

# 8

## Qualitative research: in-depth interviewing and projective techniques

Source: © Getty Images



*With no social pressure to conform to group responses, participants can be questioned in-depth in a context that allows them to really express how they feel.*



### Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1 understand why the in-depth interview is defined as a direct qualitative research technique and observation and projective techniques are defined as indirect techniques;
- 2 describe in-depth interview techniques in detail, citing their advantages, disadvantages and applications;
- 3 explain how theory may be used to create structure to questioning and analysis in in-depth interviewing by reference to the laddering technique and the repertory grid technique;
- 4 describe projective techniques in detail and compare association, completion, construction and expressive techniques;
- 5 understand the language problems that should be considered by international qualitative researchers;
- 6 understand the ethical dilemmas faced by qualitative research practitioners.

STAGE 1  
Problem  
definition

STAGE 2  
Research approach  
developed

STAGE 3  
Research design  
developed

STAGE 4  
Fieldwork or data  
collection

STAGE 5  
Data preparation  
and analysis

STAGE 6  
Report preparation  
and presentation



## Overview

Having discussed qualitative research in terms of its nature and approach, and evaluated focus groups as the main marketing research technique, we now move on to describe and evaluate other qualitative techniques.

We start by describing and evaluating what is meant by an in-depth interview and the procedure of in-depth interviewing. The role of the in-depth interviewer is described and the advantages and disadvantages of the technique are summarised. In the process of conducting in-depth interviews, the techniques of 'laddering' and 'repertory grid' can be applied to help to structure the elicitation and analysis process. Laddering and repertory grid techniques will be described and illustrated. The indirect qualitative association, completion, construction and expressive projective techniques are described and illustrated. The applications of these techniques are detailed, followed by an evaluation of their advantages and disadvantages. This is developed into an overall summary of the relative strengths and weaknesses of qualitative techniques under the headings of 'focus groups', 'in-depth interviews', 'projective techniques' and 'ethnographic techniques'.

The following example illustrates a subject that for some individuals is difficult to discuss in a group: personal hygiene issues and even their fantasies when bathing. The subject requires a qualitative technique to generate data of a kind that will support creative advertising decisions. The subject matter, however, is ideal for the application of in-depth interviews and projective techniques where time can be spent building trust and rapport between the interviewer and participant. In-depth interviews allow participants talking about bathing the time and space to express ideas about everyday events that normally they just get on with and do not have to explain or rationalise to anyone!

### Example

#### Soaps look for a fresh way to work consumers into a lather<sup>1</sup>

In studies of bath soaps, participants invariably say that a good soap makes them feel 'clean and fresh'. However, they often have difficulty explaining what 'clean and fresh' means. Copywriters trying to find a new way to talk about freshness in their advertising do not find such results supportive or relevant to the decisions they have to take. Hence, participants have been probed on a one-to-one basis through in-depth interviews about all the things 'clean and fresh' meant to them: the times they felt this way, their mental pictures, the moods and feelings connected with it, what music and colours come to mind, and even what fantasies it evoked.

Escape from ordinary life was one of the main themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews – getting away from the cramped rushed city to the free, relaxed, unhindered life, surrounded by nature, in the countryside. The words and images sparked by this theme offered new ideas for creative advertising ideas.



## In-depth interviews



### In-depth interview

An unstructured, direct, personal interview in which a single participant is probed by an experienced interviewer to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings on a topic.

### The meaning of 'in-depth'

An **in-depth interview** is an unstructured, direct, personal interview in which a single participant is probed by an experienced interviewer to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings on a topic.<sup>2</sup> It is a qualitative interview and as such is based upon conversation, with the emphasis on researchers asking questions and listening, and participants answering.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of most qualitative interviews is to derive meaning through interpretations, not necessarily 'facts' from participant talk. The emphasis should be upon a full interaction to understand the meaning of the participant's experiences and life worlds.<sup>4</sup> In order to tap into these experiences and life worlds, in-depth interviewing involves a certain style of social and interpersonal interaction. In order to be effective and useful, in-depth interviews develop and build upon intimacy; in this respect, they resemble the forms of talking one finds among close friends. They can resemble friendship, and may even lead to long-term friendship. They are also very different from the nature of talking one finds between friends, mainly because the interviewer seeks to use the information obtained in the interaction for some other purpose.<sup>5</sup> As the name implies, in-depth interviewing seeks 'deep' information and understanding. The word 'deep' has four meanings in this context.<sup>6</sup> These meanings will be illustrated with a scenario of a researcher trying to understand the Ebay ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)) shopping experience:

- 1 **Everyday events.** Deep understandings are held by the participants in some everyday activity, event or place. The interviewer seeks to achieve the same deep level of knowledge or understanding as the participants. For example, if the interviewer has never used Ebay to buy or sell goods and this experience is what is being investigated, in-depth interviewing can be used as a way to learn the meanings of participants' actions. In this respect, the participant acts as a kind of teacher and the interviewer a student, one interested in learning the ropes.
- 2 **Context.** Deep understandings go beyond common-sense explanations of some cultural form, activity, event, place or artefact. In-depth interviewing aims to explore contextual boundaries to uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view and to penetrate the more reflexive understandings about the nature of that experience. In an Ebay investigation, the interviewer can explore the meanings of different shopping experiences, the thrill of 'winning' a deal, and the 'joy' of owning a particular artefact, to name but a few contextual boundaries.
- 3 **Multi-faceted.** Deep understandings allow multiple views and perspectives on and meanings of some activity, event, place or cultural object. The researcher may wish to explore the many perspectives of Ebay buyers and sellers, family members who 'enjoy' or 'suffer' Ebay transactions in their household, executives who manage Ebay, Ebay competitors, high-street retailers, again to name but a few facets of the total experience.
- 4 **Interviewer reflection.** Deep understandings can help to reveal the interviewer's common-sense assumptions, practices, ways of talking and self-interests. This issue will be developed in Chapter 9. In this example, however, if the interviewer traditionally buys goods from the high street, wanting to examine the goods before buying, or has not conducted an Internet transaction, what will he or she 'see' or 'hear' in a particular in-depth interview? This situation mirrors children-parent relationships. Children do not learn what their parents tell them, but what they are prepared and ready to hear. The same holds for in-depth interviewers: researchers do not necessarily 'hear' what their informants tell them, but only what their own intellectual, social, cultural and ethical development has prepared them to hear.

Going deep into the minds of consumers is a learning process. Researchers make mistakes; they sometimes say the wrong things or upset participants in some way. They learn that their race, age, gender, social class, appearance or voice makes one kind of difference with some participants and another kind of difference with other informants.<sup>7</sup> The lesson from this is that there is no 'ideal' means to conduct the in-depth interview. Researchers learn from their experiences, discovering strengths and playing to them, realising weaknesses and understanding how to compensate for them. In this spirit of experimentation and learning we present a procedure that encapsulates how a marketing researcher may approach the in-depth interview.

### Procedure

To illustrate the technique, a scenario is set whereby the researcher is interviewing the marketing director of a soap manufacturer that has successfully sponsored a major athletics event. The sponsorship has resulted in many industry awards, increased sales and better employee–employer relations. The researcher wishes to understand why the soap manufacturer became involved in the sponsorship and how it achieved such success.

The in-depth interview with this busy executive may take from 30 minutes to well over an hour. It may occur on a one-off basis or it may unfold over a number of meetings as more understanding is developed. Once the interviewer has gained access to the marketing director (which can be very problematic, why should he or she give up valuable time and share commercial knowledge?), the interviewer should begin by explaining the purpose of the interview, showing what both will get out of taking part in the interview and explaining what the process will be like. Beyond the introduction the interviewer may ask the marketing director a general introductory question such as 'what impacts have the industry awards had upon your business?' The interviewer would be expected to have done their homework to know what the awards were, what they were awarded for and who the manufacturer was competing against. This is a very positive feature of the sponsorship experience, and it would be hoped to boost the ego of the marketing director and encourage them to talk freely about the different impacts of the awards. The impact of sponsorship could be upon existing and potential new customers, employees and suppliers. The discussion could then flow into any of these areas. After asking the initial question, the interviewer uses an unstructured format, guided by a topic guide as a reminder of important subject areas to cover. The subsequent direction of the interview is determined by the participant's initial reply, the interviewer's probes for elaboration and the participant's answers.

