

ONE

Epistemological Dimensions in Qualitative Research: the Construction of Knowledge Online

Overview: this chapter introduces the aims of the book. In doing so, it explores how the advent of the Internet has inspired new ways of thinking about the nature of qualitative inquiry and how research is conducted using different methods of data collection. It takes up the theoretical concerns about how knowledge is constructed in qualitative research and the potential this holds for online interviewing. Finally, the chapter concludes by providing an overview of the chapters to follow.

Introduction

In a matter of very few years, the Internet has consolidated itself as a powerful platform that has changed the way individuals communicate. In 2007, there were 1.24 billion Internet users (Burkeman, 2008). The Internet has become the universal source of information for millions of people, at home, at school, and at work. It has had significant impact on the conditions of social interaction and the way in which individuals construct the reality of everyday lives. It has reconfigured the way in which individuals communicate and connect with each other. The 'trajectory of acquaintanceship development' has become such that individuals can now first get to know each other online through chat rooms, before using other media such as email, telephone and face-to-face contact (Zhao, 2006: 471). There has been a rapid increase in websites such as Youtube, MySpace, Facebook and blogs of many descriptions, that allow people to present themselves, create presentations of themselves, present their views and invite the views of others. Such websites also offer opportunities for 'social networking' and they are clearly reshaping the way in which news and views are gathered and disseminated (Goodfellow, 2007).

Coinciding with the global expansion of the Internet, is its popularisation as a research medium for the collection of primary data, as seen in marketing research and the field of communications and media research. More recently, the Internet has been used as a research medium in the social sciences, opening up innovative ways for researchers to examine human inter/actions

and experiences in new contexts. Consequently, there has been a growth of literature discussing the Internet as a tool for research. Over the last decade there has been a number of ground-breaking books including Jones (1999) *Doing Internet Research*, an edited collection of studies which examined Internet research methods, Mann and Stewart (2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research* and Hine (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. These texts have examined the impact of Internet technology as both a medium for collecting data, and a product of culture that infiltrates other spaces and times of its participants. Further, virtual training packages such as that developed by Madge et al. (2006) have been critical in enhancing users' understanding of both qualitative and quantitative online research methods.

Advances in Internet technology have offered researchers innovative approaches to online research in the social sciences (Jankowski and van Selm, 2005). The Internet has had considerable affect on the way in which qualitative inquiry takes place in the social sciences. In particular, it has altered the nature of context in which research takes place, and knowledge is constructed. 'Electronic virtuality is now embedded within actuality in a more dispersed and active way than ever before' (Hammersley, 2006: 8).

The Internet has offered researchers exciting possibilities to explore and understand human experience by taking conventional research designs and methods and adapting them for the virtual environment. Hine (2005: 5) has commented that: 'Research on the "Internet" is marked as a distinct topic worthy of specific note by the introduction of new epithets to familiar methods.' The Internet offers a different space and dimension in which familiar research methods can be used to allow researchers to write about who their participants are, and what they know. Further 'Each manifestation of these technologies of mediation presents opportunities for the evolution of those traditional methods of social investigation' (Stewart and Williams, 2005: 396).

The Internet has greatly expanded the possibilities of conducting research with individuals and communities, providing a virtual social arena where practices, meanings and identities can intermingle between researchers and participants in ways that may not be possible in the real world (Dominguez et al., 2007). This raises questions around how researchers:

- (i) Enter the virtual world to collect and communicate participants' experiences.
- (ii) Understand experience, and explain how they know what they know in the virtual world.
- (iii) Ensure that such knowledge is adequate and legitimate, given the social, cultural and legal terrain of the Internet.

This book examines such issues by focusing on the use of interviewing as an online method of qualitative inquiry. The online interview presents both methodological and ethical potential and versatility in social science research. It also presents methodological and ethical challenges that need to be addressed when using the Internet to conduct research.

