

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

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**Locating Instances and
Generating Material**

Now you have a focus and a topic and, if you have read the previous chapter, you will be aware of the intellectual, political, ethical and personal issues at stake in embarking on your project. You next need to decide on the site or location for exploration and generation of your research material. I have deliberately avoided the term 'data' that is used in all sociological texts but also in Hammersley and Atkinson's (1993) book on Ethnography, for example their chapter on 'Recording and organizing data'. 'Data' has strong associations with 'evidence', 'information' and 'proof' as well as being associated with the products of more conventional sociological research methods. As such, I know it will be an immediate 'turn-off' for those of you who have come to cultural studies through more literary and textual routes. I don't want to lose you, so please read on.

My preference for the term 'research material' is not merely semantic, nor only a ploy to retain 'arts' students. The definition of 'material' encompasses the following dimensions all of which provide interesting keystones for cultural studies research.

1 In addition to more conventional notions of 'data', the term 'material' is inclusive of such things as, information, notes, work, as it were, the 'stuff' of research. This can therefore expand our understanding of empirical work to include: interview 'data', notes made on participant observation, personal research journals, autobiographies, dreams, etc. but also the products of literary and visual textual analysis.

2 It is also suggestive of substance and 'worldliness', if something is material, then it is grounded and embodied. This neatly encompasses both the kind of research material we produce, but also the way in which we do it. The connection, thus to the embodied researcher. Thus, neither the stuff of research, nor the researcher themselves are

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free-floating or disembodied. Rather, both must be located and locatable.

3 By definition, something which is material is of consequence, meaningful and significant. A useful criteria to apply to research material.

4 A final dimension of the term that provides us with useful sets of questions is that it should be applicable, apposite and germane to the research topic and the task in hand.

Thus, the label 'research material' incorporates all the 'stuff' of our research, whether the product of participant observation, interviews, or the close analysis of texts, e.g. film, comics, television programmes, of documents e.g. historical papers, diaries, photographs, of government reports, print news coverage, etc. In addition, it offers useful suggestions about the way we approach our research. The research material that you generate will be the core of your research and is what makes it uniquely yours. It can perform different functions, but your particular method of research will define and shape the nature of the material and will limit or facilitate your interpretation and analysis. The important thing to bear in mind when setting up your project is that the material you gather fulfils the function you require of it.

The kinds of projects you might be interested in within a cultural studies perspective could be: interpretation and use of popular texts; membership of a fan or sub-culture; the construction of celebrity across different media; the work of identity in a national and global context; the performance of gender in different public and private spaces; the construction of markets; presentation of 'green' issues through the media; cultural and political activism. And finally, the cultural producers, institutions and organisations of culture, although it is true that this dimension of 'culture' has been neglected in cultural studies (Born, 2000; Meijer, 2001).

Let me try to detail some of the dimensions of the different relationships or formations which are implied by the above.

1 Interpretation and use of popular texts. Still one of the key areas in cultural studies, given its focus on the extent to which 'the cultural', as it is embodied in popular texts produced by large cultural industries, determine or shape a sense of self and the social more generally. If this is the primary area of concern, then a way must be found to explore the connection between text or genres are interpreted and used by actual users and readers. Janice Radway, in her now classic study of romance readers (Radway, 1987), did exactly that in identifying a group of already defined readers of popular romantic fiction and, through questionnaires and interviews explored their interpretations and readings of romantic fiction. Her broader interest was in patriarchal positioning of women and the release which romance reading, and

the very act of reading itself, offered the women concerned. In other words, her broader research agenda looked at how romance as a powerful discourse within contemporary Western culture is commodified, circulated and consumed.