As with the focus group topic guide and the moderator managing that guide, spontaneity ensures that the process is creative and meaningful to the participant. Suppose that the participant replies to the initial question by saying

*The award for the 'best use of sponsorship' in the launch of a new product gave us the most satisfaction. It has made us review how we execute all of our new product launches and integrate our different marketing agencies, our employees and supply chains.*

The interviewer might then pose a question such as 'was it the award that initiated the review or would you have done that anyway?' If the answer is not very revealing, e.g. 'we may have', the interviewer may ask a probing question, such as 'what did the award tell you about how you worked as a team?' This question could open up a whole series of issues such as 'trust', 'relationship development' or 'technical support', to name a few. Such an exchange of questions and answers could emerge from a heading of 'Integrating sponsorship with other marketing communications' on the topic guide. The interviewer will keep an eye on the topic guide to ensure that all the important issues are tackled, but the specific wording of the questions and the order in which they are asked is influenced by the participant's replies.



Probing is of critical importance in obtaining meaningful responses and uncovering hidden issues. Probing can be done by asking general questions such as 'why do you say that?', 'that's interesting, can you tell me more?' or 'would you like to add anything else?'<sup>8</sup> Probing can search for general issues but also be more specific, an example in the above scenario being 'what does good teamwork mean to you?' One of the main success factors of specific probing is that the researcher understands something about the nature of the subject being researched. This means the researcher appreciates the significance of particular revelations, understands the language (even technical language and jargon in certain areas, like the soap industry) and has a credibility with the participant that encourages him or her to open up to the interviewer.

The interviewer must be alert to the issues to go through but also the issues that the participant is willing to talk about, and must listen carefully to and observe which issues fire enthusiasm in the participant. The questions and probes the interviewer puts to participants should follow the interest and logic of the participants, making them feel motivated to respond in a manner that suits them. As with a focus group discussion, the participants should feel comfortable and relaxed, which could mean holding the interview in their office, their home, a bar, a sports club – any context in which they will feel comfortable and more willing to be reflective, honest and open. Answering in a manner that suits the participant helps to make the interview more comfortable and relaxed. For a great amount of business research, the in-depth interview is the best way to gain access and to talk to managers. Much of the interviewing takes place in their office at a time that is convenient to them. Researchers can also observe characteristics of the manager in his or her office environment that can be of help in their analyses. Examples of this could be levels of formality in the workplace, reports and books that the manager has for reference, the manager's use of IT equipment, or the tidiness of the workplace. In the example above, it could be how awards are displayed, photographs from advertisements, displays of new products. These observations would be entirely based upon the purpose of the study, but the context of the office can be of help to the manager and the researcher. In order to make the above process work, the interviewer should:

- 1 Do his or her utmost to develop an empathy with the participant.
- 2 Make sure the participant is relaxed and comfortable.
- 3 Be personable to encourage and motivate participants.
- 4 Note issues that interest the participant and develop questions around these issues.
- 5 Not be happy to accept brief 'yes' or 'no' answers.
- 6 Note where participants have not explained clearly enough issues that need probing.

In marketing research that focuses upon managers or professionals as illustrated above, the context of the in-depth interview helps to set the frame of mind of the participant. The context should also help the participant and interviewer to relax, engendering an atmosphere to explore and develop issues that they feel to be relevant. The following arguments help to focus on the issues faced by the interviewer coping with managers and professionals, trying to find the right context to allow these participants to express how they really feel.<sup>9</sup> The in-depth interview helps to overcome:

- 1 *Hectic schedules.* The best participants tend also to be the busiest and most successful people. They can make time for an interview, but are rarely able to spare the much greater time needed for them to come to a group discussion at some location away from their office. So groups exclude the best participants.
- 2 *Heterogeneity.* Whereas mothers evaluating nappy ads, or beer drinkers the latest lager, have only their personal preferences to consider, it is very different for executives evaluating copiers, airline advertisements or computer software. This is because their reactions are complicated by the type of job they do and who they work for. The group discussion

is dependent on the group's composition being fairly homogeneous; the job backgrounds of business people make them too varied to be entirely comfortable in a group.

- 3 *Live context.* A lot of information comes from seeing the participant at his or her desk, which is missed in a group discussion. Work schedules pinned to the wall, the working atmosphere, the freebies from suppliers on the desk, the way coffee is served, all help to fill out the picture.
- 4 *Interviewer reflection.* Groups do not allow the researcher enough thinking time. Two groups, each taking an hour and a half over successive evenings, do not even begin to compare with two or three full days of non-stop interviewing. Individual interviews give much more scope for experimentation. If one way does not work, it is only one participant, not a whole group, that is affected.

Another major application of in-depth interviews where the context of the interview plays a major part, is in the interviewing of children. Researchers into children and teenagers spend considerable time working out the best research approach. Debates proliferate on the most appropriate research designs and interviewing techniques: in-depth interviews versus group, mini groups versus standard groups, friendship pairs versus stranger groups, association projective techniques versus expressive, and so on. These debates make researchers focus on the implications of how research is conducted and which technique provides the best results. One vital element is often overlooked, and that is the issue of context: in other words, the need to ensure that the situation in which children are interviewed is relevant to the research needs.

Like adults, children have multi-faceted personalities. The same teenager can be sullen at home, obstructive in the classroom, but the life and soul of the peer group. The essential difference between children and adults, however, is the extent to which different aspects of the persona can be accessed on one occasion and in one situation, the research setting. Adults have insight into the different roles and behaviour, which they adopt in different contexts, and can project other aspects of themselves which they bring into the research situation. Children and young teenagers, on the other hand, react to the moment and thus project only one aspect of themselves. They lack the maturity, experience and self-knowledge to draw on other parts of themselves and therefore find it almost impossible to know, let alone admit or explore, how they might behave in another circumstance.<sup>10</sup>

The above evaluation of the importance of context also shows that question formulation, the very heart of marketing research, can be more important in interviewing children than when dealing with adults. A straightforward 'what do you think about X?' may throw children into confusion. A formulation such as 'if you were to call your friends about this, what would you tell them?' would be more likely to produce illuminating responses. An innovative approach to interviewing children is illustrated in the following example.

### **Example** Quantifying the emotional aspects of advertising<sup>11</sup>

In order to understand how to 'talk' to children we need to find ways to connect to them, and hence explore what it is like to be a 10 year old. The way Quæstor ([www.quaestor.co.uk](http://www.quaestor.co.uk)) goes about researching children taps into the very areas where they are not adults. It is about how we as adults adapt to who they are, finding a way to engage with every child, and building a bridge to help us reach their world. A good starting point is often an awareness of the skills they have developed in school, using these as the building blocks for the technique. So, rather than asking a child a direct question, which more often than not will result in a long blank look, we can ask children to draw a picture, or select a photograph, or even write a story that simply relates to the question we are trying to ask. Children react well to this approach and find the prop easy to talk around, often giving the researchers more than they hoped for.



On a project for Cartoon Network, a child depicted in a picture one of the pressures of the fierce consumer society we live. The picture was about exclusion and showed a group of boys; outside the group, another boy was crying. On closer inspection it was not the boy crying that told the story, but why he was doing so. A Nike tick was distinctly missing from his trainers.

#### Friendship pair

A technique used to interview children as two friends or classmates together.

An effective technique when working with children is the use of **friendship pairs** – interviewing two friends or classmates together. This helps to cut out lying because children are not alone with strangers and because if one tells a lie, the other tells on them. The ingrained honesty of children arguably makes them easier to research than adults, who of course are far more accomplished exponents of deception.

