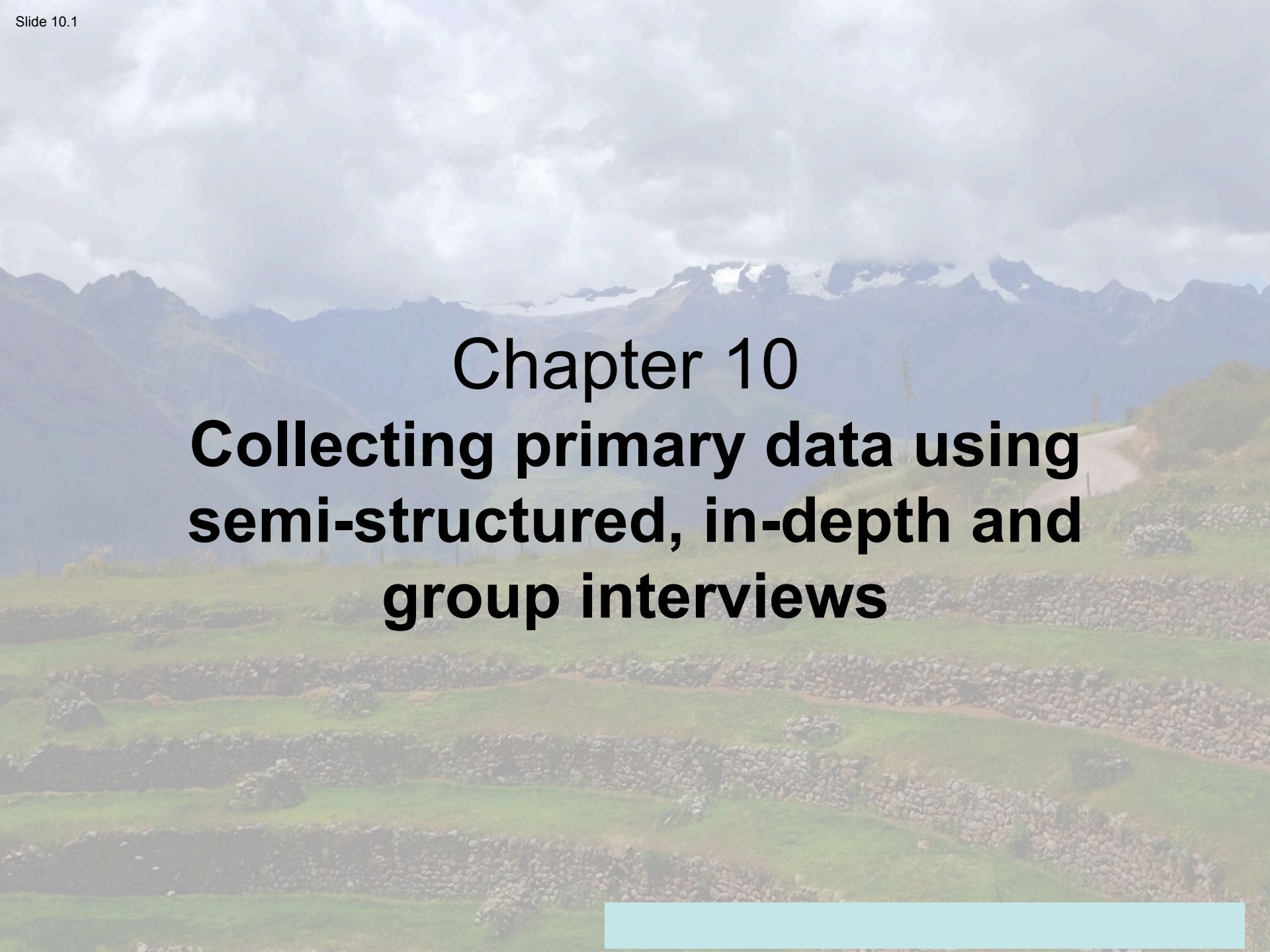




Chapter 10

Collecting primary data using semi-structured, in-depth and group interviews

Learning outcomes

By the end of this lecture you should be:

- able to classify research interviews in order to help you to understand the purpose of each type;
- aware of research situations favouring the use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and their limitations;
- able to analyse potential data quality issues and evaluate how to overcome these;
- able to consider the development of your competence to undertake semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and the logistical and resource issues that affect their use;

Learning outcomes

By the end of this lecture you should be:

- aware of the advantages and disadvantages of using one-to-one and group interviews, including focus groups, in particular contexts;
- aware of the issues and advantages of conducting interviews by telephone and via the Internet or intranet.

