



Ethics in Social Research: the views of research participants

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Summary

Chapter 1 Introduction

- This study sought to look at research ethics from the perspective of research participants and to identify their ethical requirements. The study was funded by the Government Social Research Unit, in collaboration with HM Revenue and Customs, Scottish Executive, Department for Transport, Department for Communities and Local Government and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- The study began with a literature review (published separately, Graham, Lewis & Nicholaas, 2006) and involved 50 in-depth interviews with adults who had recently participated in research carried out by NatCen. Ten participants in each of five studies were interviewed, including both qualitative and quantitative studies. The original interviews are referred to here as the 'main interview'. Participants were selected to represent diversity in geographical location, age, gender and ethnicity. Follow up interviews were conducted within two weeks of the main interview.

Chapter 2 Talking about ethics

- Some participants had ready definitions of ethics, others expressed themselves more uncertainly or had no understanding of the term. Four types of meaning of ethics emerged at the outset of the Ethics in Social Research interviews: respect; morality, integrity and probity; acting beyond self interest; and following procedures.
- By the end of the Ethics in Social Research interview a wider set of issues had emerged based on people's own experiences of their main interview:

Before the interview	During the interview	After the interview
Unpressurised decision-making about taking part	Being able to exercise the right not to answer a question or to say more than they want to	Right to privacy and anonymity respected in storage, access and reporting of the research
Research is independent and legitimate	An unpressurised pace, time to think	Unbiased and accurate research and reporting
Knowing why they were selected to be approached	Feeling comfortable and at ease, valued and respected, not intimidated or judged	Opportunity for feedback on findings and use
Clear and worthwhile objective, purpose and intended use	Opportunity for self-expression and for own views to be recorded	Use is actually made of the research for wider social benefit
Knowing what to expect and being able to prepare especially in terms of the coverage and questioning style	Questions are relevant, not repetitive, clear	
Openness, honesty, and correcting misunderstandings	Left without negative feelings about participation	

Chapter 3 Decision making and information needs

- There were clear differences in how much people recalled about what they had been told and when, before they took part in main interviews. Having multiple opportunities for information acquisition emerged as important.
- However, the dominant pattern was of quick decision-making about participation, at the point when people were first approached. This was generally not problematic, although some people felt on reflection that they had made the decision too hastily. The speed of decision-making is particularly significant as once people had said they would take part they generally felt a high level of commitment, despite knowing they could change their mind.
- Four groups of people were identified based on the speed of their decision and the factors on which it was based. These were those who had a clear motivation to participate; those who had an absence of disinclination; participants for whom some reassurance or persuasion had been required; and a small group who experienced a sense of compulsion, based either on an initial misunderstanding of the study or a sense of social obligation.
- The information people received played an important part in their decision-making. However, decisions were also in part based on assumptions formed about the research, which were not checked out in advance. This highlights that the research relationship is based to a large degree on trust.

Chapter 4 The Interview Interaction

- The interview interaction, and in particular the relationship with the interviewer, was central to participants' experiences. People looked to interviewers to help them to feel 'comfortable'. Being interviewed was an unfamiliar experience and people had little sense of what to expect. Being at ease was also important for the quality of data – it helped people answer honestly and influenced how much information was shared. It was also important to participants to feel that they and their input were valued by the interviewer, that the pace of the interview was unhurried and that interviewers were non-judgemental. Participants generally constructed a somewhat passive and circumscribed role for themselves.
- Alongside the interviewer's behaviour and characteristics, reactions to questions and questioning style were an important component of the interaction. Key issues were the extent to which the interview gave scope for self expression, and the relevance of the questions asked. More negative reactions to questions and style could be mediated by a skilful interviewer.
- There was very limited awareness of and engagement with what happens to data after the interview, particularly what analysis and reporting might involve. What was clearer was an understanding that findings would be shared with whoever commissioned the research and would be used to bring about change. There was a strong interest in feedback, particularly to demonstrate that the research had been used but also to compare their own responses with those of other people.

Chapter 5 Key Aspects of the Interview Experience

- Participants fell into three groups in relation to controlling the information given during interviews: those who saw no reason to have withheld, those who gave some thought to withholding but did not in practice and a third group who had withheld information during their interview. The dominant reason for either withholding or considering doing so was perceived lack of relevance, but the

sensitivity of questions was also involved. Barriers and facilitators to controlling information-giving during the interview work in subtle ways. Some factors that make it easy to withhold information, such as awareness of the voluntary nature of giving information or a good rapport in the interview, can also encourage people to say more.

- People understood confidentiality in a variety of ways, but most did not have a wide and detailed understanding. The picture seems to be one where people are much reassured by confidentiality assurances without having particularly clear requirements themselves.
- Both negative and positive footprints were experienced as a result of research participation. Positive footprints were generally described in stronger terms, and negative as usually milder and short lived. The footprints experienced were largely driven by participants' experiences of three things: how enjoyable the interview interaction had been, the perceived value of the research, and the presence or absence of any concerns about confidentiality.

Chapter 6 Discussion

- Participants' ethical requirements are not fundamentally in conflict with researcher's conceptions of ethics. But there are different emphases and sometimes a tension between participants' preferences and data quality or response rates.
- Research practice needs to reflect participants' perspectives but it also needs to reflect the requirements of robust research data. The findings suggest that good ethical practice requires reflexive approaches to research that consider the impact on participants, rather than prescriptive or bureaucratic procedures.
- Researchers place emphasis on consent as an ongoing process but participants often make quick decisions, before they have all the information. This raises questions about how to provide information and help people prepare for the interview.
- Taking part in research is often an unfamiliar experience and this seems to make it hard for people to engage very actively with it. There is a stronger emphasis in their discourses on trust rather than rights and requirements. Assumptions are made which are not checked out and it seems hard for people to assess or evaluate what they are told about research procedures because research is unfamiliar and technical. There is scope for researchers to encourage a more active and empowered engagement with research.
- The role of the interviewer is critical and has important implications for who should carry out interviews and for how they should be trained and supported.
- The differences between qualitative and quantitative studies are more muted than might be expected. What seems more meaningful is how sensitive or personal the subject matter is. Rather than creating new ethical requirements, sensitive topics place particular emphasis on voluntariness in participation, being mentally prepared for the interview, the scope for self expression, confidentiality and the scope to withhold information.
- There is an emphasis on research being used and leading to wider benefit. This underlines that the research relationship is tri-partite, involving participant, researcher and funder. Funders too have responsibilities.

- This study also highlights the importance of returning to the research field to see what footprints the research has left, and incorporating the lessons into future research practice. There is a need for more research on participants' perspectives, using a wider range of approaches and exploring experiences of different research methods, and different research populations.

Introduction

1.1 Background and objectives

Ethics have long been seen as sitting at the heart of good research practice. However, it would be difficult not to have noticed an increased emphasis on research ethics in recent years. For example, the Social Research Association (SRA) has updated their ethical guidelines, the British Sociological Association has published a Statement of Ethical Practice, a European ethical code for socio-economic research has been developed, the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU) has produced guidance on Ethical Assurance For Social Research In Government, a Research Ethics Framework has been produced by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and the Scottish Executive is currently developing new guidance for staff and researchers. There have also been initiatives revising the ethical review procedures conducted by the NHS Central Office of Research Ethics Committees (COREC) and increasing pressure for a review of research ethics procedures within universities (e.g. Tinker & Coomber, 2004).

What is striking however is that the debate about research ethics is not underpinned by much empirical research with actual or potential research participants. The voice of research participants, or of the general public, is largely absent. The aim of the Ethics in Social Research study was therefore:

- to look at research ethics from the perspectives of participants in research
- to identify their ethical requirements through exploring their experiences of taking part in research.

NatCen approached GSRU with the idea of a study and was encouraged to submit a detailed proposal which GSRU agreed to fund in collaboration with HM Revenue and Customs, Scottish Executive, Department for Transport, Department for Communities and Local Government and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. An Advisory Group was also set up with representatives of the funding bodies, from the SRA, the ESRC Research Methods Programme and INVOLVE (which aims to promote and support active public involvement in NHS, public health and social care research), and academics.

1.2 The study design

1.2.1 Literature review

The study began with a literature review which focused on studies generating empirical data on participants' ethical perspectives on interview-based research. Twenty texts were reviewed, and the literature review has been published in full (Graham, Lewis & Nicholaas, 2006). The literature review confirmed the absence of a substantial literature on research participants' perspectives on ethics. In particular, the texts reviewed all focused on a single study and explored specific issues of the study conduct rather than ethics more broadly. Many used structured methods, sometimes incorporated into the interview itself, and almost all were carried out by the original study team and interviewers. The review also highlighted the need for more exploration particularly of information requirements for informed consent and how they impact on the interview experience, meanings of confidentiality, and the interview as an interaction (issues such as the relationship with the interviewer, experiences of questions, and controlling information giving).

1.2.2 The Ethics in Social Research interviews

The Ethics in Social Research study involved 50 in-depth interviews with people who had recently participated in interview-based research carried out by NatCen. Ten participants in each of five studies were interviewed. Three of the studies had used quantitative methods and two had used qualitative methods. We use the term 'main studies' and 'main study interview' in describing these.

The main studies

All the main studies involved adult participants since it was felt that children's research participation would need to be the subject of a separate study. The main studies were selected to be diverse in terms of their topic area, funder, population and approach to sampling. Studies which required COREC approval or interviews with professional groups were excluded, and longitudinal studies were only included if the Ethics in Social Research interview occurred after the last wave or at least eight months before the next wave. It was decided that none of the main studies should involve anyone from the Ethics in Social Research research team. In one case, both the qualitative and the quantitative elements of a research programme were included, to facilitate explorations of interview mode effects.

The five main studies were:

- People, Families and Communities Survey: conducted for the Home Office with a general population sample and a boost sample of people from minority ethnic groups. The interview asked about views and experiences of local communities and also included questions about perceptions of race relations. It is a time series survey so changes to the questionnaire are kept to a minimum.
- Learning for Life and Leisure Survey, 2005: conducted for the Department for Education and Skills, again with a general population sample. The study looked at participation in adult learning as well as factors influencing participation and non participation. Again, it is a time series survey.
- Improving Child Maintenance Payments Survey: conducted for the Department for Work and Pensions. The survey explored the views and experiences of parents as clients of the Child Support Agency (CSA). The main aim was to investigate parents' experiences of different child maintenance payment methods, but it also explored family relationships, contact arrangements, and financial arrangements. The sample consisted of payers and recipients of child maintenance.
- Improving Child Maintenance Payments qualitative research: part of the same programme of work as the survey, and conducted before it with the same population group and covering similar issues. A particular feature of the qualitative study was that in many cases both the parents from the same former couple were interviewed. If parents were happy to take part in the study, they were asked whether they would still be willing to participate if their ex-partner was also approached.
- Transport and Travel in Later Life: this qualitative study was commissioned by the Department for Transport, as a follow-up to the National Travel Survey. The study looked at how people's travel behaviours, needs and aspirations change as they grow older. The study population was 50+ year olds, all of whom had previously taken part in the National Travel Survey (which involved a diary and a short face-to-face interview).

Sampling for the Ethics in Social Research study

The sample frame for Ethics in Social Research was generated from the main study interviews. All researchers in the two qualitative studies, and selected interviewers in the three surveys, described the Ethics in Social Research study to participants at the end of the main study

interview. They asked for permission to pass contact details to the Ethics in Social Research team, and an explanatory leaflet was left with participants. Contact details were passed to the Ethics in Social Research team who then selected a purposive sample and telephoned selected participants to ask whether they would be willing to take part in a further interview. Further details of the approach are shown in the Technical Report.

The criteria for purposive sampling, within each main study and across the whole sample, were sex, age, ethnicity and geographical area. The final study sample is shown in the table below:

Table 1 Ethics in Social Research study achieved sample¹

	No.
Male	26
Female	24
18-24	2
25-30	3
31-40	16
41-50	9
51-60	7
61+	13
White	41
Black African and Caribbean	5
Asian	2
Other	2
Scotland	4
Wales	8
North	8
Midlands	9
London & S.East	12
South & S.West	9
Total	50

The research team felt it would be essential, to allow full and open discussion of interview experiences, that the main study teams and interviewers were not told which participants were re-interviewed. No information about the main study interview was given to the Ethics in Social Research team.

It is important to stress that the studies followed up were all social policy studies. It may be that some different issues would have been raised if the studies followed up had included medical research or studies with theoretical rather than policy objectives. Similarly, few of the people interviewed had taken part in other research except market research questionnaires. It is likely that people who have more experience of taking part in research might have raised different issues or had different perspectives. In addition, the study design meant that all participants were people who were willing to take part in two interviews, and those who did not agree to do so may also have had different views and experiences to report.

¹The table shows the participants across the follow up studies, rather than individually, as this would increase the risk of participants from qualitative studies being identifiable to the main study teams.