Constructing Knowledge in Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research recognises the importance of value and context, setting and the participants' frames of reference. Further, the way in which the researcher and participant enter and communicate the research field is a vital and influential element of the research process and its outcomes. Research that is conducted using qualitative methods acknowledges the existence and study of the interplay of multiple views and voice. It also allows for the construction of reality and knowledge to be mapped out. Yet, this knowledge cannot be understood without understanding the meaning that individuals attribute to that knowledge – their thoughts, feelings beliefs and actions (Illingworth, 2006). The construction of knowledge in qualitative research is related to the philosophical underpinnings that researchers choose whether the methods of data collection in that research are used on site or in an online site.

In trying to make sense of social reality, no grand method or theory has a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge (Richardson, 1997: 121). Researchers engage in the practical activities of generating and interpreting data to answer questions about the meaning of what their participants know and do. They can do this using a wide range of methods including ethnography, life history work and narrative inquiry to study '... *first hand* what people do and say in particular contexts' (Hammersley, 2006: 4). To do this, researchers' practice will be underpinned by epistemological stances that provide a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible, and how researchers can ensure they are both adequate and legitimate (Maynard, 1994: 10). There is a range of epistemologies as briefly summarised in Table 1.1 that highlight how knowledge can be generated. These stances are reflected in qualitative research methodologies and methods that researchers employ.

Table 1.1 Three epistemologies

<i>Objectivism</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>	<i>Subjectivism</i>
Meaning and meaningful reality exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness. In this epistemology, of what it means to know, understanding and values are considered objectified in the people researchers study. Using appropriate methods researchers can discover objective truth.	Constructivism rejects the objectivist view of human knowledge. Truth or meaning is constructed not discovered. People may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomena. There can be no unmediated grasp of the social world that exists independently of the researcher and all claims to knowledge take place within a particular conceptual framework.	Evident in structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist thinking. Meaning does not emerge from the interaction between the object and the subject; it is imposed on the object by the subject.

Source: Crotty (1998).

Epistemology has considerable bearing on the way researchers undertake their research projects. Some researchers interested in the social world are critical of the objectivism found in positivist and post-positivist stances that apply the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond (see Bryman, 2004 for a more detailed discussion of objectivism). Instead, researchers have argued for the need to focus social inquiry on understanding subjective meanings and values of individual actions. Such a stance can be linked to Max Weber's (1864–1920) *Verstehen* (understanding). To find meaning in action, requires researchers to interpret in a particular way what individuals are doing (Schwandt, 2000: 191). This process of interpretation can be differently represented through hermeneutics, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. These philosophical or theoretical positions embrace different perspectives on the aims of understanding human action, different ethical commitments, and methodological and epistemological issues (Schwandt, 2000: 190). These philosophies provide a lens through which researchers can examine the research process and data. The kind of lens researchers choose to work with will influence how they view and make sense of the social world as a researcher. Table 1.2 gives an overview of these philosophies that provide different ways of addressing what individuals are doing or saying. It can also be used to explain the aims and methods of qualitative inquiry.

Table 1.2 Philosophical assumptions in the generation of knowledge in qualitative research

<i>Phenomenology</i>	<i>Hermeneutics</i>	<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>
Human behaviour is a product of how individuals interpret the world. The aim is to grasp and understand how individuals come to interpret theirs and others actions meaningfully. It requires researchers to engage with phenomena and make sense of them directly and immediately.	Meaning is participative and thus cannot be produced by the researcher. The point is not to reveal truth but to engage with the effects of tradition in a dialogical encounter with what is not understood and clarify the conditions in which understanding may take place, and thus disclose meaning.	Interaction takes place in such a way that the individual continually interprets the symbolic meaning of his/her environment. Researchers catch the process of interpretation through which individuals construct their actions.

Source: Crotty (1998).