### Advantages and challenges of in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews have the following advantages. They can:

- Uncover a greater depth of insights than focus groups. This can happen through concentrating and developing an issue with the individual. In the group scenario, interesting and knowledgeable individuals cannot be solely concentrated upon.
- Attribute the responses directly to the participant, unlike focus groups where it is often difficult to determine which participant made a particular response.
- Result in a free exchange of information that may not be possible in focus groups because there is no social pressure to conform to group response. This makes them ideally suited to sensitive issues, especially commercially sensitive issues.
- Be easier to arrange than the focus group as there are not so many individuals to coordinate and the interviewer can travel to the participant.

The following are not necessarily disadvantages, but really the challenges that researchers face when using this very valuable technique:

- 1 The lack of structure makes the results susceptible to the interviewer's influence, and the quality and completeness of the results depend heavily on the interviewer's skills. As with all qualitative techniques, the interviewer needs to develop an awareness of the factors that make him or her 'see' in a particular way.
- 2 The length of the interview, combined with high costs, means that the number of in-depth interviews in a project tends to be few. If few in-depth interviews can be managed, the researcher should focus upon the quality of the whole research experience. 'Quality' in this context means the qualities that the participant possesses in terms of richness of experience and how relevant the experiences are to the study; the quality of drawing out and getting participants to express themselves clearly and honestly; and the quality of analysis in terms of interpretation of individual participants and individual issues evaluated across all the interviews conducted.
- 3 The data obtained can be difficult to analyse and interpret. Many responses may not be taken at face value; there can be many hidden messages and interpretations in how participants express themselves. The researcher needs a strong theoretical awareness to make sense of the data or the technical means to develop theory if using a grounded theory approach. As well as the transcripts of the interview, additional observations add to the richness and multi-faceted analyses and potential interpretations.

The following technique illustrates how a theoretical awareness can help to develop structure, elicit or draw more out of participants and help to make sense of the data they generate. It is an illustration of how the three challenges outlined above can be overcome.

### The laddering technique

The in-depth interview can be driven by a topic guide, made up of just a few topics covering a very broad range of issues. From these few topics, the nature of questions, the order of questions and the nature of probes can be driven by the interviewer's perception of what will draw the best out of participants. Alternatively, an in-depth interview can be semi-structured where parts of the interview use consistent and highly structured questions, with set response categories, interspersed with open-ended questions involving probes that again suit the nature of the participant. There are other variations on the technique that can help the interviewer and participant to apply useful structure to issues that can be very 'messy' and unstructured. One of the most popular techniques to apply structure is called **laddering**. Laddering requires interviewers to be trained in specific probing techniques in order to develop a meaningful 'mental map' of the consumer's view towards a particular product. The ultimate goal is to combine mental maps of consumers who are similar, which lead to the reasons why people purchase particular products.

#### Laddering

A technique for conducting in-depth interviews in which a line of questioning proceeds from product characteristics to user characteristics.

The laddering technique is made up of a linking or ladder of elements that represent the link between products and the consumer's perception process. It enables an understanding of how consumers translate product attributes, through personal meanings associated with them.<sup>12</sup> Theories of consumer behaviour act as a foundation to this approach, based on the contention that consumption acts produce consequences for the consumer. Consumers learn to associate these consequences to specific product attributes. These associations are reinforced through consumers' buying behaviour and, as a result, they learn to choose products that have certain attributes in order to obtain the consequences they desire. There are two features of this theory that the researcher using laddering technique will focus upon:

- 1 *Motivation*. The laddering technique focuses upon generating insight to the motives behind the consumption of certain products. It represents a more contemporary approach to classical motivation research.<sup>13</sup> The technique aims to stimulate participants to reflect upon their buying behaviour in a way unconnected from their usual behaviour.
- 2 *Cognitive structure*. This feature is also a development of theory, in this case means-end-chain (MEC), developed by Guttman.<sup>14</sup> MEC starts from a point of consumer motivation. It contends that motivation leading towards a form of behaviour is derived from the connection between tangible product attributes and more abstract cognitive structures that involve the physical and emotional consequences derived from these attributes. At a more abstract level, the consequences lead to values held by the consumer.

The laddering technique is therefore designed to identify and follow the chain of

attributes → consequences → values (A–C–V)

The in-depth interview using the laddering technique is based on comparisons of the consumer's choice alternatives. These can include, for example, different products used for the same purpose, such as an electric toothbrush and a conventional toothbrush, and/or varieties in a product line such as full-fat and skimmed milk, and/or product brands such as Heineken and Amstel beer, and/or kinds of packaging such as wine in bottles and in cartons. Other elements that can affect consumer choices can be added to the above list. In making the comparisons, the interviewer poses a question that hopes to encourage the participants to put aside their established rationale and reflect upon their consumption behaviour, in ways that they would not normally do. In other words, questions are posed that make participants think about consumption from other points of view to try to release participants from fixed attitudes, perceptions and values. The interviewer's role is to build up a rapport with participants and get them to relax and feel comfortable to respond with whatever comes to mind. The interview revolves around three basic questions based on the A–C–V chain. The questions posed would be:



- 1 *Values*. How important is this for you? (e.g. health)
- 2 *Consequences*. What does this difference mean? (e.g. not fattening)
- 3 *Attributes*. What is different about these alternatives? (e.g. low calories)

From the attribute of 'low calories' in comparing different product varieties in a product line such as full-fat and skimmed milk, a further and negative consequence of 'watery taste' could be elicited, followed by the values of 'unnatural'. The interviewer aims to build a great repertoire of chains through these levels spontaneously, choosing the right comparisons to draw out the next link in the chain. The resulting responses are analysed to establish possible categories of attributes, consequences and values. The categories are then organised according to the qualitative comments made between the relationship of an attribute, its consequence and value. The result is an association matrix that graphically displays the categories and the connections that have emerged.

Laddering requires an interviewer with experience of in-depth interviewing, with a realisation of what will relax participants and get them in a frame of mind to 'play' with the associations sought. The interviewer needs to appreciate the theoretical foundations of the technique,<sup>15</sup> not only to help determine what should be elicited from participants, but also to help generate sound and meaningful analyses. The following example illustrates the consumer insights and marketing implications that emerged through the use of laddering.

### Example

#### Climbing the ladder to PlayStation2 success<sup>16</sup>

The laddering technique was used to determine consumer attitudes and purchasing motivations towards the Sony PlayStation2 ([www.scea.com](http://www.scea.com)). The key laddering insights for this product included:

- My friends come over and we spend an evening working together through a game or playing against each other.
- Challenging games require more critical thinking and decision making. It feels more like a puzzle than a game.
- Some games are suited to adults only, so I don't feel like I'm playing a 'kids' game, but taking part in a high-quality gaming experience.

The marketing implications that emerged from these insights include:

- Set up kiosks in large cities to attract adults.
- Advertise through programmes such as *Friends* with Joey and Chandler playing games on a PlayStation2.
- Target magazines such as *Wired* and *Sports Illustrated* with more mature advertisements.

The insights generated helped to develop further research at Sony and helped with creative marketing decisions in all aspects of designing products, distribution, pricing and promotions.

### The repertory grid technique

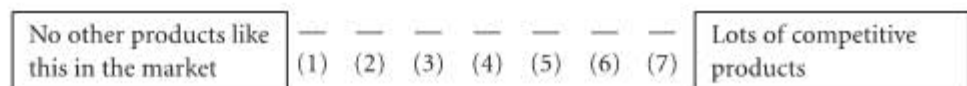
Another widely used technique that applies structure to qualitative in-depth interviewing is the repertory grid technique (RGT). This technique was originally developed by George Kelly in 1955<sup>17</sup> to explore the meanings that people attach to the world around them, which they find particularly hard to articulate. As with the laddering technique, there is a theoretical underpinning, personal construct psychology.<sup>18</sup> Given the debate around this theory, there are a number of variations of the technique and arguments about whether it should be implemented and analysed in a positivist or interpretivist manner,<sup>19</sup> but in essence the stages involved in the repertory grid technique are:

- 1 Element selection
- 2 Construct elicitation
- 3 Element comparisons
- 4 Data analysis.