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Types of interview

- An interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people.

structured interviews

unstructured or in-depth interviews.

semi-structured interviews

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Types of interview

- **Structured interviews** use questionnaires based on a predetermined and 'standardised' or identical set of questions and we refer to them as interviewer-administered questionnaires.
- You read out each question and then record the response on a standardised schedule, usually with pre-coded answers.
- As structured interviews are used to collect quantifiable data they are also referred to as '**quantitative research interviews**'.

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Types of interview

- In **semi-structured interviews**, the researcher will have a list of themes and questions to be covered, although these may vary from interview to interview.
- You may omit some questions in particular interviews, given a specific organisational context that is encountered in relation to the research topic.
- The nature of the questions and the ensuing discussion mean that data will be recorded by audio-recording the conversation or perhaps note taking.

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

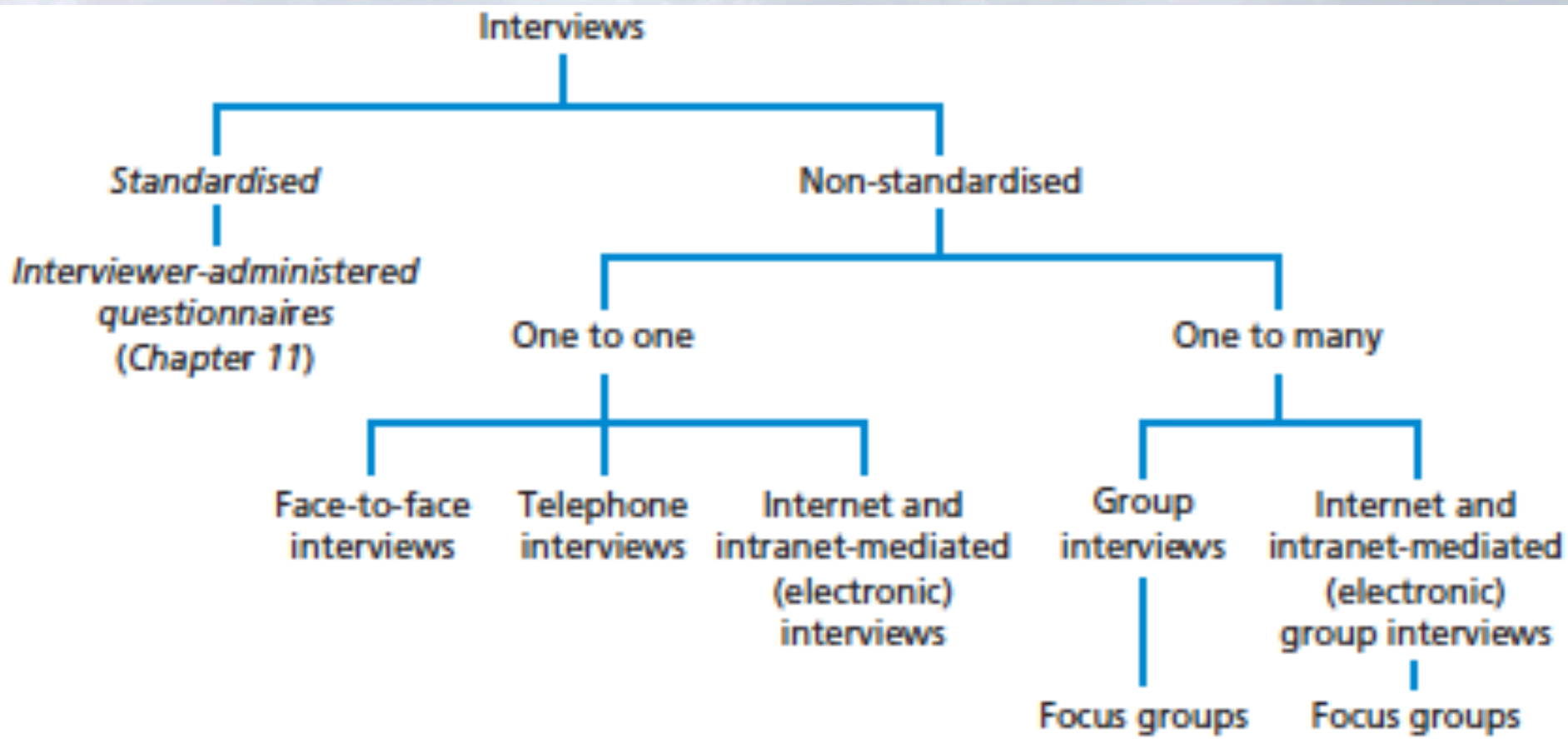
Types of interview

- **Unstructured interviews** are informal.
- You would use these to explore in depth a general area in which you are interested.
- There is no predetermined list of questions to work through in this situation.
- The interviewee is given the opportunity to talk freely about events.

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Links to the purpose of research and research strategy

- **Standardised interviews** are normally used to gather data, which will then be the subject of quantitative analysis, for example as part of a survey strategy.
- **Non-standardised (semi- structured and in-depth) interviews** are used to gather data, which are normally analysed qualitatively, for example as part of a case study strategy.



Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Links to the purpose of research and research strategy

- Previously, we outlined how the purpose of your research could be classified as **exploratory**, **descriptive** and **explanatory** studies.
- In an **exploratory study**, in-depth interviews can be very helpful to 'find out what is happening [and] to seek new insights.
- Semi-structured interviews may also be used in relation to an exploratory study.
- In **descriptive studies**, structured interviews can be used as a means to identify general patterns.

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Links to the purpose of research and research strategy

- In an **explanatory study**, semi-structured interviews may be used in order to understand the relationships between variables, such as those revealed from a descriptive study.