There are parallels between these stances and each will have distinctive epistemological concerns for the qualitative researcher, and different ways of addressing those concerns. At the very least, researchers have to decide on what is or should be regarded as acceptable knowledge. In doing so they should consider:

- (i) How to define what 'understanding' means and how to justify claims to understand.
- (ii) How to conceive and frame the research project.
- (iii) How to occupy the ethical space where researcher and participant relate to one another in a project.

(Schwandt, 2000: 200)

As social scientists, understanding the contexts and actions in which people live out their lives is important for making sense of the discourses they construct. Qualitative research does not have to carry with it fixed epistemological implications. Researchers have to decide what knowledge they want to gather about the social world and how, but epistemological assumptions, values and methods may be inextricably intertwined.

This also applies to research on the Internet where people's everyday multiple realities are spatial and temporal. Advocates of postmodernism see the Internet as a blurring of the distinction between the virtual and the real world. This has created both hyper-reality and hyper-identity, leading to a loss of distinctions and consequent sense of fragmentation (Maclure, 1995). The Internet has altered the realities of everyday lives in which individuals interact with each other. It has been substantially broadened to include '... social phenomena of massive time-space extension' (Giddens, 1984: 85). The advent of modernity has increasingly torn space away from place by 'fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction' (Giddens, 1990: 18–19). Online, participants can take on meaningful and multiple identities in ways never before possible, leading to fundamental shifts in how individuals create, experience and understand identity (Turkle, 1995). The Internet, then, can provide a way of ordering human activity in the social world (Cavanagh, 2007: 146). The emergence of email, instant messaging, and chat rooms as well as online public domains has altered the possibilities, scope and general basis of knowledge. This has implications for the nature of reality and existence in the social world and the nature of relationships that exist between individuals/communities. To understand reality and being in the virtual world, researchers can now look at humans as they are online (Capurro and Pringle, 2002). It is now possible for individuals who have never met face-to-face to have intimate, mutual knowledge through frequent online interactions (Zhao, 2006: 465). Participants and researchers from distant locations and diverse cultural backgrounds can come to know each other too, and construct meanings without ever seeing each other (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004).

The Internet, despite the absence of face-to-face interactions, creates a setting for research purposes and provides considerable opportunities to study the world beyond reach from the point of view of individuals and groups (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). In naturalistic settings, such as virtual communities, researchers can gain knowledge about the meaning of action taking place.

This approach emphasises the aims of interpretive research to study 'participants' ideas, attitudes, motives and intentions, and the way they interpret the social world' (Foster, 1996: 61), whether or not participants are online. It can empower participants to engage in action as individuals, and as members of a virtual community. Further, a researcher can join participants in these communities to explore how they co-construct their world in the circumstances in which they find themselves. As researchers immerse themselves in virtual communities to discover insightful findings about participants' private lives and social worlds, conversations about these lives can be broadened and democratised, rather than simply becoming records of human experience.

Researchers can acquire, explain and understand their participants' online experiences through a dialogic and reflexive encounter. This can become part of the interpretive act itself and the ongoing development of participants' viewpoints during the telling of experience. This process can be enhanced by researchers embracing both temporal and contextual dimensions of individuals' experiences (Illingworth, 2006). Adopting this approach broadly reflects the hermeneutical position. It allows time and space to explore what is not understood as well as clarifying the conditions in which understanding has taken place, and thus disclose meaning. Through this process, the meaning of conversation and interaction can be negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation, rather than simply discovered. From this perspective, on the construction of knowledge, participants and researchers work together to construct understandings of the situations in which participants are living and working. Participants become co-constructors of knowledge of the situations which they inhabit as well as interpreters of the knowledge about a situation which emerges during the course of a research project. Researchers can gain a richer understanding of the practices of cultural and social life by examining the interrelationship between people, places and practices (Rybas and Gajjala, 2007). It illustrates the significance of the context of communication, paying attention to 'where' and 'how' (Illingworth, 2006).