The Ethics in Social Research fieldwork

The Ethics in Social Research interviews took place within two weeks of the main interview. They were in-depth, qualitative interviews, conducted using a topic guide which listed the key topics for discussion but which left discretion for the researcher in the way they framed questions and asked follow-up questions. Interviews lasted up to an hour and a half and were tape recorded, with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were analysed using Framework². This involved identifying the key themes and sub-themes, and drawing up a series of matrices or 'charts' within which columns represent topics and rows represent individual participants. The data from each transcript were then summarized in the relevant cell, noting the page and relevant contextual details. The charts were then studied in detail, looking at the range of responses within each topic, looking within cases to explore how different themes or experiences are linked, and drawing comparisons between individual cases and groups of cases.

1.3 Structure of the report

The next chapter looks at how the concept of ethics was approached within the Ethics in Social Research study and how it was talked about by participants. Chapter 3 then looks at how participants were approached to take part in the initial research, their decision-making processes and their information needs. In chapter 4 we look at the interview as an interaction, particularly exploring the relationship between participant and interviewer and their experience of the interview. Chapter 5 looks in more detail at some specific aspects of the interview: voluntariness and withholding information, confidentiality, and the footprints or impacts of the interview. The final chapter discusses the findings and their implications. Further details of the conduct of the study, including information of methods and key study documents, are published by GSRU separately in a technical report: *Ethics in Social Research: the views of research participants - Technical Report*.

The study was conducted using qualitative research. The exploratory and responsive nature of qualitative research meant that the individual experiences of different participants could be explored in depth. The purpose was not to generate statistical findings, but to describe the range of experiences and ethical requirements, and to look at the linkages between different issues. Qualitative research does not give an indication of the prevalence of different views. Instead the report aims to highlight the range and diversity of views, experiences and how they are formed. Throughout the report, verbatim quotations are shown in italics, with brief details of each participant.

²For a detailed account of Framework see Ritchie J, Spencer L & O'Connor W (2003)

2

Talking about ethics

In this chapter we first explain how the concept of ethics was approached in the study, and then explore the different meanings of ethics that emerged.

2.1 The approach taken in the study

Although the aim of the study was to explore participants' perspectives on and frameworks of ethics, the study team suspected that the concept of ethics would often be an unfamiliar one. This meant that we would not be able to rely on participants themselves to generate the issues to be explored in the interview. Equally, however, we did not want to frame the interviews entirely around researchers' prior concepts of ethics.

The approach taken was therefore to construct an understanding of ethics from people's reflections on the research experience as well as from their direct comments on the term. We attempted to strike a middle ground between participants' frameworks and researchers' frameworks by structuring the interviews in the following way:

- discussing any particular meanings the term 'ethics' had for people. Where people had no sense of its meaning, the researcher offered a loose definition of 'treating people with respect'
- where the term had some meaning to people, discussing what ethics might mean in the context of research
- asking participants to reconstruct the interview ('tell me about what happened, right from the very beginning'). We wanted to see what events and issues were raised spontaneously and probed those that were. We followed up with questions about what was particularly significant about the interview, positive and negative aspects, advice for researchers
- then taking participants through the research process, exploring how they first heard of the study, the decisions about taking part, anticipating the interview, the interview itself, understanding of what happens next with the data, any interest in feedback, confidentiality, and impacts of the interview. Throughout we focused on what people experienced, what they thought of it, how it could be improved, and the advice they would give to a researcher
- asking people to summarise the most important aspects of their experience
- where people had initially had some concept of ethics, relating the discussion to their definition of ethics.

The full topic guide is reproduced in the Technical Report. This report draws on people's descriptions of the research experience, their explicit comments on what is appropriate or ethical in research, and what their accounts of participating imply about ethical constructs and requirements.

2.2 Participants' early thoughts about ethics

2.2.1 Initial definitions of ethics

Some participants had ready definitions of ethics. Others expressed themselves more uncertainly, and at the other end of the spectrum were people who had no understanding of the term at all. It was noticeable that even people who expressed themselves articulately and with a wide vocabulary elsewhere in the interview sometimes struggled with the term 'ethics'.

Where people did have some concept of it, this had emerged from a range of different contexts. They talked about ethics in relation to corporate behaviour and politics, in relation to standards and practices in their own jobs, or related it to their own moral framework, their upbringing, or the way they raised their own children.

At this stage in the interview, four aspects of ethics emerged. People's discussion of ethics was generally quite narrow, although it sometimes spanned more than one aspect. The four aspects were:

- respect: aspects of behaviour particularly with a public perspective. People here talked about not offending others; being respectful, polite, having good manners and observing etiquette; respecting diversity, and behaving properly and responsibly.

"Ethics to me is, I suppose, similar to being politically correct, being - just being correct in the way you do things in respect of all sorts of different ideals like race, like age, like religion, and kind of things like that. Ethics is making sure that you don't offend people unnecessarily. I think that's what it means to me." (Male, 31-40, survey participant)

- morality, integrity and probity: here people talked about having values, a moral code, standards, or knowing right from wrong; adhering to standards and moral codes; making the right moral decisions; not doing wrong, not harming or exploiting others, and being honest and truthful, or correct and above board.

"Kind of, morality, values, that kind of stuff. Um, [sighs] the thing that's going round in my mind right now is the difference between right and wrong and that kind of thing. You know, the way you live your life, the values that you adhere to. Or don't." (Male, 31-40, qualitative participant)

- acting beyond self interest: people here talked about acting for the public good rather than out of self interest, not letting self-interest override the interests of others, and putting other people first. There were references to supporting developing nations and to fair trade.

"Principles of good and evil, I suppose. Unethical would be a thing that would be not altruistic, that you would [not] be doing for the common good rather than yourself." (Male, 60, survey participant)

- following procedures: finally, some people saw ethics as being about following agreed procedures and protocols or not breaching internal rules. There were specific references to confidentiality in this context.

"Well ethics for me is all - I'm bound legally [in her work in a hospital]. So even though ethics could be a bit of conscience... in my work it's all legally - it's all legal ethics ... because you can come and ask me any information pertaining to [someone] But my first question to you [would be], 'Are you the next of kin?' because legally I'm only [allowed] to give information to the next of kin." (Female, 41-50, survey participant)

2.2.2 Ethics as applied to research

Given that few people had ready concepts of ethics, it is perhaps not surprising that they found it difficult to relate ethics to the practice of research. People responded here in two

different ways. One group of people did not see ethics as having any application to research, on the grounds that research is ‘just questions and answers’.

“I can’t see how you can be unethical on research to be honest with you because realistically you’re only asking people’s opinions. And I can’t, there isn’t realistically a question you can ask me that I would find rude or intimidating provided it’s described as research All our knowledge is based upon asking questions” (Male, 31-40, survey participant)

The second group of people, though, felt that ethics did apply to research and talked about ethics here in more numerous and more specific terms than they had initially. The particular issues that emerged at this stage were:

- the purpose of research: that it should be for the common good rather than for commercial gain, that there should be complete honesty about the purposes and that the research should be used only for those purposes, that the research should be both useful and actually used, and that it should not be used to damage specific communities or groups.

“How would ethics [apply to research]? I think if you’re doing research, use the information that you get. You know, rather than waste government money to do all this research and then there is no product out of it, or no outcome, no enquiry into well can we do this, can we do that? If you get something out of it, and you can change something through doing it, that’s ethical. If it’s just a case of well let’s waste some more government money because they’re going to give it to us for doing this, but they’ll never use the information, put it in the bin That’s unethical I think and a waste of people’s time.” (Male, 31-40, survey participant)

- accuracy and lack of bias: that research should be designed, conducted and reported in a way that includes the full range of views and represents views accurately and without bias.

“Well it’s got to be ethical, hasn’t it? Otherwise it’d be biased research, wouldn’t it? If you ask questions from one point of view only then you’re going to get answers to one point of view only, aren’t you? You’ve got to ask generally, the broader spectrum. If you’re doing research then you get the research from more than one side of the question.” (Male, 61 and over, qualitative participant)

- confidentiality not being breached, and particularly contact details not being passed on to marketing organisations.
- that questions should not be too personal or intrusive, and that interviewers should not make people feel uncomfortable by pressing for information which the participant clearly does not want to give.

“Maybe research can go too far in, you know, people’s lives ... How can I put it? You’re researching into people’s lives to a certain point and then you’re overstepping the mark ... Maybe trying to find out too much about a person, you know. I think everybody’s got a line ... You’ve maybe touched on something that they feel uncomfortable with, you’ve overstepped that line.” (Male, 41-50, survey participant)

- appropriate behaviour on the part of interviewers, making people feel comfortable, being polite and treating people well, not threatening or intimidating, respecting individual views and choices, and adapting their behaviour to different social contexts.
- following procedures and organisational standards

“Conducting the interview as I would assume that you’ve been trained and so on, yeah, just carrying out the interview as they were trained and correctly, and following procedures.” (Female, 31-40, qualitative participant)

- and not actually harming individuals – a point made specifically in relation to a recent drugs trial which had caused severe injury to trial participants.

2.3 Mapping ethics through experiences of the interview

By the end of the interview, a much wider set of issues had emerged based on people’s own experiences of the main study interview. Generally, people felt that they now had a wider view of what ethics involves.

“I think that I would have taken a narrower view of what ethics was about [before the interview]. Whereas I think now I’ve got a broader understanding of what ... would encompass that aspect of social research.” (Male, 51-60, qualitative participant)

Based on participants’ discussions across the interviews, and particularly on recurrent views, those that were expressed with most emphasis, and issues that were emphasised at the end of the interview when people were asked to highlight what mattered most to them, the issues that emerge as central are identified in Table 2. They are discussed in more detail in the next three chapters. The issues in the first column broadly relate to requirements before the interview, the issues in the second to the interview itself, and the issues in the third column to what happens after the interview.

Table 2: A participant map of research ethics

Before the interview	During the interview	After the interview
Unpressurised decision-making about taking part	Being able to exercise the right not to answer a question or to say more than they want to	Right to privacy and anonymity respected in storage, access and reporting of the research
Research is independent and legitimate	An unpressurised pace, time to think	Unbiased and accurate research and reporting
Knowing why they were selected to be approached	Feeling comfortable and at ease, valued and respected, not intimidated or judged	Opportunity for feedback on findings and use
Clear and worthwhile objective, purpose and intended use	Opportunity for self-expression and for own views to be recorded	Use is actually made of the research for wider social benefit
Knowing what to expect and being able to prepare especially in terms of the coverage and questioning style	Questions are relevant, not repetitive, clear	
Openness, honesty, and not allowing misunderstandings or false assumptions to persist	Left without negative feelings about participation	

3

Decision-making and information needs

A number of aspects of information and decision-making emerged as important ethical considerations in people's accounts. This chapter looks at how people found out about the study they took part in and the processes by which they decided to take part. We look first at the process of information acquisition and then at the process of decision-making and the factors on which decisions were based. We then highlight people's information needs, drawing on their experiences of finding out about the study, deciding, and actually taking part.

3.1 Information acquisition

There were clear differences in how much people recalled about what they had been told about the study they took part in and when. By the time of the Ethics in Social Research interview, some people still had a detailed recollection of things like who the study was for and its purpose. Others could no longer remember details, although some here felt they had been given enough information at the time. People had received information at different stages: the initial letter (which not all recalled receiving or if received, had not read); when they were visited or telephoned; and at the start of the interview itself. Each stage was individually important, but having multiple opportunities for information acquisition also emerged as important for a number of reasons.

First, letters and personal contact were clearly experienced as different forms of communication and played different roles. Both, in different ways, gave people reassurance about taking part. Letters gave confidence that the study was genuine, made people feel safer about letting the interviewer into their home, and gave an opportunity to decide about participation in a more considered and less pressurised way. Personal contact was an opportunity to meet and assess the interviewer, which people welcomed, and was a chance to ask questions, although few people did. The tone of each was different: letters were described as 'formal' and 'official', interviewers as 'friendly' and 'not intimidating'.

Second, it was clear that people did not necessarily receive or absorb the information given at different stages. Some people had read the letter in detail, taken a lot of information from it, and kept it. But initial letters were not always received or absorbed. People acknowledged that they may have received but not opened³, read or recalled the letter, or said they had scanned the letter but then thrown it away, or put it aside to read later but not got round to it. Language difficulties also meant that some had not read, or understood, the letter. Even where people read the letter there were indications that they had not absorbed it. For example, people who said they had read the letter also said that they had not been told something that was in fact in the letter, or that they had learnt something subsequently from the interviewer when it had in fact also been in the letter.

There were very different descriptions of subsequent telephone calls, visits, and of what interviewers said immediately before starting the interview. This may reflect different approaches by interviewers, but it may also indicate differences in what people actually took in. People who were already very committed to taking part in the study tended to describe these personal interactions less fully. Those who had not read or received a letter described them more fully, which might suggest either that the interviewer was carefully covering the ground in detail or that the participant was taking in more. Again, there were indications that people did not necessarily take in everything they were told face to face. For example,

³In two survey studies, the sample frame was the Postcode Address File which provides addresses but not names, so letters would have been addressed to 'the householder' or 'the resident'.

people said that the interviewer had given a lengthy introduction but could not recall exactly what had been said. Some said they had been feeling apprehensive and did not take in exactly what was said. People who had not already met the interviewer sometimes seemed to be using this early stage to assess or gauge them. There seemed to be value in casual social interaction before the interview introduction, to give time to shift from 'observing' to 'listening' mode.