**Element selection.** The elements selected will depend upon the nature of consumer behaviour that the interviewer wishes to examine. In a study that wished to understand *broad-based patterns of consumer behaviour*<sup>20</sup> the elements chosen included 30 generic products and services such as newspapers, holidays, chocolate bars, eggs, alcoholic drinks, shoes, toothpaste, savings accounts, restaurant meals and shampoo. In another study that wished to understand *the process of effective new product development*<sup>21</sup> the elements chosen included 30 successful new products and services such as Slim Fast, Pull Ups, Loed Tea, Ultraglide, Baby Jogger, Gourmet Coffee, Zantac, Paragliders, MTV and Carmen Soft. These elements should be chosen by the participants, not just chosen and presented by the interviewer. There should be some homogeneity in the elements in the sense that the participant sees the elements relating to and representative of the behaviour being studied.

**Construct elicitation.** Having selected elements that the participant believes to encapsulate the behaviour being studied, the interviewer now seeks to understand what connects them together. The first stage of this involves the interviewer selecting three of the chosen elements at random and then presenting to the participant small cards with a summary of these elements. The participant is then asked to describe how he or she sees two of the three to be alike and how the third may be different. The researcher selects different 'triads' to the point where all the elements have been contrasted or the participant cannot describe further 'similarities' or 'differences'. Construct elicitation therefore draws out the participant's perspective of the important features that encapsulate a particular form of consumer behaviour.

**Element comparisons.** The constructs elicited from participants are now turned into bipolar descriptions in a manner similar to the semantic differential scale described and illustrated in Chapter 12. For example, suppose that in a study of *the process of effective new product development*, three elements were compared: MTV, Gourmet Coffee and Paragliders. The participant may say that MTV and Gourmet Coffee are alike in that there are many similar competitive products that they can be compared with, whereas Paragliders is different in that there are few competitive 'personal' means to fly long distances. Whether this is factually correct or whether the interviewer agrees with this is immaterial; it is how the participant sees it that is important. Such a belief could be turned into a bipolar scale as illustrated below:



Other scales would be constructed to cover the ways that participants compared the chosen elements, i.e. the constructs elicited would be turned into a series of bipolar scales. Participants would then be expected to evaluate all the original elements using these scales. If they felt that Gourmet Coffee has many competitors they could tick a line at the (6) or (7) point. So, if there were 30 elements that encapsulate the behaviour under study and 20 constructs elicited to evaluate these elements, a total of 30 × 20 or 600 ratings would need to be performed.



**Data analysis.** A grid can be assembled for each participant to represent in the above example the  $30 \times 20$  ratings. Again, an illustration of this comes from a small extract of *the process of effective new product development* study. The following represents an extract of the total response from one participant:

Construct	MTV	Gourmet Coffee	Paragliders
Market newness	6	6	2
Company newness	3	7	1
Technology newness	2	4	6

With a number of these completed grids, factor analysis (Chapter 22) can be performed to discover the important underlying factors or dimensions that encapsulate a particular form of behaviour.<sup>22</sup> The analysis can continue by performing cluster analysis (Chapter 23) to explore patterns of similarity or dissimilarity in different types of participant, i.e. to discover and describe groups of participants who may view particular forms of behaviour in similar ways.

The above process can take a great deal of time to select the elements, to elicit the means to compare the elements and to evaluate them. It requires an amount of rapport between the interviewer and the participant and patience in working through the stages. All of the stages may not be completed in one interview. It may require the interviewer to return to the participant to develop the next stage, especially in transferring the elicited elements to bipolar descriptions to allow all the elements to be evaluated.

### The Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique

Another technique that creates a 'mental map' of the consumer's view towards a particular product is the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET). It is a qualitative in-depth technique that is used by companies such as Procter & Gamble, AT&T, Kodak, Ford and General Motors. It was developed at the Harvard Business School by Professor

Jerry Zaltman and is patented in the USA. The technique uses images and metaphors to reveal how consumers think and feel about brands, issues or other research topics. It does not ask consumers 'what they think about the things researchers think about'. Instead, it lets respondents' own frames of reference shape the in-depth interview, without losing sight of the research aims. The technique and its application are illustrated in the following example.



Source: © Alamy

**Example** Diving for pearls<sup>23</sup>

ZMET allows the participant to define the frame of reference for an interview. The use of metaphor is extremely effective in revealing submerged thoughts and feelings and specifically in allowing access to the emotional domain. Respondents are given a question a few days before their actual interview, and asked to source (non-literal) images reflecting their feelings. For example, in a study of looking at how people choose which financial products to buy and which suppliers to use, one respondent brought in a picture of two dogs, a fully grown Saint Bernard towering over a tiny Chihuahua, to express his feeling of being intimidated by large companies. This period of reflection brings tacit knowledge to the surface. At an in-depth interview, participants explain the significance of each image and how it relates to the question. Probing for clarification, cause and consequence reveals the meaning behind each idea and the connections between ideas. The results reveal the consumers' mindset: the issues most salient to them and the thoughts and feelings they attach to each issue. In ZMET, the main ideas are coded and mapped by *Metaphoria*, proprietary software that shows the links between them. The result is a consensus map of 'the mind of the market'. Although product performance remains central to this map, the process also allows highly emotional outcomes, such as confidence, joy, fear and alienation to emerge.

ZMET aims to understand the images and associations that underpin both spoken and tacit thoughts and feelings through the elicitation of both rational and emotional thinking. The process especially allows the emotional aspects of products and their use to shine through. The resultant analysis creates a graphical visualisation of the 'mind of the market'. This visualisation creates a link between consumer perceptions and those involved in creative activities of product design and marketing communications. Such an approach accelerates the creative process and helps design and advertising agencies to add more emotional value to their work.

**Applications of in-depth interviews**

Applying in-depth interviews, with high or low levels of structure, with a strong theoretical foundation such as laddering, the repertory grid technique or ZMET, or with the desire to generate grounded theory, presents challenges but also many rewards. There are many marketing decisions that can be made with support from marketing researchers using the broad array of techniques under the heading of 'in-depth interviews'. The following summarises the applications:<sup>24</sup>

- 1 Interviews with professional people (e.g. finance directors using banking services).
- 2 Interviews with children (e.g. attitudes towards a theme park).
- 3 Interviews with elite individuals (e.g. wealthy individuals involved in large philanthropic ventures).
- 4 Detailed probing of the participant (e.g. new product development for cars).
- 5 Discussion of confidential, sensitive or embarrassing topics (e.g. personal hygiene issues).
- 6 Situations where strong social norms exist and where the participant may be easily swayed by group response (e.g. attitudes of university students towards sports).
- 7 Detailed understanding of habitual or tacit behaviour (e.g. the route a consumer may take around a supermarket).
- 8 Detailed understanding of complicated behaviour (e.g. the purchase of fashion or 'high-status' goods).
- 9 Interviews with competitors who are unlikely to reveal the information in a group setting (e.g. travel agents' perceptions of airline travel packages).
- 10 Situations where the product consumption experience is sensory in nature, affecting mood states and emotions (e.g. perfumes, bath soap).



In the application of in-depth interviews, the researcher can use other techniques to help maintain the interest of participants, to make the experience more enjoyable for the participants and the researcher alike, and ultimately to draw out the true feelings of participants. A set of techniques that help to achieve all this, that have been applied with great success over many years, is the body of indirect techniques called 'projective techniques'.

## Projective techniques



### Projective technique

An unstructured and indirect form of questioning that encourages participants to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings regarding the issues of concern.