Embracing the hermeneutic stance means researchers not only have to understand the context of shared meanings or practices that shape actions, but individual perspectives of the situation being investigated. Social actions cannot be extracted from, nor exist independently of, their context. However, the meanings that researchers draw from such contexts does demand caution as to whether knowledge generated in one context will be applicable to others (Doherty, 2007: 5). The stance may then pose a number of challenges for online researchers. The meanings that participants and researchers bring to the shared context of online interactions may be affected by the connections of time and space which occur differently in face-to-face interactions. This means that researchers need to build a detailed account of the online context. In face-to-face qualitative research the physical, visual and embodied ways of knowing provide a legitimate means to identify and explain the epistemological stance

that researchers adopt. When interviews are conducted online, these frames of reference are lost, leading to reliance on the written word. Whether online research is composed asynchronously or synchronously the construction of knowledge will occur through textual means of representation (Doherty, 2007: 6). Methodologically, researchers may need to consider other factors that can shape participants' perspectives such as biographies and identities.

Yet, the text-based temporal and spatial nature of virtual communication means that researchers can 'collect rich data about the subjective self, a self accessed in what may be experienced as an almost transparent process of relating to one's own consciousness' (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 95). This can lead to a 'textual reflexivity' that reveals the 'text as much more – and also much less – than just a transparent representation of "the way things are"' (Stones, 1996: 97). This can encourage participants to engage in a more expansive discussion, and give online researchers an insight into the frames that participants use to constitute their reality, and the complexities of human expression. However, from a social constructivist position, such texts are devoid of meaning in their own right. Meaning is a process that is socially determined. It cannot exist independently of the interpreter and so all claims to knowledge will occur in a particular conceptual framework. Knowing is not passive. Individuals make knowledge and make sense of it. Meaning is constructed through the world and objects in the world (Illingworth, 2006).

All these challenges (and opportunities) raise questions about the nature of research practice that is adopted by online researchers to capture such sources of knowledge. Some researchers have argued in favour of an epistemology and ontology of research that stresses 'the hybrid and unfinished character of cyberspace ...' (Teli et al., 2007). In other words, if researchers are to understand life online, they have to understand that participants' experiences are connected and shaped by cultural and social elements that are both real and virtual, public and private and online and offline. To capture this connectedness suggests a methodology that can research the connected spaces – the real-contexts and actions of the research participants and their exploits online.

Methods of Data Collection in the Construction of Knowledge: Face-to-face and Online Interviewing

Knowledge in qualitative research is constructed through the social processes of researchers engaging with the other participants in their studies. Research using qualitative methods are closely linked to researchers' different visions of how social reality should be studied, and what can be regarded as acceptable knowledge (Bryman, 2004). In the construction of knowledge, social scientists have viewed the face-to-face encounter as the optimal way to actively engage with research participants in qualitative research (Seymour, 2001). It has been

perceived as the most powerful way in which researchers can seek to gain an understanding of how people construct their lives and the stories they tell about them (Fontana and Frey, 2003). When researcher and participant(s) meet face-to-face, physical and visual interaction can provide detail on each others' identity and about the situation eliciting the emotion (Sade-Beck, 2004). The presence of verbal and non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, postures and emotional mannerisms all add a further layer to individuals' social presence, and to the social interaction taking place. In the exchange of such cues, researcher and participant(s) can observe each others' behaviours and attributes.

In these face-to-face encounters, researchers use a variety of research methods to study everyday life and social interactions, to reveal the rich symbolic world that underlies needs, desires, meanings and choice (see for example Oakley, 1984; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998; Flick, 2002). Such methods are designed to develop 'an analytic understanding of individual's perspectives, activities and actions ... that are likely to be different from, perhaps even in conflict with, how the people themselves see the world' (Hammersley, 2006: 5). Further, the use of multiple methods such as case studies, personal experience and stories and visual texts to describe moments and meanings in individual lives, allows researchers to collect rich, descriptive and contextually situated data in order to seek understandings of human experience or relationships within a community or culture (Silverman, 1999).