"I suppose I was nervous and anxious and a lot of what she might have said at the beginning just didn't register Most of what she said was just going over my head." (Female, 41-50, qualitative participant)

For some people, a single information event was sufficient: subsequent ones added nothing to what they knew and could seem irksome. For other people, though, multiple information events seemed to have been important. Even if the letter had been received, people found value in having details repeated.

"I couldn't remember the full details of when we first met, so ... it was mainly filling me in or just reminding me. But yeah, I needed reminding, I wouldn't have remembered. I mean even though it was four days ... it needed repeating. Yeah, you can't assume people remember things like that." (Male, 41-50, survey participant)

If it had not been received, information given by the interviewer could compensate, but some lack of clarity sometimes persisted. There was a small number of cases where people had not received the letter and chose to do the interview when the interviewer first visited. This meant people learnt about the study, decided to take part and were interviewed all at the same event. Although shorter information acquisition processes had been sufficient for some, in other cases they seemed to have contributed to people not having all the information they later thought necessary. However, it is also clearly difficult to give information in ways which people always engage with.

How well-informed people were about the study had important consequences for their experience of the interview, as we discuss in chapters 4 and 5.

3.2 The process of decision-making

3.2.1 Speed and timing

Despite multiple stages of information giving, the dominant pattern was of quick decision-making about participation, at the point when people were first approached, whatever form this took. Some people talked about deciding 'immediately' or 'within a few seconds' of receiving a letter, telephone call or visit. This was true even in studies where the letter was not addressed to a named individual and where the participant was selected by the interviewer when they visited. It was rare for people not to make a decision at the first contact although some did delay, deliberately withholding a decision until later. This meant that information-giving often continued after people had made their initial decision⁴.

The speed of decision-making was not problematic particularly if people had either taken on board the information they needed already or they engaged with subsequent information-giving. However, some people felt on reflection that they had made their decision a little too hastily, particularly if the interview took place at the point when they first learnt about

⁴Survey research has found that over two thirds of participants do indeed make fast decisions to participate, but that reassurance and persuasion is required for others' decisions. (e.g. Campanelli, Sturgis & Purdon, 1997)

the study. They felt in retrospect that they would have benefited from having more time to consider their decision, prepare and anticipate questions about the research that occurred to them later (see further chapters 4 and 5).

The speed of decision-making is particularly significant since once they had said they would take part people generally felt a high degree of commitment. Except in the few cases where people felt the interview was compulsory (see section 3.2.2 below) they knew or assumed, from the interviewer's manner or what they had said, that they could withdraw if they changed their mind. However, although some said that they would definitely have withdrawn had they changed their mind, it was clear that people would have found this very difficult, and similarly would have felt an obligation to go through with the interview once the interviewer arrived.

People's reactions to the idea of written consent suggests it would have added to their sense of obligation. None of the studies asked people to provide written consent, but the overwhelming reaction to the idea was negative. People felt that written consent would have taken away from the voluntary nature of the study and made them feel they could not subsequently withdraw or chose not to answer particular questions. Some said they would not have participated on that basis.

"I'd wonder whether I had the right to [withdraw] even though it's not necessarily a legal document but I might have [hesitate] about [it]...and be worried." (Female, 61 and over, qualitative participant)

People who did not react so negatively said that it would have made no difference to them. Only one person saw written consent as helpful, but she saw it as beneficial for the interviewer to be able to prove the participant had consented 'in case there was any come back'. No-one responded to the idea of written consent as if it conveyed any benefit or protection for themselves. Of course, people in the Ethics in Social Research study had not experienced written consent, and it may be that it could have been handled in a way that allayed concerns and conveyed a sense of it being for their own protection. The strength of feeling expressed, however, was striking and highlights what needs to be overcome if written consent is used.

3.2.2 The dynamic of decision-making

From the way in which people made decisions to participate in main interviews, four groups can be identified:

- **Motivation:** here people made their decision early on and had a very clear sense of why they wanted to participate. Their reasons related to both the research study (issues such as the opportunity to be heard, the importance or interesting nature of the topic, the potential to influence government) and to the research process (the way they were approached and what they were told about how the research would be carried out). This dynamic was, particularly prominent in the Child Maintenance Payment studies, and particularly in the qualitative study, reflecting the relevance of the topic to people.
- **Absence of disinclination:** here, people again made their decision at the first contact. They articulated their decision not as having a clear reason for wanting to take part, but rather having no reason not to. Again, this involved both the subject and the process. There was nothing particularly off-putting about the research study, and nothing to object to or that presented an obstacle in how they were approached and what they were told about the research process.
- **Reassurance or persuasion:** this small group of people did not decide on their first contact, which was in all cases a letter. Some felt positively about the study but had questions or concerns, for example whether the research was 'genuine', about

confidentiality or about what the study was about. Others were suspicious or formed the initial view that they did not want to take part, or thought they would not make their decision until they had some personal contact and the chance to gauge the interviewer or the organisation.

- Sense of compulsion or obligation: for this small group of people, the sense of compulsion arose in different ways. First, thinking the study was literally compulsory – either a census or an investigation by the CSA – although this misunderstanding was later rectified. Second, a feeling of social obligation – the sense that one was obliged, as a ‘good citizen’ to take part in studies that might help government and contribute to wider benefits. Third, feeling personally obliged to take part. This arose where people felt sorry for the interviewer and found it hard to refuse when they visited. How easily people might feel coerced is also illustrated by the experience of a woman who opted out by telephone because she not had direct contact with the CSA and felt she had nothing to say. The person she spoke to emphasised that this did not matter and that her participation would still be important. She felt she could not say that she still did not want to. Her experience of the interview was very positive and she was pleased she had taken part, but this case illustrates how easily people might feel pressurised.

3.3 The basis of decision-making

3.3.1 Factors relating to the research study

The opportunity to be heard could be an important motivation, particularly for people taking part in the Child Maintenance Payment studies who felt that the CSA had not listened to them. It was also important for other groups who felt their views were not heard or taken into account by government generally.

“[When I got the letter I felt] over the moon ... absolutely overjoyed to be perfectly honest because somebody wanted to listen to me to hear my views about the CSA because the CSA won’t listen so somebody else will ... over the moon” (Female, 25-30, survey participant)

Others responded positively to the opportunity for the views of ‘the common man’ more generally to be heard. There were also people who had had positive experiences of the CSA and who wanted to ensure their views were heard to balance negative publicity.

There was a sense of the existence of the research study validating people’s experiences or their own views about the importance of something. They felt the fact that research was being carried out showed that their experience was seen as important, that ‘people cared’. Similarly, people felt that being asked to take part conveyed a sense of personal importance or worth.

“It makes you feel quite important that you’ve been asked for your opinions ... I watch these things on television, or read in the papers, you know, about like percentages and things ... and you think ... ‘I’m going to be one of them now’. You feel useful. Yeah, I like to think that my, you know, my opinion counts.” (Female, 41-50, survey participant)

Some people viewed the interview as an opportunity for catharsis – a chance to express their anger, to ‘have a moan’ or to get something ‘off my chest’. There was also a sense of the research offering a chance to ‘get back at’ the CSA or the government more generally.

Taking part was also widely seen as a chance to make a difference. For some people there was a general sense of research, especially government research, being for the greater good or for wider social benefit, or an implication that the information they provided might help

government. Others had more specific expectations that the research would improve services – particularly transport services and the CSA – and the way they were expressed sometimes suggested they saw a direct link between research and practice.

“It’s very important to me, because if the government’s doing these surveys, obviously they’re doing it with an aim for the betterment of services I want to help in every little way I could, in my own little ways Because every input of mine, my response, is going to be taken into consideration and improve the services If that’s going to make a difference in helping them improve the system, there are thousands of mums and dads out there that will benefit from the responses”
(Female, 31-40, qualitative participant)

The topic of the research was important in other ways too. People participated because the research was not commercial, not political or not too personal – for example not about money, health, religion or politics. (This view was held by people taking part in the Child Maintenance Payment qualitative study too despite having read the letter which indicated topic coverage including the breakdown of the relationship between ex-partners. Some were later surprised by questions about family circumstances, see chapters 4 and 5.) It helped that the research was a topic that was important, either generally or because of their own circumstances or experiences. It was also important to people that the research should be on a topic they were familiar with and could contribute to, and not one with which they might be ‘out of my depth’.

The fact that the study was government funded was seen positively. It was felt to reinforce the importance of the research, that it was likely to be taken into account and to lead to wider social benefit. This is reflected too in the fact that some people had always previously refused to take part in research which had been commercial in its orientation, but agreed readily to take part in the main study. The fact that it was government funded also triggered a sense of curiosity for some, who thought they might glean something about government intentions by taking part.

Finally, taking part in research was seen as an opportunity to do something new and different. People were curious about what it might involve and saw it as a chance to exercise their mind or for social interaction, which could be important to people whose social interaction was more constrained.

3.3.2 Factors relating to the research process

A number of issues about how the research had been or was to be conducted were also important aspects of people’s decision-making.

First, the research seemed trustworthy and genuine. People felt this was evidenced by letters and leaflets – the fact that it looked official and formal, that it was quite detailed, the NatCen logo, the fact that contact details were given and that the interviewer was named⁵. The contact details were occasionally used by people to check NatCen’s website, but more often it was their presence that gave reassurance, rather than the fact that they were actually checked. Trustworthiness was also evidenced by the person who first approached the participant – the fact that they seemed genuine and professional, and friendly and relaxed. For people who had delayed their decision until they had some personal contact, being reassured by the manner of the person they spoke to or met was critical.

“[Interviewer was a] very professional person Introduced herself, what it was all about ... No pressure at all, you know it’s entirely down

⁵In survey studies, interviewers sometimes send a second letter introducing themselves.

to you She made me feel really comfortable. And [the interviewer said] 'please at any time if you feel uncomfortable, you feel anxious about answering these questions please don't, just let me know. It's not a problem, you won't have to answer it' She turned up at my door and my mind was made up for me there and then, all right I'll go for it." (Male, 41-50, survey participant)

Second, the selection process was important in decision-making. Being specifically selected gave a strong message that they personally mattered to the study. The effort made by the interviewer to make contact, visiting or telephoning several times, also impressed people, although for one woman it contributed to a sense that the study was a census. The random selection process was also important. It provided reassurance as to why they had been chosen, but the fact that there were careful and rigorous selection procedures also gave a message about the quality of the research process, and thus the importance of the study.

Not being put under pressure to take part was also relevant in people's decision-making. They appreciated actually being asked whether they wanted to take part, or the voluntary nature of the study being stressed. Being given a choice about the time of the interview was also important – both because of the convenience and because it implied an absence of pressure.

The fact that the research was conducted by an organisation that was independent of both the funder and the subject of the research was generally important to people, and reassured them that there would be no 'come back'. There was occasional disappointment when people learnt that the interviewer was not from the CSA, thinking this would be a chance to ask questions about how the agency works or to make their feelings about their experience known very directly. But for most people, independence was viewed as a positive thing. Confidentiality was also important, especially in the Child Maintenance Payment studies (see section 5.2).

Being given a financial incentive did not emerge as critical to the decision to take part. For one man it had been important, and he doubted he would have taken part without it since the interview was the second he had done. Others however appreciated it and saw it as a nice gesture or appropriate compensation for their time, but they said they would have taken part without it⁶.

Overall, the subject of the research study was a strong pull for some people. But the research process itself also played a very significant role, and if the topic did not exercise a strong pull the research process could provide the motivation to take part. Aspects of the research process were important in their own right. Issues like confidentiality and independence mattered to people. But they were also important for what they implied to people about the research – that that the research was worthwhile, and that they would be valued and treated well if they took part.

3.3.3 A relationship based on trust

The information people received about the study played an important part in their decision-making. However, decisions were to some degree also based on assumptions which were not based on information provided and not checked out. People assumed that the research would be an opportunity to have your say and be heard, that it would make a difference and be of wider benefit, that the research was genuine, that the research organisation and interviewer were trustworthy, that the research would not be too personal, that data would

⁶Incentives were used in both qualitative studies (£20 to each participant), and were also used, experimentally, in a random selection of the sample in the CSA survey work (£10 voucher for some participants). No incentives were used on the Learning for Life and Leisure or Families, People and Communities surveys.

be confidential, and that the interview itself would not be a negative experience. These assumptions were largely borne out by their experiences, although not always, and there is clearly scope for misplaced assumptions. People seemed to have little sense of what the interview itself would be like, and articulated sometimes quite vague understandings of the study topic, coverage and purpose. They also seem not consciously to weigh up potential benefits against potential disbenefits. This highlights that the research relationship is, for participants, based to a large degree on trust.

