, although it did frequently elicit stories, in retrospect the first question was probably 'insufficiently narrativised'. They argue that the best questions for narrative interviews invite the interviewee to talk about specific times and situations, rather than asking about the respondent's life over a long period of time (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

Box 2.1   Questions developed by Hollway and Jefferson to elicit narratives in their first interview

1 Can you tell me about how crime has impacted on your life since you've been living here?
2 Can you tell me about unsafe situations in your life since you have been living here?
3 Can you think of something that you've read, seen or heard about recently that makes you fearful? Anything [not necessarily about crime].
4 Can you tell me about risky situations in your life since you have been living here?
5 Can you tell me about times in your life recently when you have been anxious?
6 Can you tell me about earlier times in your life when you have been anxious?
7 Can you tell me what it was like moving to this area?

In addition to asking appropriate questions, the interviewer who wants to encourage the production of narratives during an interview must clearly also be a good listener. Thompson argues that, in oral history interviewing, the interviewer should 'Wherever possible avoid interrupting a story. If you stop a story because you think it is irrelevant, you will cut off not just that one but a whole series of subsequent offers of information which will be relevant' (1978: 172). This is consonant with Elliot Mishler's suggestion that a process takes place at the beginning of a research interview that might be thought of as the interviewer training the interviewee to give appropriate responses. It is widely recognized in the social sciences that the subjects of research are eager to comply with the wishes of the researcher and to provide the type of responses that the researcher is looking for. If the researcher implicitly communicates that narrative responses are not what is wanted, by interrupting the interviewee's stories for example, this in some senses 'trains' the respondent to provide a different type of information.

Collecting life histories – the use of a life history grid

If the primary aim of carrying out qualitative biographical interviews is to obtain individuals' own accounts of their lives, it is clearly important not to impose a rigid structure on the interview by asking a standardized set of questions. However, it is also important to be aware that some individuals might find it very difficult to respond if simply asked to produce an account of their life. This is a particular problem if the focus of the research is on the broad life course or on experiences (such as education and training or employment) that may span a great many years. As was mentioned above, respondents are likely to find it easier to talk about specific times and situations rather than being asked about a very wide time frame. One approach is therefore to make use of a pre-prepared life history grid at the beginning of the interview. The life history grid can have a number of different formats. The 'Balan' type of grid, discussed by Tagg (1985), has a row for each year, and the respondent's age is entered in the left hand column. The remaining columns are used to record major events under a number of different headings such as education history, work history, housing history, and family history. Clearly these categories will vary somewhat depending on the exact focus of the research. For example, research on those with a chronic illness might include a column for events related to health, and research in criminology may have a column for arrests and incarcerations. Completing the grid will ideally be a joint task undertaken by the interviewer and interviewee at the beginning of the interview. By moving backwards and forwards between the different areas of the respondent's life, the memory is stimulated. For example, individuals may have no difficulty remembering the year when their first child was born but may not remember the date when they returned to college as a mature student. However, if they remember that this occurred the year after their child was born the life history grid helps to locate this educational event. Once the grid is completed, the respondents can be asked to use it to help guide them as they recount the story of their life, starting from

whatever point is most appropriate for them as individuals or for the purposes of the research.[3]

The length of narrative interviews

The emphasis within in-depth interviews on allowing the respondents to set the agenda and on listening to, rather than suppressing, their stories also raises practical questions about the appropriate length for these types of interviews. For example, Riessman discusses how a research project that was originally conceived as using a structured interview to examine the differences between the post-separation adaptation of men and women was modified to allow interviewees more of an opportunity to talk and to tell the story of how their marriage had ended (Riessman, 1990). She explains that in the pilot phase of the study, the structured interviews typically took under two hours to complete, but in the research itself, when interviewees were allowed to tell their stories, many of the interviews lasted for up to six hours. Several authors suggest that ninety minutes is the optimum length for a qualitative research interview (Hermanowicz, 2002; Seidman, 1998). If the quantity of material to be covered in an interview is judged to need more than two hours then the most practical solution is to conduct a second and even a third interview. Regardless of decisions about the exact length of the interview, what is important is to make the timing clear to the interviewee from the start. In my own research with graduate women in their forties (Elliott, 2001), I suggested to interviewees that the interview would probably last for approximately an hour and a half, but might go on for as long as two hours. This appeared to be helpful to interviewees as it gave them a sense of how much detail to provide. Interviews of this length yield transcripts of approximately twenty to thirty pages of text (or approximately 15,000 to 20,000 words). In terms of the task of analysis this clearly provides a wealth of material to examine.

Repeated interviews

A further practical consideration when using the method of biographical interviews is whether to rely on a single interview or whether to conduct a series of interviews with each respondent, and practice among researchers is very variable in this respect. Seidman (1998) makes a persuasive case for conducting a series of three interviews with each respondent. He suggests that the first interview should focus on the life history of the respondent, who should be asked to provide an account of his or her past life leading up to the topic or event of interest. The second interview should then focus on the concrete aspects of the respondent's present experiences, and Seidman advocates encouraging the respondent to tell stories as a way of eliciting detailed information. In the final interview, the researcher can then move on to encourage the respondent to reflect on his or her understandings of those experiences. Seidman argues that this three-interview structure also helps with establishing the internal validity of the findings as the researcher can check that the respondent is consistent across the three separate interviews.