The use of qualitative interviews in the social sciences has led to a broad range of discussions about how such interviews are designed and used as a method of data collection, and where they are located epistemologically and methodologically. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) argue that this has created an 'interview society' in which there is, 'a commitment to and reliance on the interview to produce narrative experience ...' (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 63). Interviews as social arenas provide both vehicles and sites through which people construct and contest explications for their views and actions (Foucault, 1977). These arenas can include both group and individual interviews that produce a wealth of data about people's experiences, thoughts and feelings from their perspective. These methods then can become the site for the construction, interpretation, understanding and representation of experience.

Constructing knowledge in online research takes many forms. To date, social scientists have explored how traditional qualitative methods of research can be utilised and adapted in the virtual arena to examine how they make and validate knowledge as well as what that knowledge is. Researchers can engage in one-to-one interviews or with participants in groups to investigate the social processes of existing online communities. For example, Bampton and Cowton (2002) used email to interview teachers about their experiences of teaching management accounting in higher education (HE). Hinton-Smith (2006) also used email to explore the experiences of lone parents as HE

students. Addrianssens and Cadman (1999) set up an asynchronous focus group study to explore the launch of an online market share-trading platform in the UK, in which questions were emailed to the participants. Finally, O'Connor and Madge (2001) employed conferencing software in connection with a virtual synchronous focus group study on the use of online information for parents.

In their studies, these researchers were faced with the epistemological challenge of understanding human action and experience, as well as understanding the importance of context, setting and participants' frames of reference. They were also faced with ethical and methodological tensions and decisions about the impact of the Internet on what their participants said, how it was said, and on the method and practice of online interviewing. Such research involved an 'epistemology of doing' (Teli, 2007) that emphasised the doing of technology, sustained interaction, and being online in order that the researchers could understand the everyday practices associated with the context. 'Typing and posting oneself into existence, researchers can earn the code, build communities, and collaborate with others.' (Teli, *ibid*) Researchers then can also become included in the epistemological space of the practice under investigation.

Advocates for social constructionism and philosophical hermeneutics might agree that individuals are 'self interpreting human beings and that language constitutes this being' (Schwandt, 2000: 198). However, hermeneutics take this a step further by trusting in the potential of language (conversation) and interpretive practice to disclose meaning that emerges within the dialogic encounter. This allows for the exploration of being (Illingworth, 2006) using qualitative research methods that draw on the interplay of making sense of, and interpreting, participants' voices and stories to construct knowledge of the dynamics of that situation. The unique strengths of qualitative methods of data collection are their ability to search for a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences (Illingworth, 2006). Table 1.3 examines this issue in more detail by comparing the processes of knowledge construction in online as opposed to face-to-face interviews.

As can be seen, the characteristics of both online and face-to-face interviews suggest that online interviewing will not be appropriate for all qualitative research. The methods should be considered based on the topic being investigated, how knowledge is to be generated and which methods are really best equipped to get at answers researchers are looking for (Baym, 2005: 231).

Conclusion

What is required is an explicit and sustained theoretical investigation regarding the ethical, methodological and epistemological challenges and possibilities that online research methods present when used to collect qualitative data.

Table 1.3 The processes of knowledge construction in online and face-to-face interviews