**Projective techniques** are a category of exercises designed to provoke imagination and creativity that can be used in in-depth interviews. A projective technique is an unstructured, indirect form of questioning that encourages participants to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings regarding the issues of concern.<sup>25</sup> They are useful techniques for drawing out emotional values, exploring issues in a non-linear manner or for bypassing participants' rational controls. They also help participants to verbalise unframed, subconscious, low-salience or low-involvement attitudes.<sup>26</sup> In projective techniques, participants are asked to interpret the behaviour of others rather than to describe their own behaviour. In interpreting the behaviour of others, it is contended that participants indirectly project their own motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings into the situation. Thus, the participants' attitudes are uncovered by analysing their responses to scenarios that are deliberately unstructured, vague and ambiguous. The more ambiguous the situation, the more participants project their emotions, needs, motives, attitudes and values, as demonstrated by work in clinical psychology on which projective techniques are based.<sup>27</sup> As in psychology, these techniques are classified as association, completion, construction and expressive. Each of these classifications is discussed below.<sup>28</sup>

### Association techniques

#### Association technique

A type of projective technique in which participants are presented with a stimulus and are asked to respond with the first thing that comes to mind.

#### Word association

A projective technique in which participants are presented with a list of words, one at a time. After each word, they are asked to give the first word that comes to mind.

In **association techniques**, an individual is presented with a stimulus and asked to respond with the first thing that comes to mind. Word association is the best known of these techniques. In **word association**, participants are presented with a list of words, one at a time, and encouraged to respond without deliberation to each with the first word that comes to mind. The words of interest, called test words, are interspersed throughout the list, which also contains some neutral, or filler, words to disguise the purpose of the study. For example, in the Sports Marketing Surveys – Racetrack Project, individual Formula One teams may be examined with test words such as competitive, dangerous, inspirational, elitist, sexy. The subject's response to each word is recorded verbatim and responses are timed so that participants who hesitate or reason out (defined as taking longer than 3 seconds to reply) can be identified. The interviewer, not the participant, records the responses.

The underlying assumption of this technique is that association allows participants to reveal their inner feelings about the topic of interest. Responses are analysed by calculating:

- 1 The frequency with which any word is given as a response.
- 2 The amount of time that elapses before a response is given.
- 3 The number of participants who do not respond at all to a test word within a reasonable period.

Those who do not respond at all are judged to have an emotional involvement so high that it blocks a response. It is often possible to classify the associations as favourable, unfavourable or neutral. An individual's pattern of responses and the details of the response are used to determine the person's underlying attitudes or feelings on the topic of interest, as shown in the following example.

### Example Dealing with dirt

Word association was used to study women's attitudes towards detergents. Below is a list of stimulus words used and the responses of two women of similar age and household status. The sets of responses are quite different, suggesting that the women differ in personality and in their attitudes towards housekeeping. Ms M's associations suggest that she is resigned to dirt. She sees dirt as inevitable and does not do much about it. She does not do hard cleaning, nor does she get much pleasure from her family. Ms C sees dirt too, but is energetic, factual minded and less emotional. She is actively ready to combat dirt, and she uses soap and water as her weapons.<sup>29</sup>

Stimulus	Ms M	Ms C
Washday	Everyday	Ironing
Fresh	And sweet	Clean
Pure	Air	Soiled
Scrub	Does not; husband does	Clean
Filth	This neighbourhood	Dirt
Bubbles	Bath	Soap and water
Family	Squabbles	Children
Towels	Dirty	Wash

These findings suggest that the market for detergents could be segmented based on attitudes. Firms (such as Procter & Gamble) that market several different brands of washing powders and detergents could benefit from positioning different brands for different attitudinal segments.

There are several variations to the standard word association procedure illustrated here. Participants may be asked to give the first two, three or four words that come to mind rather than only the first word. This technique can also be used in controlled tests, as contrasted with free association. In controlled tests, participants might be asked 'what Formula one teams come to mind first when I mention "boring"?' More detailed information can be obtained from completion techniques, which are a natural extension of association techniques.

### Completion techniques

In **completion techniques**, participants are asked to complete an incomplete stimulus situation. Common completion techniques in marketing research are sentence completion and story completion.

**Sentence completion** is similar to word association. Participants are given incomplete sentences and are asked to complete them. Generally, they are asked to use the first word or phrase that comes to mind, as illustrated in the context of the Sports Marketing Surveys – Racetrack Project\*.

This example illustrates one advantage of sentence completion over word association: participants can be provided with a more directed stimulus. Sentence completion may provide more information about the subjects' feelings than word association. Sentence completion is not as disguised as word association, however, and many participants may be able to guess the purpose of the study. A variation of sentence completion is paragraph completion, in which the participant completes a paragraph beginning with the stimulus phrase. A further expanded version of sentence completion and paragraph completion is story completion.

In **story completion**, participants are given part of a story, enough to direct attention to a particular topic but not to hint at the ending. They are required to give the conclusion in their own words, as in the following example.

\* The Racetrack Project did not use Projective Techniques. The examples presented illustrate how this could have been applied.

#### Completion technique

A projective technique that requires participants to complete an incomplete stimulus situation.

#### Sentence completion

A projective technique in which participants are presented with a number of incomplete sentences and are asked to complete them.

#### Story completion

A projective technique in which participants are provided with part of a story and are required to give the conclusion in their own words.





Focus on

## Sports Marketing Surveys – Racetrack Project

### Sentence completion

A Formula One fan that supports a team rather than a driver is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

A sponsor who selects drivers based on how competitive they are is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The Ferrari team is most preferred by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

When I think of watching Formula One on television, I \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Focus on

## Sports Marketing Surveys – Racetrack Project

### Story completion

*The marketing director of a bank had championed the sponsorship of a Formula One team for 10 years. A new chief executive has been appointed and he believes that the sponsorship is just an excuse for senior executives to party at the bank's expense. He wants to see a measurable impact in terms of sales for any sponsorship activity. The marketing director has tried to defend the Formula One sponsorship in terms of corporate image development in being associated with the sport. She has also pointed out the impact of hospitality events upon major clients and other stakeholders that are important to the bank. She has tried to get the next chief executive to attend the Monaco Grand Prix, but is having great difficulty.*

What should the Marketing Director do? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

The participants' completion of this story could reveal characteristics of successful sponsorship that may not be measurable. It could examine why, after such a lengthy relationship, the bank should explore other sponsorship activities. The relationship between the marketing director and the chief executive could be explored as could many directions and facets of the sponsor relationship.

## Construction techniques

**Construction techniques** are closely related to completion techniques. Construction techniques require the participants to construct a response in the form of a story, dialogue or description. In a construction technique, the researcher provides less initial structure to the participants than in a completion technique. The two main construction techniques are picture response techniques and cartoon tests.

The roots of **picture response techniques** can be traced to the thematic apperception test (TAT), which consists of a series of pictures of ordinary as well as unusual events. In some of these pictures, the persons or objects are clearly depicted, while in others they are relatively vague. The participant is asked to tell stories about these pictures. The partici-

### Construction technique

A projective technique in which participants are required to construct a response in the form of a story, dialogue or description.

### Picture response technique

A projective technique in which participants are shown a picture and are asked to tell a story describing it.

participant's interpretation of the pictures gives indications of that individual's personality. For example, an individual may be characterised as impulsive, creative, unimaginative, and so on. The term 'thematic apperception test' is used because themes are elicited based on the subject's perceptual interpretation (apperception) of pictures.

In **cartoon tests**, cartoon characters are shown in a specific situation related to the problem. Participants are asked to indicate what one cartoon character might say in response to the comments of another character. The responses indicate the participants' feelings, beliefs and attitudes towards the situation. Cartoon tests are simpler to administer and analyse than picture response techniques.

#### Cartoon tests

Cartoon characters are shown in a specific situation related to the problem. Participants are asked to indicate the dialogue that one cartoon character might make in response to the comment(s) of another character.

#### Expressive technique

A projective technique in which participants are presented with a verbal or visual situation and are asked to relate the feelings and attitudes of other people to the situation.

#### Role playing

Participants are asked to assume the behaviour of someone else or a specific object.