3.4 Information needs

What people based their decision to take part on tells us something about the information they needed to have before the interview itself. But information needs also emerge from what they say about their experience of taking part, from misunderstandings, and from their views on what information should be given. The key information needs that emerged, some of which anticipate issues discussed in more detail in the following chapters, were:

- The subject matter and the coverage of the interviews: As we have seen, this was an important part of people's decision-making, but it was also relevant to their thoughts and feelings before the interview and their experience of the interview. It was particularly important to people to know in advance whether the interview would cover personal and sensitive topics. People talked about the value of knowing the topics in advance to be able to prepare mentally for the interview. They talked about this mental preparation involving recalling or checking relevant facts, having an opportunity to consider one's views, and thinking in advance about what one might or might not be prepared to discuss. In practice, few people did prepare in this way but experiences of the interview and feelings afterwards sometimes suggested a need for more information. People often felt that knowing more about the topic would have helped them understand the relevance of some questions in the interview itself.

There were felt to be some advantages to seeing the actual questions in advance, both to inform their decision-making about participation and to help them to prepare so that they would not feel 'put on the spot' or 'rushed' in the interview itself. But others thought it was better not to see them, feeling it was important that they had expressed themselves spontaneously.

- The purpose of the research and how it will be used: Again, the assumption that the research would be used formed an important part of people's decision-making. Some seemed to have more information needs here after the main study interview than they had before: the interview itself had raised more questions in their mind about the study objectives and how the study would be used. Reflecting, in the Ethics in Social Research interview, on the main study interview also seemed to raise questions in people's minds about how the information would actually be used.
- The style of questioning in the interview: This was an issue that generally emerged only after the main study interview itself. One person had asked about how the questions would be put when she was deciding whether or not to take part and was relieved to hear the interview would involve answering specific questions rather than talking in her own words. But generally people seemed to give little thought beforehand to the style of the interview. However, it was sometimes not what they expected (see chapter 4) which suggests that an earlier indication of the questioning style might have been useful.

Participants in qualitative studies had not always been told in advance that the interview would be tape-recorded. No-one objected to it being recorded, although some said they felt a little ill at ease at first or wondered who would listen to the tape. The general view

was that it was courteous to be asked or told in advance about tape-recording, although no-one said it would have influenced their decision about taking part.

Similarly, in survey studies people were generally comfortable with the use of the laptop computer to record responses, and it was viewed positively as professional, efficient, quicker, more confidential and indicative of a rigorous approach. However, one man who had been particularly concerned about confidentiality was concerned that he could not see exactly how his responses were recorded and felt it would have been helpful to have known in advance. For another person, the fact that the laptop was plugged into her mains supply could have been problematic. She rationed her use of electricity very carefully and said that had the interview taken place the previous week she would not have had enough money in the meter. She felt it would be better to warn people in advance so that if this was a problem they could decline to take part.

- The voluntary nature of the study and of information giving: The fact that the study was voluntary was seen as an essential piece of information to give. As noted earlier the absence of perceived pressure to take part was a positive facilitator of participation. People also felt it was important to be told that they were free to choose whether or not to answer individual questions, or to say no more than they wanted to (discussed further in chapter 5). There were different views though about precisely when it was necessary to be told this, which seemed to reflect the sensitivity of the study. Some people felt that being told this before the interview could raise unnecessary worries about what the questions might cover, but in the more personal Child Maintenance Payment studies people felt it was important to know early on.
- Confidentiality and access: There were different meanings and understandings of confidentiality, as we discuss in chapter 5, and some people had questions about it after the interview, suggesting a need for more clarity in information here.
- Why they had been selected and the population involved in the study: as noted earlier, understanding how they had been selected provided important reassurance. There were also some comments about the value of knowing more about the population covered, particularly where people were unsure whether the study was carried out only with people in minority ethnic groups, for example, or only with older people.
- Who is funding and who is conducting the research: The distinction between commercial and government research was not a relevant one to everyone, but some people felt it was important to know the study was funded by government. Knowing who was conducting it was also important, to make it clear that it was research rather than for example a CSA investigation, to communicate the independence from the subject and funder, and as noted earlier because contact details provided reassurance.
- What happens to the data: As we discuss in chapter 4 people generally had little understanding of how data are analysed and compiled into a report or of what the report would look like. Arguably, people need more information here to give fully informed consent, or further opportunities to ask questions of the interviewer before, during and after an interview. .

3.5 Key ethical implications

Getting enough information about the study was emphasised by participants, especially at the end of the Ethics in Social Research study, as an important aspect of doing research well. It was also important for people's preparation for the interview and for having a good experience of it. There seems to be value in multiple information events, using different forms and tone. It is clear that providing information in ways that people engage with fully is difficult and this underlines the need for checking, repeating and not assuming.

Decisions about participation are, for many, made quickly. Once made they are seen as firm and not contingent, even though they are often made before the process of information-giving is complete. There are some indications of decisions having been made too hastily, and the findings suggest that finding ways of encouraging more considered decision-making might be helpful. What is also striking is that the decision to participate is based on a number of assumptions which are not fully checked out or necessarily information-based, particularly the view that the research will bring about improvements and positive change. This highlights that the research relationship is based to a high degree on trust. Although people's assumptions are often borne out in the interview experience, there is scope for misunderstanding. There are important responsibilities on researchers and funders not to allow expressed misunderstandings or wrong assumptions to go unchecked.

The key information needs that emerge are broadly consistent with researchers' understandings of informed consent. But the findings suggest participants could benefit from more information about the subject matter and coverage of the interview, the purpose and how it will be used, the style of questioning, and voluntariness in information-giving.

4

The interview interaction

The interview interaction, and in particular the behaviour of the interviewer, was central to participants' experience of research. This was equally true for quantitative and qualitative interviews. The centrality of the interview emerged in a number of ways. In the Ethics in Social Research interview when asked to talk through their experience of the main study from the beginning, it was common for participants to start at the interview rather than their first contact with the study. This focus on the interview continued throughout the Ethics in Social Research interview, and it was particularly emphasised at the end as the important aspect of research to 'get right'. The interaction involved both the behaviour of the interviewer and the questions actually asked, but of these the interviewer's conduct and skills emerge as key.

In this chapter we look first at people's feelings anticipating the interview, and then provide a description of interviews. We then look in detail at the behaviours and skills sought in interviewers. We also consider views about the interviewer exchanging personal information and about 'matching' interviewer and participant characteristics. We then look at experiences of the questions asked and the role they play in shaping the interaction. We look at people's assumptions about analysis and reporting and their views about getting feedback, and conclude by looking at participants' constructions of the respective roles of interviewer and participant.

4.1 Anticipating the interview

As noted in chapter 3, not everyone had a gap between arranging the interview and it taking place. Having a time lag could be a useful opportunity to think in advance about the interview and prepare one's thoughts. But others opted for an immediate interview specifically because they thought that they might otherwise worry about it and wanted to 'get it over with'. Where people had a waiting period, some gave no thought at all to the interview – they had no concerns about taking part and put it out of their mind until the day. But it was common for people to say that they wondered about what questions would be asked or what the interviewer would be like. Some felt nervous, anxious or 'on tenterhooks', trying to put it out of their minds or worrying particularly about their performance – whether they would have enough to say or would be 'of use'. People also deliberately did not think through what they might be asked and might say, assuming that it was their spontaneous responses that were sought. Others described feeling excited, looking forward to the interview, and preparing for it by thinking through and deliberately recalling aspects of their views and experiences that might be relevant.

"I was hoping I [wouldn't] come across as 'she hasn't really got anything to say', 'she doesn't really know what she's on about' [laughs] just thought, just do it, and try and forget about it.. I wasn't really concerned about it, as I say, I was just hoping that I could answer the questions and talk and say something that is going to be of use, really." (Female, 41-50, qualitative participant)

The limited preparation done reflects to some extent the fact that people did not know in detail what would be covered. As noted in chapter 3, this suggests that from the participant perspective there is value in giving more information about topic coverage.

There was some interaction here with the dynamic of decision-making described in chapter 3. People with a strong motivation to take part described the most positive feelings in anticipation of the interview and more deliberate recalling of events and views, although some were also anxious particularly about their own performance. People who had needed reassurance or who felt a sense of compulsion were sometimes more anxious, about specific

issues such as confidentiality or how the information would be used, or more generally. Participating because of an absence of disinclination generally invoked less emotion or thought, although again here there were some concerns about performance.

4.2 Experiences of the interview

The ways in which participants described the interview interaction ranged across a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, the interview was described as being 'a free flowing conversation', 'like chatting to a friend', where they were 'almost unaware of questions' being posed. People found the interview relaxed, fun, stimulating, interesting and enjoyable, and said that time passed quickly. At the other end of the spectrum, the interview was described as being 'mechanical' with a 'question and answer' format that achieved little depth. People found it frustrating, puzzling, boring or monotonous.

What was striking was that there were examples of interviews from both qualitative and quantitative studies at each end of the spectrum, and people used very similar language to describe both. It was also striking that interviews within the same study, and indeed with the same interviewer, could be described in either way.

Qualitative research interviews were particularly described in ways that suggested more interaction and less structure. People talked for example about 'a chat', 'an open interview', the interviewer 'guiding' rather than asking questions, or 'not sticking to the interview'. But quantitative interviews were also described in sometimes quite naturalistic terms. People talked about the questions flowing from the answers they had given, being 'a conversation' and much more than 'yes or no questions'. One man described it as 'like an invisible person wanting to know you'. Some wondered if the interviewer was generating the question themselves, rather than taking them from the computer. People also talked about finding it interesting to hear other views or see other perspectives. This seemed to be a reference to the response codes offered, the phrasing of attitudinal questions and, in the Child Maintenance Payments survey, to the use in some questions of hypothetical scenarios of family situations.

4.3 Interviewer characteristics and behaviours

4.3.1 The interviewer's behaviour

Across all the interviews, it was important to participants that they were 'comfortable' during the interview. 'Being comfortable' and 'being put at my ease' were recurrent phrases across the dataset. As noted above, some people felt nervous or anxious before the interview. But more widely it was clear that being interviewed was for most people an unusual and unfamiliar situation, and they had little sense of what to expect. They looked to the interviewer to set the tone of the interaction and to help them relax. Being comfortable had important implications for how people felt about the interview, but it also had implications for the quality of the data collected. It meant that the participant was likely to reflect on the questions and answer honestly, and it could also influence how much information a participant shared and how they exercised control over this (discussed in chapter 5).

The interviewer's behaviour on arrival was particularly important in helping people to feel comfortable. Being relaxed was important in putting people at their ease. Participants valued the interviewer being punctual; showing their identity card; smiling and being friendly and warm; making small talk; acknowledging other people, especially children; accepting hospitality; being nicely presented; and not reacting negatively to anything about the participant's environment. The nervousness some people were feeling is illustrated by their comments that the interviewer was 'not intimidating'.

It was also important how the interviewer introduced the study. People valued being told that there were no right or wrong answers, that they should say if they did not understand

a question, that they did not have to answer any questions, and being reassured about confidentiality.

During the interview itself it was important to participants to feel that they themselves, and their input, were being valued. It helped that the interviewer appeared to care about the research they were carrying out and to be enjoying their work. People commented on the interviewer listening and demonstrating interest.

“She seemed genuinely interested.... If you’re talking to somebody and they seem interested, you’re more inclined to carry on talking.... You knew she was listening because the next, the follow-up question would be relevant to what you’d said..... Whatever I had to say she listened to, seemed interested.” (Male, 31-40, qualitative participant)

Maintaining eye contact, not obviously checking the time and addressing the participant by their name when putting questions to them were also important. People appreciated interviewers injecting personality and warmth through their body language and comments. Professionalism was valued – sticking to the time given, being proficient with their equipment, and having materials such as show cards in order and to hand.

The pace of the interview was also important to people’s experience. It was important that the interviewer went at the participant’s speed, giving them time to consider their responses and to express themselves, being patient and not pressurising for answers. They appreciated interviewers explaining questions or ‘long words’ if they did not understand them, and not being too quick to move on.

It was important to them that the interviewer was non-judgemental about their responses, for example where people expressed views about other races or religions, described themselves as having limited education or qualifications, or talked about relationship breakdown or unusual family set-ups.

How interviewers respond if people became upset was also important. Some people reported becoming either tearful or angry, in the Child Maintenance Payment studies. People also talked hypothetically about how they would have wanted the interviewer to behave if they had become upset. Different strategies were suggested. The first was to continue with the interview, leaving the decision to stop with the participant. The second was for the interviewer to be more proactive, stopping the interview, having a discussion off the record, and for the participant to decide whether to continue. Another suggestion, made only by those who had not become upset, was to leave the question that had upset the participant, apologise for upsetting them, and move on to the next topic.

Although what constituted acting appropriately varied, there was agreement that it was the interviewer’s responsibility to gauge the situation and respond. The following quote comes from a participant who became angry during his interview but did not want to stop and was pleased that his interviewer had read this correctly.