	<i>Online interviews</i>	<i>Face-to-face interviews</i>
Cost	Cheaper to conduct. There is no need for transcription as there is a continuous and visible record of the interview.	Greater costs incurred, for example travelling to location for interviews and transcription costs.
Access	<p>However online interviews from home require considerable commitment from participants if they have to remain online for extended periods of time.</p> <p>Allows access to individual/groups not possible to reach/interview by telephone or face-to-face interview or have geographically distant location.</p> <p>However, only people with access to the Internet and/or have experience of online facilities/keyboard skills will be able to participate, particularly in synchronous focus groups.</p> <p>Asynchronous interviews are non-real-time and seen as an important part of online interaction.</p>	<p>Easier to exclude certain individuals/groups because they are geographically dispersed, marginalised or disabled.</p> <p>It may be more difficult for participants with language/communication barriers to become involved in the research.</p> <p>Real-time. The immediacy of social presence that takes places when researchers and participants meet is a critical part of the research relationship.</p>
Temporal dimension	Synchronous interviews are real-time.	The notion of social space includes temporal, physical, intellectual and interpersonal relationships. Focus groups can compound the effects of such factors, for example by individuals displaying particular attitudes, positions or status differences in front of other group participants.
Nature and speed of response	In asynchronous interviews, participants can reread what they have previously written, reflect on and consider their responses, enriching the text. However, there is also a greater risk of non-response. In synchronous interviews responses are spontaneous.	Researchers and participants can spontaneously share place and time to produce sensitive and in-depth data that reflects the interests of both. Non-response is also easier to observe.

Table 1.3 (Continued)

	Online interviews	Face-to-face interviews
Time	<p>Provides the possibility to interview more than one participant/group at a time.</p> <p>Asynchronous interviews can take several days/weeks. Synchronous interviews will be constrained by time.</p> <p>However, external distractions can interrupt the flow of the online interview, of which the researcher may be unaware, resulting in the participant's temporary or prolonged disengagement with the interview.</p> <p>Email/discussion board.</p>	<p>Constrained by time pressures. But participants show less tendency to terminate the interview as and when they wish.</p>
Venue and participation	<p>The long period of asynchronous interviews can aid collection of in-depth data as it involves repeated interactions and closer reflection of interview issues. However, in asynchronous interviews that can continue for weeks, the researcher has to work hard to maintain rapport and probing</p>	<p>Venue plays an important part in influencing the interview process, taking place in settings that may involve the participant's home, the researcher's institution or more neutral sites in which the researcher has a physical presence.</p> <p>Situating discourse within the physical location that is familiar to participants may enhance their willingness to disclose and hence the richness of data gathered.</p> <p>Visual and verbal cues are important social signals in face-to-face interviews and can establish rapport with the participant(s) especially if the participants are unknown to the researcher.</p>
Quality of data		

(Continued)

Table 1.3 (Continued)

	Online interviews	Face-to-face interviews
	<p>as it easier for participants to ignore requests for further information especially if they do not wish to open up. In synchronous interviews the interaction and sharing of experiences is framed by researcher's and participant(s)' online presence.</p> <p>Interviews do not have to be recorded thus eliminating participants' apprehension about speaking and being recorded. Transcripts are more likely to be accurate as participants can read what they have previously written in their responses and text cannot be misheard. However, conversational elements of simple gestures (nodding, agreeing, eye contact) have to be translated into text.</p> <p>Reduces if not eliminates researcher/participant effects that result from visual/verbal cues or status difference (age, gender, voice, dress, disabilities, gestures).</p> <p>Participants can use pseudonyms so that their identity can be concealed from others. This may make it easier to discuss more sensitive topics or state unpopular views.</p> <p>Guaranteeing participant confidentiality is more difficult to achieve especially in synchronous interviews, where postings and group discussions cannot prevent identification of the author of the message by others in the group.</p>	<p>Interviews do not have to be recorded but this can affect the quality of the data in terms of breadth and depth. However there are greater opportunities for probing as it less difficult for participants to ignore/forget about requests for more information.</p> <p>Visual/verbal and status differences are present and may discourage/eliminate participants from taking part because of speech and mobility disabilities, or because they are shy/self-conscious.</p> <p>Participants may be less willing to discuss sensitive/personal topics because of the physical presence of the researcher.</p>
Identity and confidentiality		

This book seeks to provide that investigation, with specific focus on online interviewing. It discusses how knowledge is constructed in this disembodied, anonymous and textual environment, and how that environment affects research relationships when the visual and verbal clues present in face-to-face conversations are absent. In part, we have drawn on our own research studies to illustrate this. In addition, we have drawn on a wide range of research studies to stimulate ongoing debate and reflection about online interviewing. We too, are active qualitative researchers who have acquired our Internet expertise through our involvement in two separate studies using email interviewing to understand the narratives through which our participants expressed their perspectives of their work experiences and identities (Busher, 2001; James, 2003).