### Expressive techniques

In **expressive techniques**, participants are presented with a verbal or visual situation and asked to relate the feelings and attitudes of other people to the situation. The participants express not their own feelings or attitudes, but those of others. The main expressive techniques are role playing, the third-person technique and personification.

In **role playing**, participants are asked to play the role or to assume the behaviour of someone else. Participants are asked to speak as though they were someone else, such as another household member with whom they would share a decision or an authority figure. For example, 'Bernard, you are a 15-year-old boy; Eva, you play Bernard's mother; George, you play Bernard's father. Imagine you are at home deciding which summer holiday you would like this year as a family'. The discussion that emerges is likely to reveal unspoken objections as well as those of overcoming resistance to features of the holiday, locations, and ways of travelling there that may be favoured by Bernard but not his parents, or even his mother and not by the two males. The researcher assumes that the participants will project their own feelings into the role.<sup>30</sup>

In the **third-person technique**, participants are presented with a verbal or visual situation and are asked to relate the beliefs and attitudes of a third person rather than directly expressing personal beliefs and attitudes. This third person may be a friend, a neighbour, a colleague, or any person that the researcher chooses. Again, the researcher assumes that the participants will reveal personal beliefs and attitudes while describing the reactions of a third party. Asking an individual to respond in the third person reduces the social pressure to give an acceptable answer.

In the **personification technique**, participants imagine that the brand is a person and then describe characteristics of that person, e.g. their lifestyle, status, demographics, home(s). They can build up layers of this description using words and images from a variety of sources. These descriptions help to uncover and develop the perceived nature of a brand's personality. The following example shows why the brand personality is of importance to the marketer and how an understanding of personality may be used in advertising.

#### Third-person technique

A projective technique in which participants are presented with a verbal or visual situation and are asked to relate the beliefs and attitudes of a third person in that situation.

#### Personification technique

Participants are asked to imagine that the brand is a person and then describe characteristics of that person.

### Example

#### It's a bit of an animal<sup>31</sup>

##### Brand personality

A brand has a human-made personality and it can survive only if those responsible for it think long term, safeguard its consistency, and ensure its adherence to and compatibility with the needs and attitudes of those for whom it caters. The brand's personality is sacrosanct. Its owners need to guard against squatters, parallel traders, plagiarists and the threat of the brand becoming generic. Above all, they must guard against inconsistency.<sup>32</sup>

The oddball snack product Peperami, strongly flavoured and meat based, in a world where sweet confectionery snacks are the norm, has been an enormous success. Advertising for the product could not be developed without first obtaining real insights into how consumers related to Peperami. Research revealed that there was a widespread view



of the brand's personality. Children and adults alike referred to it as bizarre, mischievous, anarchic, impulsive, rebellious and manic. More than 50 rough advertising concepts were then tested to establish how the brand personality could be expressed, from mere eccentricity to naked aggression. What emerged was a swaggering character with a mischievous desire to shock. All the ingredients were there for the advertising solution – the manic, animated Peperami, and the pay-off line, 'It's a bit of an animal.'

Brand personality can also be uncovered using role playing. In a group discussion scenario, participants may be asked to play out the personality of a brand. In the Peperami example, the setting could be a cocktail bar after work on a Friday evening, with individuals acting out a Peperami brand, Pringles, a Snickers Bar and a Lidl (store) branded packet of salted peanuts. What the individuals as a brand do, what they say, how they interact with each other in the cocktail scenario, all allow an expression of personality that straight questioning may not reveal. Video recording of the event, played back to the group, acts as a means to discuss and elicit further meaning of a brand's personality, highlighting any positive and negative associations of the brand.

### Advantages and disadvantages of projective techniques

The major advantage of projective techniques is that they may elicit responses that subjects would be unwilling or unable to give if they knew the purpose of the study. At times, in direct questioning, the participant may intentionally or unintentionally misunderstand, misinterpret or mislead the researcher. In these cases, projective techniques can increase the validity of responses by disguising the purpose. This is particularly true when the issues to be addressed are personal, sensitive or subject to strong social norms. Projective techniques are also helpful when underlying motivations, beliefs and attitudes are operating at a subconscious level.<sup>33</sup>

Projective techniques suffer from many of the disadvantages of unstructured direct techniques, but to a greater extent. These techniques generally require personal interviews with individuals who are experienced interviewers and interpreters, hence they tend to be expensive. Furthermore, as in all qualitative techniques, there is the risk of interpretation bias. With the exception of word association, all are open-ended techniques, making the analysis and interpretation more problematic.

Some projective techniques such as role playing require participants to engage in what may seem to be unusual behaviour. Certain participants may not have the self-confidence or the ability to express themselves fully with these techniques. In role playing, for example, the skills of acting may make some participants more articulate at expressing their feelings compared with others. The same may be said of techniques where pictures and cartoons are put together and interpreted, in that distinctive skills may make certain participants more adept and comfortable in expressing themselves. To counter this, one could argue that there is a great amount of skill required in expressing oneself in an open-ended in-depth interview. One could point to fiction writers or poets who are able to encapsulate particular feelings most clearly and succinctly, which again is enormously skilful.

With such skill requirements, the disadvantage of the technique lies in the nature of the participants who agree to participate, and how characteristic they are of distinct target markets.

### Applications of projective techniques

Projective techniques are used less frequently than unstructured direct methods (focus groups and in-depth interviews). A possible exception may be word association, which is commonly used to test brand names and occasionally to measure attitudes about particular

products, brands, packages or advertisements. As the examples have shown, projective techniques can be used in a variety of situations.<sup>34</sup> The usefulness of these techniques is enhanced when the following guidelines are observed. Projective techniques should be used:

- 1 Because the required information cannot be accurately obtained by direct questioning.
- 2 In an exploratory manner to elicit issues that participants find difficult to conceive and express.
- 3 To engage participants in the subject, by having fun in expressing themselves in interesting and novel ways.

## Comparison between qualitative techniques



To summarise comparisons between qualitative techniques, Table 8.1 gives a relative comparison of focus groups, in-depth interviews, projective techniques and ethnographic approaches (qualitative observation).

The nature of qualitative research is such that, within the broad categories above, there are numerous variations of the techniques with distinct strengths and weaknesses in eliciting and representing consumer feelings. Really, it is not possible to say that one technique is better or worse than the other. Faced with a given problem, it would seem to be the case of deciding which technique is the most appropriate to represent or understand consumers.<sup>35</sup> What may affect this choice is the confidence that marketing decision-makers may have in particular techniques. Thus, for example, any number of arguments may be made for the use of a projective technique as being the best way to tackle indirectly a sensitive issue. If the marketer who has to use the research findings does not believe it to be a trustworthy technique, then other, perhaps less appropriate, techniques may have to be used.

**Table 8.1** A comparison of focus groups, in-depth interviews, projective techniques and ethnographic techniques

Criteria	Focus groups	In-depth interviews	Projective techniques	Ethnographic techniques
Degree of structure	Can vary from highly to loosely structured	Can vary from highly to loosely structured	Tends to be loosely structured	Loosely structured, though can have a framework to guide observation
Probing of individual participants	Low	High	Medium	None when used in isolation and in a covert manner
Moderator bias	Medium	Relatively high	Low to high	None when used in isolation and in a covert manner
Uncovering subconscious information	Low	Medium to high	High	High
Discovering innovative information	High	Medium	Low	Medium
Obtaining sensitive information	Low	Medium	High	High
Involving unusual behaviour or questioning	No	To a limited extent	Yes	Perhaps on the part of the observer





## International marketing research

One of the major contributors to the success of in-depth interviews and projective techniques is getting the context of questioning right. The context of questioning can have two key components.

The first component is the actual location, such as an office, hotel room or even a bar. Given the issues that are to be tackled and the characteristics of the target participants, the location plays a significant role in helping the participant to relax and feel comfortable about responding in a manner that the interviewer is looking for. For some participants, e.g. a young graduate manager, being questioned about issues relating to 'night life and entertainment', talking in a noisy, smoky bar may be far more natural than talking in a 'business suite' at a hotel. The same participants being questioned about cleaning their homes may be far more comfortable in a quiet 'home' environment, though perhaps not their own home. The interviewer has to work out what location will work best for the target participants and the issues that will be discussed. The interviewer has to appreciate that this location may change between different participants and may also change as he or she discovers what effect location has on getting the most out of participants.