2 Membership of a fan or sub-culture. This requires a close and, indeed, participatory involvement with the group concerned. Henry Jenkins's work with the fans of *Star Trek* was an ethnographic account of this group written from an 'insider's' perspective. While the focus of the study is on the relationship between an enduring text of popular culture and its fans, Jenkins's study explores their interpretive strategies, the social organisation and cultural practices as well as its relationship to the mass media and consumer culture. Paul Hodkinson, himself a member of the Goth sub-culture, carried out research into his 'community' using participant observation and interviews in addition to textual analysis in his study. While interested in this specific cultural and social phenomenon, Hodkinson (forthcoming) argues for a post-modern approach to the construction of identity and community, relating this to both material practice and the existence of virtual communities.

3 The work of identity in different global and national contexts. Marie Gillespie explored identity work of Punjabi Londoners through long ethnographic contact, interviews, discussions, as well as analysis of the discourses of specific films and other texts used by households (Gillespie, 1995). Although her study is based on a specific group, socially and geographically located, she explores through interpretation of her material the significance of popular forms, especially television and video, in the processes of identity formation.

Youth clubs and other 'public' groupings provide often highly condensed yet embodied examples of interactions and experiments with identity, with belonging and not belonging, with finding your place and location (Back, 1996; Alexander, 2000).

4 The organisations and institutions of cultural producers. As we saw in Chapter 3, much less research energy has been put into this aspect of the cultural, but more recently, Georgina Born has carried out an ethnography of some of the BBC production contexts and Irene Costa Meijer interviewed the producers of three Dutch prime time soap operas in relation to their constructions of ethnicity (Bourne, 2000; Meijer, 2001).

Whatever your topic area, you will probably want to carry out some form of 'participant observation' and I now want to discuss this set of methods more generally before looking at some specific examples.

'Just looking' and participant observation

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Paul Willis (1980) specified the following techniques which make up participant observation:

- Participation
- Observation
- Participation as observer
- Observation as participant
- Just 'being around'
- Group discussion
- Recorded group discussion
- Unfocused interview
- Recorded unfocused interview.

You may find that what you are investigating demands some or all of the techniques mentioned above. This is likely if, for example, you are interested in the ways in which people interact and relate to one another within given sites or spaces, for example, the classroom or a night club, a household or the shopfloor. This is usually referred to as 'participant observation' and is the central method of ethnography, indeed, Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) suggest that the terms, ethnography and participant observation, are synonymous. By employing this kind of method, you will be able to go beyond talking to the actors involved through, say, the interview or group discussion, but the material you gather in this process can also be used to complement your interviews or group discussions. In this way it would provide a kind of 'descriptive context' in setting the scene of the action for your readers. This often enriches or fills out the character of your interviewee and can say quite a lot about them which would not necessarily reveal itself in an interview alone. Examples here would be: appearance; clothing, style and demeanour; setting: at home or the workplace; a person's presence within their setting: are they easy or nervous?, do they move around their space with authority?, and so on. Some may be uncomfortable with what seems like a covert, or even voyeuristic practice. However, my point in bringing this to your attention is that you will be picking up these kinds of clues in your different research encounters anyway, and interpreting them, usually coming to some evaluations or judgements about your respondents. This is what Beverley Skeggs has referred to as the 'tacit knowledge' we have of a particular social process or context (1994: 70). By making this apparent within your analysis, not only are you using all your senses in data collection, but you are acting with integrity in regard to your respondents and your readers. Alasuutari, speaking of research into media cultures, goes further and suggests that 'we

have the advantage of a very long personal field experience' in that we have inhabited the same culture which forms the background to our study (1999: 8). What I have just described is, if you like, a weaker use of participant observation than the more fully developed, long-term process which many researchers employ, in which extended observations are made of a particular setting or group. But what Willis describes as 'just being around' is an important part of research when you can 'feel the pulse' or take soundings of the people and places you want to explore further.

It is crucial to be clear about your purpose in embarking on this kind of field work and to understand your own role in this part of your research. It is very good to get into the practice of questioning yourself at different stages in the research. Here you might helpfully ask the following questions: to what extent must I be a participant in these activities: what role will I play during this research? How will I present myself to the subjects of my study? What is at stake in revelation and/or masquerade? How much do I declare of my purpose? What about trust, confidentiality, ethics?