“It’s on the individual, though, isn’t it? I mean, it’s ok for me, but whether it would be ok for somebody else is another – you as the interviewer are going to have to weigh up that person and figure out whether you can go down it further, or whether you can’t She gauged it right with me....” (Male, 41-50, qualitative participant)

The general view was that it could be justified to ask questions which might upset people, provided certain conditions were met: that the research was important and worthwhile, that people knew the topics covered in advance, that the personal questions were relevant and necessary, that people knew they did not have to answer them, and that interviewers were skilled, alert to how participants might be feeling and able to respond sensitively.

It was helpful to people to have some indication that the interview was coming to an end, either through being aware that they had worked through most of the show cards or because the interviewer said that there were only a few more questions. At the end of the interview, it was again important to people that the interviewer made small talk; acknowledged the participant's time and contribution; and accepted any hospitality or help offered, for example an offer to call a taxi. People appreciated been thanked for their time and comments about how interesting or helpful the interviewer had found their contribution. Again, this seemed to reflect people's performance anxieties. For example, one man who had described the interview as 'like being on Mastermind', said:

"She was really glad that I took the time out, and she thanked me for it And I thought, because of what she said, you know, that she was really grateful that I took the time out She were sat there, you know, and she said she were very grateful And I felt she were being sincere, that I'd put myself out to help her, you know what I mean?"
(Male, 41-50, survey participant)

4.3.2 Sharing personal information

There is a school of thought that interviewers should share information about themselves with participants, to equalise the researcher-participant relationship and create rapport (e.g. Johnson, 2002). Although it was important to people that the interviewer's personality came across, there was little evidence in our sample of people wanting the interviewer to share personal information with them.

People felt that knowing something personal about the interviewer might influence the answers they gave. They felt it could make them feel the interviewer disapproved or disagreed, and might make them feel more ill at ease. There was a view that it was easier to talk very openly and frankly to a stranger that one would not see again. The importance of neutrality, lack of bias and interviewers not giving their own opinion was stressed. People pointed out that the interview was about the participant, not the interviewer. And they also expressed concern for the safety of the interviewer sharing details about themselves. This last point is intriguing given that this is of course what participants were doing, although the fact that unlike interviewers they were in their own home seemed relevant.

"Because she was a person that I've never met in my life, I could talk to her about my personal life, and it would be, it would always remain private and confidential... So I was at ease... If I knew a person, even by name, I would be a bit reluctant to talk things about my personal life, my relationship and all that." (Female, 31-40, qualitative participant)

There were some people however who felt it might have made the interaction more reciprocal. One man felt that hearing the views of the interviewer, especially if they were unusual, might make you feel more comfortable about expressing your own. And some people who had taken part in studies they did not see as sensitive felt that, on a more personal topic, they might have wanted to hear something about the interviewer to get a sense of what their perspective on the subject might be.

Generally though the sentiment was that it would be nice to know a bit about the interviewer, but not necessarily things that related to the research topic. Personal information exchange was primarily seen as one more way of building rapport and putting the participant at their ease or normalising the unusual situation of the interview.

"He never said anything of any significance, just little quips I don't think he went into anything personal I mean sufficient to, you know, strike up the rapport I didn't particularly want to know any more

about him. I mean it might have been quite interesting, you know, but not particularly relevant He was giving insights into his personality, not, you know, how many wives he's had or whether he drinks a lot or anything like that". (Male, 51-60, survey participant)

4.3.3 Participant and interviewer matching

There is also a view in the literature that matching the interviewer and participant on characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity or experiences in relation to the research topic can help to build rapport (e.g. Grewal & Ritchie, 2006). Again, this was not particularly supported within our sample.

Among both men and women, there was a general assumption that women would be better interviewers and this was sometimes expressed as a preference for a female interviewer⁷. People who had been interviewed by a woman and described the interviewer having good listening skills and a friendly and intuitive approach, said that this was because she was a woman. However, participants who had been interviewed by men also described these qualities in their interviewers. One reading of the preference for female interviewers is therefore that it is driven by the social construction of gender – the assumption that women are more likely than men to have the qualities that make a good interviewer. The following quote comes from a male participant who had taken part in two interviews, both with male interviewers, and had formed a strong rapport with one.

"I think a female is a lot better at doing research than a male Because ... females generally talk together. It doesn't take much for two females to talk about things. You can get two females at a bus stop.... and they don't even know each other but within five minutes they're rabbiting away.... Now men are a different situation altogether, because you get three men at a bus stop and nobody speaks." (Male, 51-60, qualitative participant)

Some men commented that since men found talking about their feelings more difficult there would be particular communication barriers if a man interviewed another man. Among the men interviewed by men in the main studies there were some cases where people did not describe a particularly strong rapport. But equally there were cases where men or women interviewed by women also did not describe a particularly warm relationship.

There were some circumstances where a stronger preference for matching emerged. A female participant in the qualitative Child Maintenance Payments study felt that if she had been interviewed by a man she would have worried that he might associate more with her ex-partner, and felt that she might have been concerned what he might make of her account. Women also said they might feel safer letting another woman into the house without a prior arrangement, although this seemed not to have been a particular concern among survey participants approached by male interviewers for their main interview. Some women also felt that they would be more comfortable being interviewed by another woman on 'female issues' such as childbirth and pregnancy. Finally a man who had been interviewed by a woman and found the survey boring and burdensome did not terminate it because he thought this would offend her. He stated he would have done so more readily had the interviewer been a man.

There was little interest in matching participants and interviewers on age, although participants generally valued 'maturity' in an interviewer – being able to draw on life experience to respond to people and situations.

⁷Most of the Ethics in Social Research interviews were conducted by women, which may have influenced responses, although the views expressed in interviews conducted by a male researcher were not obviously different.

All the main study interviews had been conducted by white interviewers⁸. None of the black and minority ethnic group participants identified the ethnicity of the interviewer as having been a factor in shaping their experience. White participants similarly generally did not see ethnicity as relevant. Some older participants expressed concern about understanding interviewers with different accents or cultural speech patterns, and there was some concern about answering questions on race and religious prejudice if the interviewer was from a minority ethnic group. But a common view was 'not thinking in stereotypes' and instead valuing particular behaviours. For example, a black woman said:

"So it doesn't matter to me if it was an Indian person or a black person or a white person that came to the door, it's all about how you present yourself. Because you could have a black person that could come to the door and annoy me in the same way." (Female, 41-50, survey participant)

Finally, there was also little interest in being interviewed by people with the same experiences as you, relative to the research topic, echoing views about interviewers sharing personal information. There were two exceptions. Participants in the Transport and Travel in Later Life qualitative study sometimes felt a local person would have known more about local transport and understood the participant's comments better, and felt this had been demonstrated by the (locally based) survey interviewer. And one person interviewed in the Child Maintenance Payments study thought that being interviewed by someone with personal experience of the CSA would have cut down on the amount of detail they needed to provide about their own dealings.

4.4 Reactions to questions and questioning style

Alongside aspects of the interviewer's behaviour and characteristics, reactions to questions and questioning style were the second important component of the interview interaction.

People were positive about interviews which they felt had flowed, with questions following on from the previous question and the participant's answer. Shifts between topics created interest, but not if people felt the interview was failing to explore each topic sufficiently or if they felt it was rambling. They wanted to feel that topics had been addressed in depth, and were critical of what they saw as superficial coverage.

Repetition was also irritating to people. Being asked the same question more than once in different ways, or to check or confirm an answer, was irritating and made people feel the accuracy or honesty of their responses was being doubted. Probes in qualitative interviews similarly sometimes made people feel they were being asked to repeat themselves or that they had not made themselves clear. Some felt the Transport and Travel in Later Life qualitative interview covered the same ground as the National Travel Survey, in which they had previously participated.

A particularly important issue for people was the extent to which the interview gave scope for self-expression. This reflected the fact that some people participated because they wanted to have their say or express their views. People who took part in qualitative interviews valued the chance to explain, to say as much as they wanted and to give an in-depth answer. Some who took part in surveys felt they too had had this chance, but there was also frustration with the use of pre-selected response options and show cards. Here, people would have preferred to give what they called their own views, to answer in their own words, to raise issues that were important to them and to elaborate on and explain their response. Some found the

⁸Although it had been intended to include main study interviews conducted by interviewers from minority ethnic groups, this proved impossible in practice given other selection requirements.

show cards overwhelming or difficult to read and felt they created a monotonous and artificial interaction.

“I wouldn’t say it was an interview as such, it wasn’t being able to give my opinion on it, because it was answers in a book. So the answers were there, so whether I agreed with them or not I had to pick one or say, none of those.” (Male, 31-40, survey participant)

The use of pre-selected response options was seen to have some benefits too, however. Some people found them clear and easy to follow, quick to use, enjoyed working through the pack of show cards, thought it was interactive and fun, and felt it provided a structure to the interview. They worked hard to find the response that matched their view or experience. One person in the Child Maintenance Payments survey commented that it was obvious the survey was based on previous research because the response options offered were largely clearly relevant to people in her position. People who were anxious about how personal the interview would be also sometimes valued the use of show cards.

“With the booklet, it took a lot of the emotion out of it There was a couple of questions, ‘why did your marriage break up?’...a), b), c) or d). Now in that case if you’re looking down the list and all you say is a) or b) it’s not as bad as saying ‘I had an affair, my wife had an affair, we just couldn’t stand the sight of each other.’” (Male, 41-50, survey participant)

Some people seemed to have answered structured questions fully in their own words, and only then selected a response. This had been a more positive interaction for them, although they were sometimes uncertain whether the detail of their answer had been recorded and hoped it had been. Being asked at the end of the interview if they wanted to add anything was also valued.

Irrespective of mode, the relevance of questions was an important issue for people. They were irritated by questions that did not seem relevant to the topic, important aspects of it, or likely to generate information that could be used. This seemed to include questions that would be used to generate analytical variables, such as household income or, in the Learning for Life and Leisure survey, parental education, although some people understood that they might be asked for these purposes.

There were concerns about questions that seemed particularly personal or went beyond what had been expected. This included questions about finances, relationships and health and well being. Whether or not the question seemed relevant was important here. For example, one person in the Child Maintenance Payments survey initially wondered why questions about the relationship between the couple were relevant, but later realised that they were important to understand how the Agency needed to operate. Other people did not make a connection between a question and the study objectives, and the relevance remained unclear. As we discuss in chapter 5, people did not always challenge such questions or refuse to answer them.

Finally, people also felt it was important that questions are neutral and not biased, and that responses are recorded accurately.

The sense that people were able to make of the questions, in terms of their depth, importance and relevance to the purposes of the study, influenced views about how worthwhile the research was and whether it was likely to effect change.

4.4.1 Interaction between interviewer and questions

The way in which the interviewer conducted the interview was an important influence on how people experienced the questions and the mode. This emerged in three ways.

First, generally injecting personality, warmth, humour, informality and ease into the interview situation made the interview a more positive experience for people even if they had some frustrations about the questions.

Second, people appreciated some interaction during the survey interview. They described the interviewer responding to things the participant said between questions, for example about the weather or about television programmes. They liked it if interviewers asked questions in an interested way, rather than reading them 'parrot fashion'. They appreciated help with questions they found difficult (such as working out their age when they gained a particular qualification) or acknowledgement that other people or the interviewer found a question difficult or the language unfamiliar or formal. They appreciated mild comments made by the interviewer in response to what they had said, such as 'that's bad' or 'that's interesting' or asking for more details. And people who chose to give longer answers rather than just selecting a response felt this was helpful to them and appreciated the time the interviewer allowed them.

Third, people appreciated a sensitive and thoughtful approach from the interviewer when sensitive topics were covered – reminding the participant that they did not have to answer particular questions, and not delving further than the participant wanted to go.

People's experiences of the questions were thus mediated by the interview, and a skilful interviewer was able to mitigate less positive experiences of the questions asked and the mode of questioning.

4.5 Understanding of next steps in the research process

There was very limited awareness of and engagement with what happens to data after the interview, perhaps surprising given the emphasis placed on research being used. People generally had only vague notions of what the analysis might involve and talked about both survey data and the qualitative interviews being collated, charts and graphs drawn up, and percentages produced. It seemed particularly hard for people to see how the qualitative data might be used, but they talked about interviews being summarised, the irrelevant material being taken out, and majority views being drawn out. Some people assumed the data would be analysed statistically, although there was also awareness that quotes would be used. One man was struck by how much interpretation of qualitative data must be needed, worried about whether this introduced inaccuracy and suggested interviewers should sometimes check their interpretation with the participant. People generally had little idea of what the report might look like or involve.

What seemed clearer to them was that the findings would be shared with the government or whoever commissioned the research, and used to bring about change. Some had clear views about what sort of change this would involve, others were less clear especially if it was not obvious from the interview. But there was generally a strong notion that research would be taken seriously and used.

Although few raised the issue spontaneously, there was much interest in feedback, particularly demonstrating that the research had been used and showing how. This was emphasised by some people as very important to prove that their time had not been wasted and that the research had been valuable and served a purpose. There was also interest in seeing the findings themselves, to see how other people's views or experiences compared. There was a feeling that seeing the findings would bring a sense of completion, satisfaction and credibility, and prove that the research had been worthwhile. Where people had been less clear about the purpose of the research, or had found questions in the interview puzzling, they felt that seeing the findings would help them to make sense of their experience.