- Structured interviews may also be used in relation to an explanatory study, in a statistical sense.

Table 10.1 Uses of different types of interview in each of the main research categories

	Exploratory	Descriptive	Explanatory
Structured		✓✓	✓
Semi-structured	✓		✓✓
Unstructured	✓✓		

✓✓ = more frequent, ✓ = less frequent.

Types of interview and their link to the purposes of research and research strategy

Links to the purpose of research and research strategy

- Your research may incorporate more than one type of interview (**multiple methods**).
- As part of a survey strategy, for example, you may decide to use in-depth or semi-structured interviews initially to help identify the questions that should be asked in a questionnaire administered as a structured interview.
- Alternatively, semi-structured interviews may be used to explore and explain themes that have emerged from the use of a questionnaire.

When to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews

- ✓ There are many situations in which the use of non-standardized (qualitative) research interviews may be advantageous.
- ✓ **Factors that effect the appropriateness of non-standardized interview:**
 - the purpose of the research;
 - the significance of establishing personal contact;
 - the nature of the data collection questions;
 - length of time required and completeness of the process.

When to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews

The purpose of the research

- If you are undertaking an **exploratory study**, or a study that includes an exploratory element, it is likely that you will include non-standardised (qualitative) research interviews in your design.
- Similarly, an **explanatory study** is also likely to include interviews in order for the researcher to be able to infer causal relationships between variables.
- If it is necessary for you to understand the reasons for decisions of participants, or to understand the reasons for their attitudes and opinions, you are likely to need to conduct a **qualitative interview**.

When to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews

The significance of establishing personal contact

- Potential research participants who receive a questionnaire via the online means, may be reluctant to complete it for a number of reasons.
- They may feel that it is not appropriate to provide sensitive and confidential information to someone they have never met.
- They may also not completely trust the way in which the information they provide is used.

When to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews

The significance of establishing personal contact

- They may be reluctant to spend time providing written explanatory answers, when these are requested, especially if the meaning of any question is not entirely clear.
- The use of personal interviews may therefore achieve a higher response rate than using questionnaires.