Hollway and Jefferson also give a helpful account of the process surrounding the use of two interviews in their research on the fear of crime in a British city (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Between the first and the second interview, a week later, the researchers together listened carefully to the recording of the first interview and discussed the material covered. The comments and analysis of the researcher who had not carried out the initial interview were valuable in that they provided a slightly more detached perspective on the interview. The notes taken during this process would then lead to the construction of further narrative questions to ask in the second interview. The use of two interviews also enabled the researchers to build up a trusting relationship with the interviewees and to demonstrate that they were interested in hearing about their experiences. Hollway and Jefferson argue that it enabled the interviewee to build up confidence that stories were what the researchers wanted. Because the narrative approach to interviewing differs from individuals' usual expectation that researchers ask lots of closed questions, it can take time to build up a respondent's confidence that telling stories about his or her experiences is valid within the interview context (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 44).

Recording narrative interviews

Given the focus in in-depth narrative interviews on the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee and on the form of the narratives provided rather than simply on the content, it is clearly very useful to be able to tape-record the interview. This also allows the interviewer to give full attention to the interviewee rather than needing to pause to take notes. For interviews lasting ninety minutes or more it would be impractical to try and remember the interviewee's responses and make detailed notes at the end of the interview. Recording is therefore now generally thought to be good practice in all qualitative interviewing (Hermanowicz, 2002). Without tape-recording all kinds of data are lost: the narrative itself, pauses, intonation, laughter. In particular if the interview is understood as a site for the production of meanings and the role of the interviewer is to be analysed alongside the accounts provided by the interviewee, it is important to capture the details of the interaction. Clearly, once an interview is tape-recorded the next set of questions involves how to transcribe the recording in order to preserve an appropriate amount of information about what was said as well as about the interaction itself. This will be discussed towards the end of the next chapter, which examines how an interest in narrative might shape the *analysis* of qualitative interview material.

Summary

This chapter has focused on the use of narrative in qualitative interviews. It has explored the questions of why researchers might be interested in listening to individuals' narratives and has also focused on examples of research using narrative interviews to show how storied accounts of individuals' experiences can be elicited. While some authors have

suggested that narratives are produced spontaneously during interviews and that if the interviewer is willing to listen to respondents' stories they will be forthcoming, others such as Chase (1995a) and Hollway and Jefferson (2000) have demonstrated that even when an interview schedule is designed to encourage respondents to tell stories, grounded in their own experiences, the results can be disappointing. The need to ask open-ended questions in everyday language that address the interests of the interviewee rather than the sociological interests of the researcher has been emphasized. An important theme in this chapter has been that although the qualitative approach to research is made to seem like a coherent paradigm when it is contrasted with a quantitative approach' qualitative enquiry is in reality relatively diverse. The naturalist and constructivist approaches to qualitative research have been contrasted, but it has been suggested that narratives are relevant both to those researchers who are interested in producing rich descriptive accounts of individuals' lives and to those who focus more on the way in which individuals make sense of their experiences in the context of a research interview. In the next chapter this distinction between an interest in the content and the form of narratives will be extended in the context of exploring different approaches to the *analysis* of qualitative material.

Introductory books on qualitative interviewing

Arksey, H. and Knight, P. (1999) *Interviewing for Social Scientists*. London: Sage.

Chase, S.E. (2003) 'Learning to listen: narrative principles in a qualitative research methods course', in R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, and D.P. McAdams (eds), *Up Close and Personal: The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. pp. 79–100.

Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seidman, I. (1998) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*. New York: Teacher's College Press.

Weiss, R.S. (1994) *Learning from Strangers*. New York: Free Press.

Readings for discussion

Cox, S.M. (2003) 'Stories in decisions: how at-risk individuals decide to request predictive testing for huntingdon's disease', *Qualitative Sociology*, 26: 257–80.

1 *How central is narrative to Cox's approach to the collection and analysis of qualitative evidence?*
2 *Why did Cox sometimes find it difficult to elicit the story of how the interviewee had arrived at the decision to be tested for Huntingdon's disease?*
3 *Should Cox's findings be generalized beyond the sample she interviewed? How might you improve the generalizability of her findings?*

Harris, S.R. (2003) 'Studying equality/inequality: naturalist and constructionist approaches to equality in marriage', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32: 200–32.

1 *What kinds of questions is Harris attempting to ask about equality in marriage and how do these differ from the research questions other qualitative (and quantitative) researchers might want to ask?*
2 *How does Harris describe constructivist interviewing as compared with naturalist approaches to interviewing?*
3 *How important is narrative within Harris's constructivist approach to the collection and analysis of qualitative evidence?*

Notes

1 Gubrium and Holstein describe four different approaches to, or 'languages of', qualitative research: naturalism, ethnomethodology, emotionalism, and post-modernism. However, for the purposes of the current discussion the distinction between naturalism and ethnomethodology is perhaps the most telling. Emotionalism can perhaps be understood as a variant on naturalism but one that is more concerned with the interior subjective life of the respondent. Post-modernism arguably has more implications for how research is reported, i.e. the crisis of representation, than on the interview process itself, and although it will be discussed in the following chapters it is bracketed in the current discussion.
2 Indeed, even among researchers who work firmly within a quantitative paradigm, there is an increasing awareness that research results are context specific and that scope statements are needed to specify more clearly the limitations of the applicability of any theory derived from empirical research (Walker and Cohen, 1985). The implications of taking a narrative approach for issues of external validity in quantitative research will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.
3 These types of grids have also been used in large-scale quantitative surveys, such as the National Child Development Study, to help respondents remember the dates of events before completing a life history questionnaire. This will be returned to in Chapter 4.