The second component of the context of questioning is the protocol of conducting the interview. The protocol can include the clothes the interviewer wears, the manner in which the interviewer greets participants, introduces the interview, conducts the interview and terminates it. This means that, even if an interviewer is technically adept at questioning, the interviewer may still not get the most out of participants. For example, an interviewer who dresses formally when the participants see themselves 'off duty' may result in an interview that is tense and lacking in spontaneity.

There are no firm rules about the balance of participant characteristics, related to issues to be questioned and the context of questioning. The interviewer has to be aware of the balance, and make adjustments as he or she learns of what works well in drawing out a quality response. Much of what works in a particular context is culturally bound. There can be striking differences between countries in how comfortable participants may feel talking about issues in their home, for example. There can be striking differences in the protocol of clothing, greeting people, questioning in a direct manner and giving 'gifts' as a reward for taking part in an interview. The problem of 'context' was paramount in the following example. This example illustrates a case in which in-depth interviews helped to probe in detail the views of professionals, which given the detail of banking relationships could be deemed as highly complex and sensitive.

### Example

#### Why are you going to make more use of electronic banking?

A syndicated study of banking in Europe was conducted by a consortium of banks from Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Spain, the UK and the USA. These banks formed a steering committee that helped shape the research design, which was primarily a postal survey followed by in-depth interviews. Each bank had different information requirements to support their marketing strategies, which meant that there was a big demand for a wide array of questions to be asked. There was much debate about which questions should be tackled and, given the detail of information sought, whether these would be best achieved through a structured questionnaire or with in-depth interviews. For example, the questionnaire asked companies what future changes they planned. An example of a response to this question was 'to make greater use of electronic banking'. Statistical analyses could reveal the types of respondent (e.g. utility companies) who were to make greater use of electronic banking. However, the questionnaire could not





**Example**

question *why* they were going to make more use of electronic banking. When around 50% of the responses to the postal survey were received, an interim report was presented to the steering committee. The issues that they deemed the most important to probe formed a topic guide for in-depth interviews. With the completed questionnaires, profiles of the participants could be analysed and those with behaviour relevant to the issues that needed to be explored in depth could be contacted. For example, 'sophisticated' users of cash management services could be profiled. These 'sophisticated' users were then contacted and invited to take part in an in-depth interview. Around 60 in-depth interviews were conducted, with a minimum of 2 interviews in any one country.

In the above example, each interview had the same interviewer who ensured a degree of consistency in the approach. This required the interviewer to visit 20 countries in order to conduct the 60 interviews. This interviewer had to have a strong awareness of the technical issues of cash management banking in order to be seen as credible by the participants, to be able to question and probe, and to appreciate the relevance of the responses elicited. He had to be aware of the context of interviewing in each of the target countries in order to get the most out of participants. The first component of context, the actual location for the interviews, was consistent throughout each country. The interviews were held in the offices of the finance directors of Europe's largest companies, who made up the participants. This was an environment where the participants are naturally used to thinking and talking about the issues under question. It was also an environment where they could talk uninterrupted; the participant was in control of the interview space and could relax. The second component of context, i.e. the protocol of the interview, was where the interviewer needed local support. Most of the technical language and terms used in cash management banking are 'American'. Many finance directors speak English, but some did not, and even if they did, at times they needed to express a view in their native tongue. To understand the protocol and language issues, the interviewer was supported by another interviewer in each country, drawn from local business schools. This interviewer helped to explain the protocol of individual countries, the peculiarities of greeting participants, posing questions in particular ways and closing an interview. These interviewers could help with the translation of questions and responses and ultimately in interpreting the findings. Using one main interviewer allowed a full understanding of the interplay between the participant, the issues and the context of interview. Using a fellow interviewer in individual countries allowed for the subtle characteristics of protocol and language to be incorporated into the whole process.

Understanding the interplay of participant, issue and context is vital to the success of in-depth interviewing and projective techniques. Working in alien cultures in international markets makes this understanding more difficult. Investing in the time and means to develop this understanding ensures that the interviewer generates quality information, getting to reflect really what international participants feel.



## Ethics in marketing research

The essence of qualitative research is that consumers are examined in great depth. They may be questioned and probed in depth about subjects they hardly reflect upon on a day-to-day basis, never mind talk to strangers about. Great care must be taken not to upset or disturb participants through such intensive questioning. In survey work,



reassuring participants that their responses will be confidential can work if there is a demonstrable link between their responses to questions and a means of aggregating all of the findings – making the individual response ‘hidden’. In qualitative research, the process is far more intimate and the link between the response and the participant is far more difficult to break. This is illustrated in the following example.

**Example** Just how ‘anonymous’ is a quali participant?<sup>36</sup>

From both a practical and a methodological perspective, ‘confidentiality’ in qualitative research is a different concept from confidentiality as applied to survey work. In survey work the emphasis is upon anonymity, i.e. the identity of individual participants should not be revealed. This creates two problems for qualitative research:

- 1 Anonymity cannot be promised in qualitative research, especially in the light of current practices where it is increasingly common for clients and others to come to groups, or hear audiotapes, see videotapes and other primary data. This issue further demands consideration of the question: ‘where does the identity reside?’ In a name, a face, the voice, perhaps even a turn of phrase? It is of course also pertinent to ask: ‘do participants actually care if their identity is revealed?’
- 2 In quantitative research, participant identity is generally unimportant. The very essence of sampling theory is that a sufficiently large and randomly chosen sample will represent the views, behaviour or attitudes of any known population as a whole. As such, the identity of any one individual is irrelevant to quantitative findings. In sharp contrast, in qualitative research the relationship between the specific individuals and their views is at the heart of analysis and interpretation. You cannot reach qualitative findings without having ‘revealed’ the individual as part of the research process. Therefore, confidentiality through anonymity is a methodologically untenable concept wherever anyone other than the interviewer is privy to any part of the research process. Yet at the same time, more clients attend groups and more groups take place in viewing facilities.

At the end of the second point above comes the reason why the marketing research industry is so concerned about how qualitative research participants are handled. More consumers are being questioned in both domestic and business scenarios. If they are to ‘open up’ and reveal deeply held feelings, perhaps in front of a group of strangers, or if they are to take part in projective techniques that they may see as being unorthodox, they have to be reassured of how the data captured will be used. As well as the ethical questions of potentially damaging participants come the problems of participants either not willing to take part or, if they do, being very guarded with their responses.

Ethical questions also arise when videotaping sessions with the participants. Some of the pertinent questions are how much to tell participants and when the clients should be allowed access. When videotaping participants, regardless of whether or not they were aware of the camera during the meeting, at the end of the meeting they should be asked to sign a written declaration conveying their permission to use the recording. This declaration should disclose the full purpose of the video, including who will be able to view it. If any participant refuses, the tape should be either destroyed or edited to omit that participant’s identity and comments completely. The researcher should be sensitive to the comfort level of the participants, and respect for the participants should warrant restraint. When a participant feels uncomfortable and does not wish to go on, the researcher should not aggressively probe or confront any further. It has also been suggested that participants should be allowed to reflect on all they have said at the end of the interview and should be given the opportunity to ask questions. This may help return the participants to their pre-interview emotional state.



## Internet and computer applications

The following example illustrates the use of a computer application in interviewing participants using projective techniques. It presents one solution to the problem of participants feeling self-conscious when undertaking what they may see as strange and unorthodox research techniques.

### Example

#### Quantifying the emotional aspects of advertising<sup>37</sup>

Much research demonstrates that people are typically on 'autopilot' in their everyday lives, and that reactions to advertising are intuitive rather than rational, and subliminal rather than conscious. News International felt that it was clear how qualitative research could help it, but it wished to quantify the emotions, feelings and intuition generated by the very nature of advertising. News International chose QualiQuant International ([www.qiqinternational.com](http://www.qiqinternational.com)) because of its creative approach to this problem. Its approach involved novel applications of projective methods, applied in PC/web-based interviewing.