The preceding discussion suggests the Internet has the potential to open up a deeper view of life that is derived from real events and feelings as conversations, as well as exposing those experiences, which might otherwise not be heard or read. Researchers can draw on the observations of the rich and complex online lives of their participants to understand cultural meaning and highlight the complexity of daily social experience through online discourse, and analyse situated behaviour (Wyn and Katz, 1997; Mann and Stewart, 2000). This has implications for 'how' and 'where' knowledge is constructed by individuals and, as researchers, how we make sense of social reality (Illingworth, 2006). Chapter Two continues the examination of tensions in the construction of knowledge by discussing the nature of online relationships and interactions and how individuals acquire knowledge of each other.

In the conduct of online research, the researcher is presented with many methodological tensions because of its complex, diffuse and multi-faceted structure (Jones, 1999). Chapters Three and Four examine the methodological and theoretical implications of developing qualitative research projects using online interviews, not only in terms of issues around design, but in terms of shifting boundaries and the nature *and* displacement of time and space.

Chapter Five will explore how researchers need to reflect ethically upon their research practice, the nature of online interactions with participants, and the impacts of these practices and interactions on those being researched. Qualitative research is highly personal and more contextual than quantitative research, and so the integrity of the researcher is crucial. Further, it is a holistic process in which participants share experiences and perspectives with researchers. When face-to-face contact is absent it is important to consider how such a situation could affect participants. This makes it difficult for researchers to be sure about the authenticity and identity of online contributions beyond what they are told by their participants (Hammersley, 2006: 8). This also suggests a situation in which participants are unsure about what to expect in online settings. Such issues will be examined in Chapter Six, particularly the challenges of constructing credible and authentic research when all or part of the data is collected online. Chapter Seven explores issues around power

relations. It will discuss whether online settings can provide an arena in which both researchers and participants can exercise power and authority in the construction and explication of their views and actions.

Chapter Eight examines the dilemmas in understanding online communities and their cultures, of constructing qualitative data as ‘text’ and the implications of such text for analysis not only in terms of content, but also on those individuals who have produced it. Chapter Nine extends this discussion by exploring how researchers can present data in an effort to find satisfactory boundaries between the private and public, and whether the text should become meaningful in the public sphere.

The final chapter, Chapter Ten, concludes by bringing together the practical implications raised throughout the previous discussions in the book. It will consider how online researchers might tackle the epistemological and methodological challenges and exciting opportunities facing them in the construction of online research methods, such as interviews.

From the above discussion, it is evident that researchers using the Internet to conduct online interviews face some serious epistemological, methodological and ethical questions in their research practice. The online setting does differ from the face-to-face and this has important implications for the research process in terms of time and space constraints, modes of communication supported, and a blurred distinction between public and private domains. Together, with our and other studies discussed in this book, we hope our experiences will offer an invaluable basis for extending discussion, debate and innovation about such issues, in the conduct of Internet-based online interviews.

Practical Points for Online Researchers

- Think about the implications of epistemology for your research practice.
- Decide what kind of knowledge you want to gather about the online world you are researching.
- Consider how you will justify your philosophical stance in online research.
- Think about how you are going to enter the online setting, the context of interaction and how you will communicate participants’ experiences.

Suggested Further Reading

- Campbell, D.T. (1998) *Methodology and Epistemology for Social Science, Selected Papers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research: Meanings and Perspectives in the Research Process*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gilbert, N. (2008) *Researching Social Life*. London: Sage Publications.