4.6 Construction of interviewer and participant roles

Looking across the research process, it is striking that participants seem to have a fairly clear sense of the respective roles of interviewer and participant, and to construct a role for themselves that might be seen as quite passive.

This emerges in a number of ways. There is a pattern of swift decision-making about participation, based on assumptions that are not verbalised and checked out, and for some people arising from a feeling that there is simply no reason not to take part. Few ask questions, either before or after the interview. There is a sense of nervousness for some people before the interview. This seems to reflect a concern about what the interviewer will be like and how they will be treated (resulting in relief that the interviewer was 'not intimidating'), and concern about whether their own performance will be satisfactory. During the interview itself, people are reluctant to say or do anything that might be construed as offensive to the interviewer. They worry about their performance and about being too slow. They tend not to challenge questions that seem irrelevant or too personal, nor to withhold information. There is a strong sense that if the question is asked it must be important, and so should be answered.

"Well, what I felt was he was the interviewer and if he wanted to repeat a question that was up to him and it was up to me to answer." (Female, 61 and over, qualitative participant)

There is also little curiosity about what happens next and, although the idea of feedback meets a strongly positive response, people did not ask for it at the time. Finally, when we asked whether participants, or people like them, ought to be more involved in research, for example contributing to the design or the questions or commenting on reports, people were quick to say that that was a role for researchers as 'the experts'. None of the studies had involved participatory methods. It may be that people would have made more sense of the concept if they had, or that the views of people who had taken part in a number of research studies might be different. Their comments highlight that this is not the role that those interviewed instinctively saw for themselves, and that detailed preparation and support would be necessary for people to play this role.

There were exceptions, of course, but the overall impression is one of constructing the interviewer role as a fairly passive one. This has important implications for how people participate and, as we see in the next chapter, for controlling information giving.

4.7 Key ethical issues

The interview interaction is a critical part of the experience for participants and a central aspect to get right. The interview is an unfamiliar, and sometimes unnerving, situation and people look to the interviewer to put them at their ease, show respect and create a positive experience. The varied responses sought to managing strong feelings in the interview underline the subtlety of the interaction, and this is also illustrated by the fact that people describe quite differently interviews on the same study conducted by the same researcher. This has important implications for the skills, qualities and training interviewers need. The importance of the manner of the interviewer perhaps emerges more strongly than in researchers' debates about ethics or in ethical approval procedures. Respect and rapport emerge in the study as more important than information exchange and matching.

People seem to want a smooth interaction which is to some degree naturalistic and makes sense to them within their understanding of the purpose of the research. Having scope for self-expression is important, which raises issues about questionnaire design, and there seems to be some ambiguity about how much information is actually recorded in survey interviews. Being well prepared especially for personal topics is clearly important.

People know, and think, little about what happens next with the data and particularly about what reports might look like and what use might be made of the research. This perhaps raises questions about how informed their informed consent is. There is very strong interest in feedback, and the study raises issues about how research is used and the transparency of study objectives and purposes. Finally, people assume a fairly passive and circumscribed role for themselves, and this raises questions about whether and how more active engagement should be encouraged.

5

Key aspects of the interview experience

This chapter looks in detail at three particular aspects of the interview experience: the voluntary nature of answering questions within the interview and people's ability to control the level of information given; confidentiality; and the 'footprints' left by the interview. All three are important aspects of people's decision-making around participation and of how they experience the interview.

We begin with controlling information-giving. As noted in earlier chapters, people placed importance on being told, at varying points, that they were free to choose not to answer individual questions. We also noted in chapter 4 that participants tend to take a fairly passive role in interviews, and this raises important questions about how far people are able to control the information they give. In this chapter we look at the thought given in advance to controlling information giving; the areas where information was withheld or where thought is given to withholding; the strategies employed, and what makes this easier or more difficult.

We then look at people's understanding of confidentiality and the aspects that were important to them. The final section of this chapter explores the aftermath of the research, or the 'footprints' left. It is here that experiences of benefit and harm are considered. These sections report the types of positive and negative footprints that were experienced, how they balance against each other, and what drives or explains participants' experiences.

5.1 Controlling information giving

There were three broad groups of people in terms of their experiences of controlling the level of information given during the interview. The first group, which was the predominant experience, did not feel there was any need to withhold information or decline to answer any questions. This group included people from all five studies, and indeed all the participants from the Learning for Life and Leisure survey. The second group were people who gave some thought to withholding information, either during the interview or afterwards, but did not, in practice, withhold. The third was a small group of people who did withhold some information during their interview. All the main studies apart from the Learning for Life and Leisure survey were represented here. Reports of withholding were more common among participants in qualitative research, and as we discuss in section 5.1.3 different strategies were used in surveys and in qualitative research.

5.1.1 Advance preparation

As we noted in chapter 4, participants did not generally give very much thought in advance to how they might respond to questions, and this includes thinking about what might be withheld. Not knowing in detail the coverage of the interview was relevant. One woman also said that she did not prepare in advance because she knew that answering questions was voluntary.

"I didn't really think too much about the interview because not knowing the exact questions – She explained to me the type of answers you would be giving and everything and, again, if I felt I didn't want to answer it I could say 'no comment.'" (Female, 31-40, survey participant)

Only one person thought specifically about how much he would be willing to say. He was prompted by a discussion with his ex-partner about the content of her interview, in the Child Maintenance Payments study, to prepare a strategy for dealing with questions about personal finance. What was more common was to wonder about how personal the questions might be and to think what they would say if they did not want to answer something.

“I just thought that because it’s a government thing, from the Home Office ... I wonder if there’s going to be any... really probing questions, because I’m just going to say ‘I’m not saying ‘owt’ I was just thinking [about] how far into mine and other people’s personal lives they were prepared to go....” (Male, 41-50, survey participant)

What is notable here is that people who gave forethought to the content of the interview were not necessarily those who actually withheld during the interview. Similarly those who withheld information during the interview had not necessarily given any forethought to the content of the interview. Nevertheless, people who felt, on reflection they had given too much information during the interview stressed that more information about the content of the interview would have been helpful for their own preparation.

5.1.2 Question topics leading to withholding or discomfort

Participants described having withheld information about health, finances, other family members and past or current relationships. In addition, people thought about withholding or wondered if they had said too much in response to questions about race and religious discrimination (in the People, Families and Community survey), and about future plans or likely needs (to understand changing transport needs in the Transport and Travel in Later Life study). The reasons for either withholding, considering withholding or expressing retrospective discomfort at having answered questions reflect people’s feelings about the questions asked, as described in chapter 4.

First, the perceived lack of relevance of the question was the dominant reason for either withholding information, considering withholding or discomfort after the interview about the information given. For example, participants in the Transport and Travel in Later Life study were sometimes troubled by questions about where other family members lived and how often participants see them (part of mapping participants’ travel behaviour).

The sensitivity of the questions was also relevant, especially emotionally painful issues that were more recent.

Finally, lack of belief in confidentiality led one participant to withhold information, and in other cases, not being clear about who had access to the data left people felt uneasy about what they had said – discussed further in section 5.1.5 below.

5.1.3 Strategies employed to withhold information

Where people did withhold information, different strategies were used in qualitative and quantitative interviews.

In surveys, participants said they had used the ‘none of the above’ answer option or had said explicitly that they did not want to answer the question. In qualitative research a more varied range of strategies were practised. Here, people described asking the interviewer to turn off the tape-recorder and talking ‘off the record’; deliberately giving misinformation knowing that it did not ‘add up’; directly questioning the relevance of particular information; and holding back or giving an outline but not details. This last approach involved relying on the interviewer’s skill in reading their reticence and moving on. The inference here is that responsibility for controlling the level of information given during an interview rests, at least in part, with the interviewer, who must read potentially subtle cues and manage the interaction without the participant having to be explicit about not wanting to answer a question.

“There were a couple of points where it strayed off into an area which I couldn’t see was concerned with the interview at all and [the interviewer] got a pretty short answer. So we didn’t go down that road, which was probably quite happy from everybody’s point of view.” (Male, 61 and over, qualitative participant)

Interestingly, participants in qualitative research who had withheld information did not use the strategy of saying explicitly that they did not want to answer the question. This is striking both because it was a tactic used in survey interviews and because people who reported not needing to withhold information commonly said that if they had needed to, they would simply have said that they did not want to answer the question, or in some cases stopped the interview. This suggests that withholding information during a qualitative research interview may be more difficult to operationalise than participants anticipate, and may be more difficult than in survey interviews.

5.1.4 Facilitators and barriers to controlling the level of information given

Among those who did withhold information, reassurance about the voluntary nature of giving information, both before and during the interview, had helped. Participants explained that although they may have withheld anyway, this made doing so easier without awkwardness. An unpressurised interview situation was also important. Participants pointed to the value of an unhurried pace, which meant they could take their time before answering and assess either whether they wanted to answer or how much detail they wanted to give. People also felt that feeling comfortable in the interview and having a good rapport with the interviewer made it easier to withhold information.

Participants who had not needed to withhold during the main interview often asserted their confidence in doing so had they needed to. They saw two additional factors as relevant: their own personal confidence and the increased comfort of being interviewed in their own homes, on their 'own territory'.

The factors that acted as barriers to controlling the level of information given are complex, and indeed there are suggestions within the data that some facilitators can work as barriers too. For example, although both participant-interviewer rapport and assurances about the voluntary nature of information giving helped people to withhold, they also seemed to make people more forthcoming. The fact that the interview situation was relaxed and comfortable and that they trusted the interviewer made it harder to find reasons to withhold information.

"I think again that would depend on ... the rapport that you've got with the ... interviewer All the interviewers that I've spoken to have been very professional and I've been comfortable with all of them. But you perhaps would open to some more than others." (Male, 51-60, qualitative participant)

Reassurance that giving information was voluntary also seemed to remove a feeling of the need to exert control over the level of information giving, and to some extent to disinhibit control. Participants seem to place symbolic value on the reassurance that they can withhold information which in turn seems to cause them to relax and feel safe to give any information. On the other hand, there were also people who did not recall being told that giving information was voluntary and felt this had made it harder for them to control how much they said, although they thought they may not have absorbed or remembered being told this.

As noted in chapter 3, although participants are aware of the voluntary nature of participation, once they have agreed to participate they have a strong sense of commitment. This similarly applied to the content of the interview: people felt a sense of commitment to giving the required research data during the interview.

"I don't know why I was asked those questions ... I was asked so I answered, because I had committed myself into doing this interview Now that you're asking me and going back, I'm not sure, I don't think .. they were relevant. But... I was told before the interview that I would be asked some personal questions and I agreed. So I answered." (Female, 31-40, qualitative participant)

This was particularly so where they had a strong sense of the value of the research and its ability to effect change, most marked in the Child Maintenance Payment studies.

Being unprepared for the questions was also relevant. Where participants had not expected a topic to be included their surprise and the need to recall details, coupled with the need to manage their emotions if it was a painful topic, seemed to make it difficult for them to consider how much they wanted to say. It was particularly in these cases that people stressed the need for more information in advance about the content of interviews. As we noted in chapter 3, there seems to be a need for giving information at more than one point, since some people who had read advance letters appeared still not to be expecting topics that had been mentioned in them.

“I’d have been better prepared, in my mind, in thinking right, we’re going to talk about this. And I wouldn’t have had to have sat here thinking ‘yes, that’s what happened’, and thinking ‘right, don’t get emotional now’.” (Female, 41-50, qualitative participant)

There was a tendency to assume that a question is relevant simply because it is being asked, even if its relevance was not obvious to the participant, as we noted in chapter 4. People said that they had not challenged or refused to answer a question that seemed irrelevant, even though they wondered at the time or later about its relevance. There was also a feeling that it would have been rude or impolite to refuse to answer questions, and that this might upset the interviewer or obstruct them in their job.

The fact that the information had already been given to other sources also led people to see less need for restraint in the interview. It is not entirely clear why this made people more prepared to give full answers, since it did not seem to be a belief that the research team would access this other information. The fact that the research context was a more positive one than the one in which the information had already been given seemed relevant.

Finally, there were also some misunderstandings about the study: as we noted in chapter 3, people were occasionally unclear about the nature of the research and the fact that it was voluntary. Although these misunderstandings were usually corrected at the beginning of the interview, there seemed sometimes to be a lingering sense of compulsion and a desire to demonstrate that participants had ‘nothing to hide’.

5.1.5 Feelings about information giving

Participants discussed how they felt about the information they had given during their main interview after that interview had happened. One group of people were satisfied with the information given or gave little thought to the content of the main interview afterwards. This included people who had had some anxieties before the interview about personal questions. There were also people who thought on reflection they had said too little. They had withheld some information during the interview, but on reflection saw less reason for this restraint, although this was not a significant regret.