Surf is a well-known British washing powder brand, and the *Sun* is the UK's best selling tabloid newspaper. The objectives were to assess whether a particular advertisement was communicating Surf's brand values amongst *Sun* readers. The interviewees ( $n = 351$ ) were regular readers of the *Sun* or other tabloid newspapers, recruited on the street for central location interviewing. Once in location, the respondents were shown to a PC. They were then asked to perform various free association tasks on Surf and the *Sun*, including playful exercises such as dragging and dropping selected visual images and words onto relevant brand or subject areas. They were then encouraged to pour their hearts out in projective techniques designed to elicit moods and feelings.

An important feature of the process was that the interviewer was 'virtual', whereby respondents go through the computer questionnaire themselves, the vast majority finding it easy and fun to complete the tasks on screen. This gives freedom and encourages spontaneity, whereas the presence of an interviewer can force respondents into a more rational justifying mode.

The Internet has opened up many possibilities to marketing researchers who wish to use in-depth interviews and projective techniques. Through the use of email, interviewers can reach and question participants from all over the world. To be able to track down and talk to individuals with the desired qualities for a particular study, without the time and cost implications of travelling, presents a significant benefit of the Internet.

Being able to track down and talk to participants, i.e. gaining access to qualitative participants, is vital, but the quality of the discussion with these participants should be considered.<sup>38</sup> In the case of in-depth interviews, a full dialogue can develop between an interviewer and participant, either in real time or in non-real time, i.e. a series of emails over a period of time. The discussion, questions and probes can be tailored to specific participants, allowing them time to reflect upon the issues and express their views in their own manner. The interviewer can present stimuli in terms of images or audio recordings that may help to elicit more from the participants. It is possible to use webcams to observe participants and for participants to view interviewers, provided of course that both parties have this technology.

However, even with the use of webcams, much of the non-verbal communication that makes in-depth interviews work is lost. Subtle changes in facial expression and body language may be missed. These non-verbal forms of communication are impor-



tant in developing a rapport between interviewer and participant and are vital in the development of dialogue and the analysis of data. The limitation of visual interaction can make projective techniques difficult to implement. For certain projective techniques such as the array of completion and construction techniques, the anonymity afforded by the distance between interviewer and participant can be a positive feature. Some participants may find the presence of an interviewer inhibiting when they are trying to think of and present a story completion. Where participants feel inhibited, working through a response in their own space and time may be the ideal context in which to tackle particular issues.

In evaluating the worth of the Internet in in-depth interviewing and projective techniques we can return to the example in the 'International marketing research' section. Meeting participants face to face allowed a great richness of dialogue and understanding to be built up. There was no question about how successful the interviews were in understanding *why* participants behaved in particular ways. However, consider the travel and other costs involved. Consider the time involved in conducting the interviews and just typing up the transcripts of the interviews. Compare the cost and timing requirements of meeting face to face in an international setting with a dialogue by email. The process could have been conducted by email much more quickly and cheaply. The dilemma faced is whether the participants would have allowed such a dialogue in the first place and how much they would open up and develop a dialogue.

## Summary



The qualitative technique of in-depth interviewing allows researchers to focus upon individuals with the qualities they deem to be important to their research objectives. With a 'quality individual' the researcher can question and probe to great depth and elicit a quality understanding of that individual's behaviour or feelings. The technique is well suited to tackling commercially and personally sensitive issues. It is also well suited to interviewing children. There are many types of interview that can be applied under the term 'in-depth interview'. They can range from the very open and unstructured to semi-structured exchanges. The application of structure in an in-depth interview can be founded on a theoretical underpinning of how individuals should be questioned and probed. Three relevant and widely used examples of interviews using a theoretical underpinning are laddering, repertory grid techniques and the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET). Laddering seeks to reveal chains of attributes, consequences and values that participants associate with products. The repertory grid seeks to elicit the underlying elements and the connection of those elements, related to a particular form of consumer behaviour. ZMET seeks to understand the images and associations that underpin both spoken and tacit thoughts and feelings through the elicitation of both rational and emotional thinking.

Indirect projective techniques aim to project the participant's motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings onto ambiguous situations. Projective techniques may be classified as association (word association), completion (sentence completion, story completion), construction (picture response, cartoon tests) and expressive (role playing, third-person, personification) techniques. Projective techniques are particularly useful when participants are unwilling or unable to provide the required information by direct methods.



The qualitative researcher needs to develop an understanding of the interplay between characteristics of the target participants, the issues they will be questioned about and the context in which they will be questioned. The context can be broken down into the physical location of the interview and the protocol of starting, running and terminating the interview. Building up this understanding is vital to the success of conducting in-depth interviews and projective techniques in international markets.

The marketing research industry is concerned about how qualitative research participants are handled in interviews and observations. More consumers are being questioned in both domestic and business scenarios. If they are to 'open up' and reveal deeply held feelings, perhaps in front of a group of strangers, or if they are to take part in projective techniques that they may see as being unorthodox, they have to be reassured of how the data captured will be used.

The Internet has opened up many possibilities to conduct in-depth interviews and use projective techniques on a global basis. A rich dialogue between an interviewer and a participant can be developed and recorded with much lower cost and time demands when compared with meeting face to face. The loss of subtle eye contact and body language can be a price to pay for the savings afforded by using the Internet.

## Questions



- 1 What is an in-depth interview? Summarise the process of administering an in-depth interview.
- 2 What are the major advantages of in-depth interviews?
- 3 What are the requirements of the researcher undertaking in-depth interviews? Why are these requirements particularly important when conducting interviews with managers?
- 4 Why may a structure be applied to the in-depth interview in the form of laddering or the repertory grid technique?
- 5 Describe the process of administering the repertory grid technique.
- 6 Evaluate the context and timing requirements that you think would be needed to make the repertory grid technique work.
- 7 Choose any particular application of an in-depth interview and present a case for why you think the technique may work much better than a focus group.
- 8 What are projective techniques? Under what circumstances should projective techniques be used?
- 9 Describe the word association technique. Give an example of a situation in which this technique is especially useful.
- 10 Describe the story completion technique. Give an example of the type of participant and the context in which such a technique would work.
- 11 Describe the criteria by which marketing researchers may evaluate the relative worth of qualitative techniques.
- 12 Why is the context of questioning particularly important when conducting in-depth interviews in international marketing research?
- 13 Why may in-depth interviews or projective techniques upset or disturb participants?
- 14 Describe a projective technique that you feel would work particularly well by email – without the use of webcams.
- 15 What limitations are there to conducting in-depth interviews by email, compared with meeting participants face to face?



## Exercises



- 1 Could an in-depth interview about the phenomenon of Internet casinos be conducted via the Internet? Present a case for how you would conduct such interviews and set out what you see as the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.
- 2 Baileys Irish Cream wishes to understand something of the nuances of serving and enjoying its drink. Develop a cartoon test for this purpose.
- 3 A cosmetics firm would like to increase its penetration of the student market through a new range of organic and 'ethical' products. Conduct two experimental in-depth interviews with a male and female student. Write a report setting out plans for any subsequent form of in-depth interviews and associated techniques, showing how the experimental interviews have impacted upon these plans.
- 4 Jeffery West shoes ([www.jeffery-west.co.uk](http://www.jeffery-west.co.uk)) wishes to develop an understanding of its brand personality. Design a role-playing scenario that will help to achieve this aim. Who would you invite to the sessions? Where would you run the sessions? What roles would you ask the participants to play?
- 5 In a small group discuss the following issues: 'Are there any dangers (for researchers and participants) in conducting in-depth studies on issues that participants hardly reflect upon on a day-to-day basis?' and 'Projective techniques cannot work well with shy and introverted participants.'

## Notes

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