When to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews

The nature of the questions

- An interview will be the most advantageous way to obtain data in the following circumstances:
 - if there are a large number of questions to be answered,
 - if the questions are either complex or open-ended,
 - if the order and logic of questioning may need to be varied.

When to use non-standardised (qualitative) interviews

Length of time required and completeness of the process

- If expectations have been clearly established about the required length of time and participants agree with the objectives of the interview, they have generally been willing to agree to be interviewed.
- Your aim must be to obtain data to enable you to answer all your research questions.
- You should consider the time you have to complete the data collection process.

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Data quality issues

- A number of data quality issues can be identified in relation to the use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews, related to:
 - reliability;
 - forms of bias;
 - validity and generalizability.
- The lack of standardization in such interviews may lead to concerns about reliability.
- In relation to qualitative research, reliability is concerned with whether alternative researchers would reveal similar information.

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Data quality issues

- The concern about reliability in these types of interview is also related to issues of **bias**.
- There are various types of bias to consider.
 - **interviewer bias.**
 - **interviewee or response bias.**

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Overcoming data quality issues

Reliability

- If you use this approach, you should **make and retain notes** relating to your research design, the reasons underpinning the choice of strategy and methods, and the data obtained.
- This will be referred to by other researchers to understand the processes that you used and your findings and, where appropriate, to enable them to reanalyze the data you collected.

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Overcoming data quality issues

Preparation

- When using non-structured interviews the five Ps are a useful mantra:
 - prior
 - planning
 - prevents
 - poor
 - performance.

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Overcoming data quality issues

Preparation

- It is critical how you are going to demonstrate your credibility and obtain the confidence of the interviewees.
- Issues associated with this are:
 - Level of knowledge
 - Level of information supplied to the interviewee
 - Appropriateness of location
 - Appropriateness of the researcher's appearance at the interview

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Overcoming data quality issues

Preparation

- It is critical how you are going to demonstrate your credibility and obtain the confidence of the interviewees.
- Issues associated with this are:
 - Nature of the opening comments to be made when the interview commences
 - Approach to questioning
 - Nature and impact of the interviewer's behaviour during the course of the interview
 - Demonstration of attentive listening skills

Data quality issues and preparing for the interview

Overcoming data quality issues

Preparation

- It is critical how you are going to demonstrate your credibility and obtain the confidence of the interviewees.
- Issues associated with this are:
 - Scope to test understanding
 - Approach to recording data
 - Cultural differences and bias

Interviewing competence

- There are several areas that you need to develop and demonstrate competence. These areas are:
 - opening the interview;
 - using appropriate language;
 - questioning;
 - listening;
 - testing and summarising understanding;
 - recognising and dealing with difficult participants;
 - recording data.

Interviewing competence

Question Types Used in Semi-structured and in-depth Interviews

Open questions

- ◆ The use of open questions will allow participants to define and describe a situation or event.
- ◆ Examples of open questions include:
 - ◆ Why did the organization introduce its marketing strategy?
 - ◆ What methods have been used to make employees redundant?
 - ◆ How has corporate strategy changed over the past five years?’

Interviewing competence

Question Types Used in Semi-structured and in-depth Interviews

Probing questions

- ◆ Probing questions can be used to explore responses that are of significance to the research topic.
- ◆ Examples of this type of question include:
 - ◆ How would you evaluate the success of this new marketing strategy?
 - ◆ Why did you choose a compulsory method to make redundancies?
 - ◆ What external factors caused the corporate strategy to change?

Interviewing competence

Question Types Used in Semi-structured and in-depth Interviews

Specific and closed questions

- These types of question are similar to those used in structured interviews.
- Examples are:
 - How many people responded to the customer survey?
 - How many times you feel that you are exhausted in a month?

Interviewing competence

Recognizing and dealing with difficult participants

Table 10.2 Difficult interview participants and suggestions on how to address them

Recognised difficulty	Suggestion
Participant appears willing only to give monosyllabic answers, these being little more than 'yes' or 'no'	Reasons for this are varied. If it is due to limited time, or worries about anonymity, then this can be minimised by careful opening of the interview (Box 10.9). If the participant gives these answers despite such precautions, try phrasing your questions in as open a way as possible; also use long pauses to signify that you want to hear more.
Participant repeatedly provides long answers which digress from the focus of your interview	Although some digression should be tolerated, as it can lead to aspects about which you are interested, you will need to impose more direction. This must be done subtly so as not to cause offence, such as by referring back to an earlier relevant point and asking them to tell you more, or requesting that they pause so you can note down what they have just said.