“I think there might have been a few things that I ... wish I had said, but I was happy with the answer that I did actually give her Once she’d finished and I’d thought about it, I thought ... ‘you don’t know this person, they don’t know you, so it doesn’t matter’. I should really have just answered it fully, but at the time, I wasn’t thinking like that. But ... I wasn’t beating myself up about it after.” (Female, 31-40, qualitative participant)

The third, small, group of people thought they had said too much. They had thought about withholding or had concerns about some information giving but had not withheld, for the reasons noted above. This left them with a sense of unease or, in more extreme cases, quite

strong anxiety, immediately after the interview or in the days that followed. This was strongly associated with being unsure about what happened next to the data and about the limits of confidentiality. None of the people with these concerns had contacted NatCen after the interview, although all would have been given contact details. In the most extreme case the participant had experienced a sense of worry for days after her main interview:

"Afterwards I was quite concerned, I felt quite anxious for a few days, I've said a lot of personal stuff here and where's it going to go? And even though [the interviewer] speaks about confidentiality I thought that anybody could get hold of the tape and even though I haven't said specifically who I am in there I just feel very anxious that I had said too much, and I was a bit worried The thing that bothered me is the tape, who listens to the tape, where does the tape go, can I really trust what she says?" (Female, 41-50, qualitative participant)

Overall, the study highlights how subtle the issues surrounding controlling information giving are, and suggests they are particularly complex in qualitative studies.

5.2 Confidentiality

5.2.1 Meanings of confidentiality

As we noted in chapter 3, being told that the research was confidential provided important reassurance when people were first approached and were deciding about participating. People also valued being told this immediately before the interview began. Some people had specific concerns about confidentiality, but for others the assurance of confidentiality appeared to come before they had formed a concern or question about it.

People used a variety of terms in talking about confidentiality:

- the word 'confidentiality' itself was much used, although this may reflect its use by the Ethical Research interviewers at the start of the interview and in letters and leaflets. People also talked about 'in confidence', 'everything said in confidence', 'strictly confidential'
- notions of privacy: 'private and confidential', everything being 'kept private'
- security: people talked about 'how safe and secure the information would be', 'data held securely'
- anonymity: the phrase 'anonymous' was occasionally used, either apparently as a synonym for confidentiality or to denote names not being used in the report
- and more generally people talked about 'information [not being] passed on' or 'the information wouldn't go to anyone else'

People appeared to understand confidentiality in a variety of ways, but most seemed not to have a wide and detailed understanding of the term. They talked either in very general terms or about just one or two of the aspects described below. Of course it may be that they had a more detailed understanding at the time, but this does suggest that people do not have full understandings of confidentiality. The picture seems to be one where people are much reassured by confidentiality assurances without having particularly clear requirements themselves. This suggests that confidentiality assurances have to some extent a symbolic power, and that they provide a general reassurance without necessarily being assessed or understood in detail.

It was difficult to get a sense of what aspects of confidentiality mattered to people: they tended to respond by saying what they had been told and saying they were happy with this. A number of different issues arose here.

First, people talked about ‘information’ being kept within the research team. Since people understood that a report would be produced, the implication was that people were talking here specifically about the data. One person for example referred to the data being held on a database which is protected and cannot be accessed by others, and people talked about tapes not being listened to by other people. Precisely who the data was kept from varied and encompassed:

- the organisation commissioning the research
- the CSA
- government more generally
- other research teams within NatCen⁹
- people known to the participant: neighbours (particularly with reference to questions on race relations in the People, Families and Communities Survey), ex-partners (in the Child Maintenance Payment studies)
- criminals who might target the participant or their home for example through knowing about their travel habits: people were reassured that even if a laptop had fallen into the wrong hands, the data would be ‘locked’ and would not be accessible
- or more generally ‘other people’, ‘all and sundry’ or the general public.

There was particular concern in qualitative interviews about who might listen to the tape, and this was given more emphasis than who might read the transcript. This may reflect that people engaged directly with the recording but did not see the transcript, but it may also reflect a sense of the personal ‘voice’. People talked about tapes and transcripts being destroyed once they had been used. There were references to survey data being destroyed, but this seemed to be a confusion with what people had been told in the Ethics in Social Research interview about the destruction of tapes.

Third, people talked about names and addresses not being passed on to marketing organisations who might use them for their own marketing purposes.

People also talked about names and addresses not being linked with responses. Here, some anticipated names and addresses not being linked in the way data was stored at NatCen, data being passed on to the commissioning organisation but without names, and names not being used in the report, although others talked more generally and it was not clear exactly what they understood. People also specifically referred to quotes not being attributed to named people.

“Well, similar to you he said it’s total confidentiality. They don’t pass on names or addresses or anything like that. Once the information is put into a report then that information is then destroyed.” (Male, 51-60, survey participant)

Finally, people talked about the main study interviewer not passing on personal information about them. The fact that the interviewer was a stranger to them provided reassurance here.

5.2.2 Beliefs about confidentiality

People seemed generally to accept what they had been told about confidentiality, although some did emphasise that this was a matter of trust on their part. The manner of the interviewer, and impressions of the research approach overall, made people feel more secure in having this trust. They were also reassured by the feeling that the interview had not covered particularly personal topics, and that the mode and depth of questioning meant they had not said anything

⁹This may reflect the emphasis placed by the Ethics in Social Research team on the fact that they had not seen the main study interview data and that the main study teams would not see the Ethics in Social Research interviews

particularly revealing or that was not already known about them. The fact that people drew on these issues for reassurance perhaps suggests that they did not altogether take statements of confidentiality at face value.

“If you’ve told me, looked me in the eyes and said to me your name and address is not going to go in with this, I would trust you I don’t think I’ve said anything untowards that even if they did find out my name I’m speaking as I find and that’s the truth. And really at this point in time I think I’m covered with our democracy. I’m hoping, I am. Trust, again. But you’ve told me that the name will be scrubbed off before it gets to the powers that be and I will trust you.” (Male, 61 and over, qualitative participant)

There were however occasional cases where people expressed concerns, questions or doubts about confidentiality in the Ethics in Social Research interview. As noted in section 5.1.5 above, this heightened concerns if people felt they had said more than they intended. These questions about confidentiality arose either at the time of the main study interview or after, which suggests that people have information at the end of the interview as well as before. It is possible that the Ethics in Social Research interview generated or crystallised some concerns, although it was also an opportunity to give more information about confidentiality and data handling processes which reassured some people. These concerns seemed to arise where people had either not absorbed or been given full information before the interview, or where they had particular concerns about state intervention or the powers of police or government. This suggests that more thorough information-giving might address some concerns but that others are more intractable.

5.3 The footprints of research

This section looks at the imprints left behind by the interview experience, and examines the factors that drive this. In this section the term ‘footprint’ is used to describe aspects of the interview aftermath. A more usual term, such as impact, would suggest a stronger aftermath than was present for some participants. People’s experiences of footprints, like their general experiences of research participation, ranged from banal to more significant.

Participants described both positive and negative footprints. They generally described positive footprints in stronger terms, and negative footprints were usually described as mild and short lived. The exception to this was among participants who were concerned about what happened to their data after the interview or who strongly doubted the value of the research. The strongest expressions of positive and negative footprints together arose among people in the Child Maintenance Payment studies who had participated because of a strong belief in the capacity of the research to lead to improvements.

The footprints of the research were usually experienced immediately after the research participation. They were sometimes prompted by participants’ discussion of the research with a partner, family member or friend, but more usually were described as occurring to the participant when they thought about the interview afterwards. How long these feelings lasted varied. For some they were felt only immediately after the interview. Other people said they lasted several days, or that they were still current when the Ethics in Social Research interview was undertaken up to two weeks after the main interview.

5.3.1 Positive footprints

Taking part in the research led to a range of positive feelings, which reflected people’s reasons for participating in research – see chapter 3.

- Feeling good about making a valuable contribution: Participants were left with ‘a good taste in the mouth’ where they felt their contribution had been of use. This

either came from seeing a potential for wider benefit from the research, or when participants had been concerned about their performance and the interviewer had specifically reassured them about the quality and value of their contribution.

- Validation: This arose in two different ways. The first of these was among the Child Maintenance Payment study participants in particular, where the existence of the research study and the fact that it had been commissioned by government reaffirmed the importance of the issue being investigated and their experiences. Secondly, across the main studies participants also described a sense of validation in being listened to, especially if they had previously felt particularly unheard.

“To be able to voice an opinion as a 65 year old woman, disabled, health problems, to be able to say to someone that was listening in the hope that something could be done. That’s what I felt.” (Female, 61 and over, qualitative participant)

- Catharsis: people talked about feeling it had been beneficial to talk, particularly to a stranger, about an experience that mattered greatly to them or about which they had strong feelings. For some, however, this was only really beneficial because they felt it was of wider benefit.
- Increased awareness and understanding: Across all main studies, people also described feeling that participation had improved their understanding or awareness. In the Child Maintenance Payments survey some participants reported seeing things from other viewpoints, such as the other parent or the CSA itself. As we noted in chapter 4 this seems to arise from response options, attitudinal questions and the use of hypothetical scenarios in survey questions. On the Transport and Travel in Later Life study participants sometimes described an increased awareness of their reliance on public transport, or the fact that they used their car very often. In the People, Families and Communities Survey participants talked about being more aware or concerned about their local area and community relations. One person talked more generally about having more insight into her own thought processes and what her opinions were based on, and participants in the Learning for Life and Leisure survey sometimes reported feeling a heightened interest in a return to adult learning. Although largely positive, one man had inferred from some questions in the Transport and Travel in Later Life study that the government was thinking of introducing a new maximum age at which people would be allowed to drive.
- Enhanced view of self: this positive footprint was described only by women. Taking part in the Learning for Life and Leisure study had helped one participant to realise that she had undertaken a good deal of learning in recent years, although she had not thought of it as learning, and this gave her a sense of pride in her achievements. Among the Child Maintenance Payment studies participants there was a stronger and more lasting footprint. These women described how, in discussing the breakdown of their relationships with their children’s fathers, they came to realise their personal achievements and independence.

“It did give you a kind of boost, a positive feeling...I actually sat there thinking to myself throughout the interview, ‘I’ve gone through three years that went from a horrible start, went really downhill and it’s actually come out, got through the bitter side of it all now’ and I sat there thinking ‘I’ve done this, this is my past and I can talk about it.’” (Female, 31-40, qualitative participant)

5.3.2 Negative footprints

A range of negative footprints were also described:

- Re-living past difficult experiences: Some participants from the Child Maintenance Payment studies discussed the emotional turbulence of reliving painful past experiences during their interviews. This was more marked among qualitative interview participants. Some thought about the past for several days after the interview; others moved on quickly. This, in part, rested on how prepared participants had felt for the interview to include questions about their relationship breakdown¹⁰, but also related to participants' view of the usefulness of this information in the context of the study producing wider benefit.
- The mental 'cost' of participation: People also talked about finding the interview tiring or demanding, boring, and frustrating. This arose particularly where they felt the interview had not been relevant or had not covered important issues, where they found the pace rushed, or where they did not find the use of show cards helpful or interesting.
- No-one described experiencing a lesser sense of self-worth after participating. However, there was occasional embarrassment at their own responses; particularly at having demonstrated strong negative feelings. In these cases people sometimes wished they had handled their responses better, or for example wished that they had not sworn during their interview.
- Concern over disclosure and confidentiality: as noted earlier, people who felt they had said more than they wanted to, particularly if they felt concerned about who might have access to the data, were left anxious and upset.

The footprints experienced by participants were largely driven by three things: the experience of the interview and how enjoyable participation had been; their assessment of the value of the research; and the presence or absence of concerns about confidentiality. These three factors interacted with each other in forming the footprints left behind.

For participants who had experienced the interview as enjoyable, there were more likely to be positive footprints after the interview had ended. This depended largely on the interaction between the interviewer and participant being 'comfortable' and the experience of the interview being a pleasant one. In some cases this could mitigate the potentially more negative effect of seeing little wider benefit in the research. Participants here commented on the enjoyability of their research participation despite doubting the value of the research.

Participants who had understood the research would contribute to wider benefit described largely positive footprints. These could mitigate more negative feelings. For example, the woman who was very concerned about disclosure and about confidentiality nevertheless said that, on balance:

"I lost so much because I wasn't given the right information [about Child Support] and given the right help ... and if research can help people to listen to people –.... I didn't want to take the whole idea of the interview back I think if I'd had the opportunity to do the first interview again I would have done it different." (Female, 41-50, qualitative participant)

¹⁰Some participants in these studies expressed surprise at the inclusion of the topic of their relationship breakdown in the interview, although others had been aware it would be covered. This topic had been expressly mentioned in the initial advance letter, but this was not information that participants always recalled, even where they did remember receiving the letter.

Participants who felt that the interview was less able to contribute to positive change were likely to describe either an absence of any footprints, or more negative footprints.

"[An improvement to the research is] maybe to be more specific. I suppose if you had to find a more specific type of information then your questions would be more... more precise, more precise words that just relate to that subject or to that issue or to that matter. But in this case it's quite wide. I think it's very wide. And I suppose it's one of the things, you know, you have to help, but then there would be like, 'Okay, so what?' Maybe a waste of time in the end." (Female, 41-50, survey participant)

Finally, where participants were left with concerns or anxieties about what happened to their data after the interview, or were worried about the personal nature of the information they had disclosed, anxiety or concern felt could overshadow any potentially positive footprints in participation and leave participants with a more negative sense.

5.4 Key ethical issues

It was rare for people to withhold information in the interview or to regret what they had said, but people described having queries about the area of questioning which they did not always articulate. The barriers to exerting more control over the level of disclosure during the interview underline the passive role participants ascribe to themselves as well as the relaxed and comfortable rapport between interviewer and participant. This level of 'comfort' was desired and valued by participants (as seen in chapter 4) and yet there are suggestions here that it may have a beguiling effect. This raises important questions about how participants can be enabled to exert as much control over information giving as they may want to.

People have varied understandings of confidentiality, but despite its importance they appear not to have detailed requirements nor to assess what they are told very questioningly. The study suggests a need for more thorough information-giving, both before and after the interview.

The footprints left by research are driven by people's experiences of the interview, their sense of its value, and their understanding of what happens to their data later. Positive footprints echo people's motivations in taking part in the interview. The findings suggest that there may be a need to do more to help people to prepare fully for the interview, particularly ensuring they are clear about the inclusion of sensitive topic areas, and re-affirms the need for multiple information events including after the interview itself.

6

Discussion

In this final chapter we discuss the key themes emerging from the study.

6.1 Scope of ethics

Our approach in the study has been to construct definitions and dimensions of ethics from people's reflections on the experience of taking part in research. This raises a question as to whether what has emerged should necessarily be construed as ethics, rather than just good research practice.

We see the issues raised as falling within the scope of research ethics for two reasons. First, they are consistent with the dimensions of ethics people articulated, albeit often hesitantly, at the beginning of interviews – respect; morality, integrity and probity; acting beyond self interest, and following procedures. Where familiarity with the term 'ethics' meant we were able to relate the issues raised to concepts of ethics, people did see the issues discussed in their interview as being aspects of ethics.

Second, as others have noted (e.g. Dench, Iphofen & Huws, 2004), ethical guidelines generally reflect a range of different concepts of ethics. They encompass avoiding harmful consequences or outcomes (a 'utilitarian' approach); behaviour led by moral principles, concepts of fairness and the avoidance of wrong (a 'deontological' approach); collaboration and the avoidance of imposition (a 'relational' approach), and cultural sensitivity and responsive communication (an 'ecological' approach). We see the issues raised by participants as consistent with these approaches to ethics.

6.2 The status of participants' perspectives

We do not see much that is fundamentally in conflict with researchers' definitions and conceptions of ethics. The issues raised by participants are generally anticipated by the topics covered in research ethics guidelines or codes of conduct. There are differences in emphasis, and participants' conceptions add texture to the perhaps drier principles articulated by researchers.

There is however sometimes a tension between participants' preferences on the one hand, and data quality and response rates on the other. For example, encouraging slower and more considered decision-making might ensure that people gave more thought to the possible costs of taking part in research, but would also be detrimental to response rates. Doing more to help people to exercise the right not to answer all questions might lessen concerns for some participants, and might lead to more accuracy in responses given, but it would also lead to more incomplete data. Ensuring that participants are never uncomfortable in an interview might involve asking only simplistic and unchallenging questions. What might be experienced by the participant as repetitive questioning might be seen by researchers as an important form of validation.

Researchers would argue that ethical practice needs to be formulated within the context of the need for research to be robust, rigorous and good enough to be taken seriously. This is not, in principle, in opposition with what participants say. They too see it as important that research is unbiased, representative of the researched population, and accurately captures views and experiences. Their comments perhaps imply an acknowledgement of the need for a pragmatic balance between ethics and data quality. But there are differences in where the line might be drawn, which will reflect in part the different theoretical perspective of individual researchers.

Although a better understanding of participants' perspectives can guide researchers' decision-making, there will clearly remain a need for detailed, considered, professional judgement,

balancing what will sometimes be conflicting pressures of participants' perspectives, the need for robust data, and practical constraints of time and money.

The study findings do not point to prescriptive or bureaucratic responses. Determining what is appropriate in interview coverage, or in interviewer behaviour, or in giving people information about research studies, requires careful, reflexive research practice rather than fixed rules and procedures. Responses to different forms of information-giving, for example, emphasise the value of naturalistic and authentic communication rather than form-filling or long written statements. Views about the interview dynamic and the participant-interviewer relationship suggest a need for training, reflection and self-critique rather than prescribed behaviours.

The findings do not lend themselves to a formulaic listing of 'dos and don'ts', but we hope that a better understanding of participants' experiences of the interview might inform the professional judgements made by researchers.

6.3 Information and decision-making

The study suggests that the participants' model of decision-making does not always parallel that assumed by researchers. Researchers place emphasis on consent as an ongoing process, its clearest expression being in the actual participation in an interview but the nature of that participation being a matter of negotiation during the interview. Participants often make quick decisions, before they have received all the information, which are seen as final. The difference is arguably greater in practice than in theory. Participants understand the interview remains voluntary, and they want to be allowed to exercise control over what they actually say. It is thus more a question of researchers enabling participants to operate in this way than of a fundamental difference of principle.

However, the study does raise questions about how to provide information. One implication of the dominant model of decision-making could be that all information should be provided at the first contact, if this is where many participants make their decision. But it is unlikely that people would take it all in, the volume of information given could discourage participation, and there seems also to be value in repeated information-giving using different modes and different tones. This suggests information-giving in stages, but supported by messages that people do not need to decide immediately, and that they can change their mind later. There are also clearly differences in how much information different people want or need. This suggests it may be useful to establish routes by which participants who want more information can access it voluntarily, such as on a website.

There are indications that we may need to do more to help to prepare people for the interview. There seems to be a need for more information about the content, coverage of the interview and style of the interview. The latter is perhaps most difficult since the research shows that interview mode is not experienced consistently, and the actual interview dynamic cannot be predetermined or standardised. But providing more information seems important to support decision-making, relieve anxiety and help people prepare – having an opportunity to recall relevant events, to formulate what they might want to say, and to think about how much information they give. There is perhaps scope for researchers to prompt participants to think through more consciously what it might be like to take part in an interview.

There is a responsibility to provide information which helps people to assess risk, given that research is an unfamiliar experience. But a degree of risk and anxiety will always remain in what is a live interaction, and we should not be over-protective. People are entitled to choose to do something even though they feel nervous or uncertain about it, have not engaged with the information provided, and have not thought through all the possible consequences.

The interview itself is also a learning event for participants and will remain one, given its unfamiliarity, even if they have more information in advance. It is clear that people continue to formulate questions about the research during and after the interview, and this underlines the

importance of information, and access to the research team, after the interview itself. Since people may not be proactive in seeking it – people with clear concerns about confidentiality after the interview did not seek further information – it seems important that researchers anticipate their needs to avoid or alleviate negative footprints.

6.4 The unfamiliarity of the interview situation

It is striking that taking part in research is an unfamiliar experience for people, and this seems to make it hard for them to engage very actively with it. This has a number of implications.

First, there is not a strong discourse of rights and requirements in the way people talk about taking part in research – the discourse is more obviously about trust than about rights. People's aspirations and assumptions are not checked out, and not always clearly articulated to themselves. For example, although a lot of emphasis is placed on research being of value and used, people do not ask questions that would test the value of research, its quality, whether it is actually used, and although they respond positively to the suggestion of feedback they do not spontaneously ask for it.

It is clearly hard for people to think about their requirements, and their discourse tends to reflect very much the process in which they have taken part so that, for example, the aspects of confidentiality they see as important tend to be those they remember being told about, rather than their own internally-driven requirements. It seems to be hard for people to assess or evaluate what they are told about research procedures because research is unfamiliar and technical, and they are reassured by the presence of procedures without investigating what they are or assessing whether they are right. Ultimately trust will always be an element of the research relationship. But there is scope for researchers to work harder to encourage a more active and empowered engagement with research – perhaps highlighting that participants have rights or encouraging more interrogation of the research approach – which might help to ensure a positive experience of research.

Participant and researcher are seen as having clearly delineated roles, and people ascribe a fairly passive and limited role to themselves. Nevertheless, a strong emphasis emerges on being valued and being treated with respect. This emerges most powerfully in what they say about interviewer behaviour, but also in comments on incentives, feedback and the importance of feeling you have made a positive contribution. In our sample these emerge as more useful forms of reciprocity than information exchange, matching and wider involvement in research. But this of course will, to some extent, reflect the research approach people actually experience.

6.5 The centrality of the interview

Overall, the interview interaction is central to people's experiences of research. It is clearly a complex interaction and there is a lot going on for participants in the interview. They may have anxieties, about their own performance, about how personal the interview will be, about the interviewer, and about how they will be treated. They are assessing and learning from the interview itself. The interviewer provides reassurance and comfort, but there is also scope for this comfort to be to some extent beguiling, and a disinhibitor to controlling what is said. This reinforces the value of information being given in different events, modes and tones.

The unusualness of the interview is also underlined by the social situations with which people compared it. It was seen as like, or not like, seeing a GP; talking with a friend, an acquaintance or a stranger; counselling or therapy; an exam or school test; a job interview; a benefits interview, and being on Mastermind. It was not like the research that people had previously taken part in, which was often postal questionnaires, market research and selling under guise of research. Ultimately it is a unique experience – there is nothing quite like it.

This perhaps helps to explain why controlling the information they give is both important and difficult to do. The social events against which they situate research are either familiar, voluntary, initiated by the participant and likely to be entered into with a sense of the benefits sought; or they are ones which imply notions of right and wrong, external rules and procedures, and a sense of oppression. None of these are useful parallels with the research interaction when it comes to controlling what is said. There may be a need for more direct discussion of how participants might respond if they do not understand a question, see its relevance or want to answer it, and perhaps for more explicit negotiation when probing in qualitative interviews.

The role played by the interviewer, here and elsewhere, is critical. They hold the participant's experience of research in their hands. They are in a position to manipulate, exploit and create a negative experience, or to empower, enable and create a positive experience. They play a central role throughout people's experience. They are engaged in information-giving and supporting decisions about participation. They provide reassurance and establish rapport. They are looked to to be active and perceptive in facilitating people's withholding of information or management of how much they say. They determine or mediate the questions. And they are the primary recipients of data who are trusted with its handling.

This has important implications for who should carry out interviews, and for how they should be trained, monitored and supported. Participants arguably place a greater emphasis on the role of the interviewer than current processes for ethical scrutiny and approval do, where the focus is on the instrument rather than the person.

6.6 Differences between study mode and topic

Looking across the studies, the differences between qualitative and quantitative studies are perhaps more muted than one might have expected. There is much common ground in how they are experienced and the ethical requirements that emerge. There is more scope for self expression in qualitative interviews than in surveys, which is viewed positively but can also be problematic. It seems to lead to more instances where people want to limit or control what they say, but also seems to make it harder for them to do so. The nature of the qualitative interview as a personal account is perhaps underlined by the emphasis, within concerns about confidentiality, on who might listen to the tape, even when it is clearly anonymous. This raises questions about the assumption some people make that the analysis is quantitative and like that of survey data – they seem not to envisage the personal, case-orientation of qualitative data analysis.

What seems to be more meaningful than mode is how sensitive or personal the subject matter is. Rather than creating new ethical requirements or considerations, sensitive topics place particular emphasis on voluntariness in participation, being well prepared for the interview, rapport and interviewer behaviour, the scope for self expression, confidentiality, and the scope to withhold information. It is here that the strongest positive and the strongest negative footprints are experienced, and that the worthwhile-ness and change capability of research is most emphasised.

6.7 Following through

There is clearly strong interest in feedback on research findings and their intended or actual use. There is an emphasis on research being not only useable but used, and leading to improvements which are of wider benefit. Although there are differences in how this is articulated, some people's comments imply a stronger and more direct link between research and practice than the complex relationships which in reality exist. It is relevant both to decisions to participate and to assessments of the interview experience. It seems important that researchers do not fuel this assumption, and take care in what they say about the scope for research to effect change, perhaps placing more emphasis on the important and useable

information that research will generate than on statements about its actual future use. But this underlines too that the research relationship is tripartite, involving participant, researcher and funder, and that funders too have responsibilities.

The study highlights the importance of post-ethnography – of returning to the research field to see what footprint the research has left. There are experiences of research that cannot be gauged from the fact of people’s participation or from their apparent behaviour during the interview. The interview can be straightforward, even banal, but it can also be a unique, puzzling and powerful experience. We should do more to find out what footprint it has left, and to incorporate the lessons into future research practice.

Finally, there is also a need for more research on experiences of research and on its social construction. This study used interviews to explore the experience of the interview. Such an approach inevitably replicates the shortcomings of the interview¹¹, its power dynamics and its artificiality. There is scope to use other approaches too to understand the participant perspective – observation, group forums, broader discussion of ethics, simulation of the interview using video material for example. We need to explore the experience of other forms of research than the interview. And we also need to do more to understand the particular experiences and views of specialist populations such as children or experienced research participants.

¹¹See the Technical Report for further discussion of this.

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