Interviewing competence

Recognizing and dealing with difficult participants

Participant starts interviewing you	This can suggest that you have created rapport. However, you need to stress that you are interested in their opinions and that, if they wish, they can ask you questions at the end.
Participant is proud of their status relative to you and wants to show off their knowledge, criticising what you do	This is extremely difficult and at times like this you will have to listen attentively and be respectful. Remember that you are also likely to be knowledgeable about the research topic, so be confident and prepared to justify your research and the research design you have chosen.
Participant becomes noticeably upset during the interview and, perhaps, starts to cry	Another difficult one for you. You need to give your participant time to answer your question and, in particular, do not do anything to suggest that you are feeling impatient. If your participant starts crying or is obviously very distressed, it is probably a good idea to explain that the question does not have to be answered. Do not end the interview straight away as this is likely to make the participant even more upset.

Interviewing competence

Recording interview data

- ◆ Most interviewers audio-record their interviews, where permission is given
- ◆ To create a full record of the interview is one of the means to control bias and to produce reliable data for analysis.
- ◆ As an interviewer, you will be interested in both what your participants say and the way in which they say it.
- ◆ It is also helpful to make brief notes to maintain your concentration.

Interviewing competence

Recording interview data

Table 10.3 Advantages and disadvantages of audio-recording the interview

Advantages

- Allows interviewer to concentrate on questioning and listening
- Allows questions formulated at an interview to be accurately recorded for use in later interviews where appropriate
- Can re-listen to the interview
- Accurate and unbiased record provided
- Allows direct quotes to be used
- Permanent record for others to use

Disadvantages

- May adversely affect the relationship between interviewee and interviewer (possibility of 'focusing' on the audio-recorder)
- May inhibit some interviewee responses and reduce reliability
- Possibility of a technical problem
- Time required to transcribe the audio-recording (Section 13.3)

Managing logistical and resource issues

- ◆ Time required to obtain data is unlikely to be less than one hour and could easily exceed this, perhaps taking two hours or longer.
- ◆ Conducting interviews may become a costly process where it is necessary to travel to the location of participants,
- ◆ Another possible strategy is to arrange two or more shorter interviews in order to explore a topic thoroughly.

Group interviews and focus groups

Group interviews

- ◆ This type of interview can range from being highly structured to unstructured, although it tends to be relatively unstructured and fairly free-flowing.
- ◆ A dynamic group can generate or respond to a number of ideas and evaluate them.
- ◆ Because of the presence of several participants, this type of situation allows a breadth of points of view to emerge and for the group to respond to these views.

Group interviews and focus groups

Focus Group interviews

- ◆ A focus group, sometimes called a 'focus group interview', is a group interview that focuses clearly upon a particular issue, product, service or topic and encompasses the need for interactive discussion amongst participants.
- ◆ This means that, in comparison with other forms of group interview, participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic being discussed and they are encouraged to discuss and share their points of view without any pressure to reach a consensus.

Group interviews and focus groups

Focus Group interviews

- ◆ These discussions are conducted several times, with similar participants, to enable trends and patterns to be identified when the data collected are analyzed.
- ◆ When focus groups are being used, this is likely to be associated with a higher level of interviewer-led structure and intervention to facilitate discussion than when group interviews are being used.

Telephone, Internet- and intranet-mediated interviews

Telephone interviews

- ◆ Attempting to conduct non-standardised interviews by telephone may offer potential advantages associated with access, speed and lower cost.
- ◆ This method may allow you to make contact with participants with whom it would be impractical to conduct an interview on a face-to-face basis because of the distance and prohibitive costs involved and time required.

Telephone, Internet- and intranet-mediated interviews

Internet- and intranet-mediated interviewing

◆ The term electronic interviews can also be used.