These are not especially easy questions to answer but it is essential to clarify as much as you can about your intentions before you start. This will be necessary in order to give a clear signal when gaining access to your 'site' or group. You will obtain much more reliable and usable research material if you are able to operate on a sound footing.

Sarah Thornton, in her study of 'club cultures' which employed participant observation (Thornton, 1995), discusses the complication of her fieldwork by distinguishing between the two conflicting dimensions of ethnography: participation and observation. The former relies upon and legitimises what people *say*; the latter relies on what the researcher *sees*. We could go further than Thornton and suggest that the researcher as observer sees what people *do* rather than what they say. Junker (1960) further distinguishes between the 'complete participant', 'participant-as-observer', 'observer-as-participant', and 'complete observer'. This spectrum goes from the researcher's activities as wholly concealed where the researcher is incognito and is 'passing' as a member of the group, culture, community, to activities as observer where they are wholly detached and visible as observers. This is to indicate that each position requires particular kinds of research performance and will produce different kinds of research material.

In her research, in common with most examples used throughout this book, Thornton consciously performs a 'double move' in that she pursues a 'subjectivist' mode in her attempt to understand the world from the point of view of the clubbers but also pursues a more objectivist line of inquiry.

Thus, as participant/observers within a group, we can describe both how people account for their involvement in what they do, how they relate to each other, the way the atmosphere of the chosen site, etc. but in order to interpret and fully explore the answer to the question 'What is going on?', we need recourse to some analytical framework. This is to say, we begin to 'objectify' our data. Put simply, to analyse something is to take it apart. In order to do

this we move into the abstract, we draw on concepts and theories, in order to offer some analysis of the action. Here we would be adopting the ‘objectivist’ mode. I want to complicate matters further, however, and suggest that, although they are useful epistemological distinctions, neither of these modes operates in a pure form. The ‘real’ world of research is always situated and able to be situated within a context and an important part of that context is the researcher her or himself. Our own subjectivity and social identities pre-date any specific research project and will determine, not only our choice of topic, but, quite literally, what we see.

Spatial metaphor/between familiarity and strangeness

As we have seen, the tension always exists in a project using participant observation techniques between the ‘external’ view of the observer to the ‘internal’ view of the participant. It is the aim of the researcher to combine the two perspectives. This raises questions about your relationship to the group or culture of your study. Traditionally, anthropology aims to ‘discover’, through extended participant observation, the ways of life of particular cultures. Anthropologists use the distinctly problematic phrase ‘going native’ where the ethnographer becomes a part of the group and culture and is integrated into their daily lives, he/she becomes one of them. Doing cultural studies usually departs from this model in a number of ways. One of these is the researcher’s knowledge of the chosen field of study and, often, of the participants themselves. Most obviously, this is because cultural studies seeks to analyse and understand cultural practices and processes which are much nearer to ‘home’. Thus, at the very least, the researcher operates within the same overall cultural framework as his or her respondents. However, as undergraduate or postgraduate students, with limited time and funds, many of you will select aspects of culture and social groups for your research with which you are already familiar, if not a part. This is an almost inevitable part of doing cultural studies, and is often not only a question of pragmatics. It can also be, for example, a question of political commitment and desire for change, or a choice inspired by existing involvement and pleasures in, say, popular culture. There are distinct advantages to the knowledge which you can bring to your project based on your experience, but as discussed in Chapter 2, this is not without its problems and pitfalls. You will need to be aware of how this belonging and being part of the scene might also produce a partial account. That, while you ‘know’ the scene, you may be blind to different aspects of it. ‘Over-identification’ can also be an issue when the researcher identifies with a group and fails to critically analyse their activities, accounts or practices. Mark Pursehouse in his study of *Sun* readers, speaks of his conflicting identity positions, the traces within his subjectivity which made him a subject for the *Sun*. He also had a group of friends who had not gone to university and who were readers of the *Sun*. He argues for the importance and advan-

tage for him in his small-scale project of interviewing friends. 'I became increasingly grateful that I had some kind of prior knowledge to work with when I met the people I interviewed' (Pursehouse, 1989: 32). Here Pursehouse is acknowledging his experience and knowledge of the specific cultural community in which his readers are placed and the way in which he was able to mobilise that knowledge during his interviews. He goes further:

I think there were significant advantages in me knowing them, or being known by them, in some way. Firstly, and obviously, it facilitated the actual process of getting to talk and feeling comfortable about speaking on a range of subjects. It also meant that there could be no pretending to the illusion that 'researcher' could somehow meet with 'researched' in some kind of empty social vacuum. I had ideas about the positions and cultures in which they were likely to live, and they could identify me both as the 'researcher' and as someone involved in other relations. Simply, they were never just going to be 'Sun readers', and I was never just going to be an 'academic researcher'. (ibid.: 33)

What Pursehouse did was to contextualise his small sample, in terms of their gender and ethnicity, but also in their geographical location, their regionality, the patterns of employment in the geographical region they all came from, thus providing that broader context, not of generalisation, but of theorisation. His textual analysis of the *Sun* and his conversational interviews revealed the complexity of both and the often contradictory nature of the *Sun* and its readers in the period of the late 1980s.

As Hammersley and Atkinson put it, 'the ethnographer needs to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness; and, in overt participant observation, socially he or she will usually be poised between stranger and friend' (1993: 112). This is to emphasise the importance of reflexivity and to acknowledge that you, as researchers of the social, will inhabit different 'identities' throughout your project. The person who dresses formally to conduct an interview, or 'hangs around' with a group of musicians, is very different from the one who sits at her desk thinking about the material and writing an academic text.

There are, of course, sites or fields where your presence can go unnoticed, for example, 'public' spaces to which access is open. However, should you wish to study the workings of a news room of a television station, clearly questions of access become crucial and there will be a visibility of presence which will require some negotiation. But remember, however 'undercover' you might be, you are the agent with the gaze - you are doing the looking and seeing the world through your particular lens. You will always and already have your framework which will determine things you will notice which another researcher simply would not. Clearly, what we see is important but also what we do not see is equally revealing, for example, objects for which we have no available categories or behaviours, accounts of experience of which we have no knowledge and that we cannot interpret. To a great extent, therefore our research abilities and potential will depend on our competences

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and our available repertoires. There is therefore a necessity, to the extent that we are able, to reveal these to ourselves in order to be reflexive about our own position within our work. To do this is to begin to 'denaturalise' our own assumptions and prejudices as they are revealed within our research.

Being there

Most seminar discussions on the use of participant observer methods in research get rather bogged down in trying to answer the question 'What effect does the researcher have on the site of study?' This is clearly an issue but what underpins this question is the assumption that there is somehow, somewhere, an existing 'natural' site of interactive social beings which can, by implication, be 'captured' by the researcher. Certainly much conventional ethnographic writing constructs this version of the field. It tries to convince us of the 'truth' and 'reality' of the setting: 'this is what actually goes on'. You are, as a researcher, a participant in the field. The question is how you account for yourself in that position - both to the actors involved and within your research writing. Whatever you do, your presence will have an effect on what you are seeking to observe. You are part of the world you are studying, in a broader 'macro' sense of being part of the culture, but also in the 'micro' sense within the geography of your chosen setting or site. Returning to our definitions of 'material', you, literally, embody your research.

The kind of information you can gather through observing can be much richer and more revealing than simply asking the actors involved about their interest, their feelings and their attitudes towards the activity (whether a factory worker or shop worker or a shopper or night-clubber). However, we cannot treat this as 'raw material' or somehow imply that in carrying out this kind of research you are gaining access to the truth - the obviousness of being there is a dangerous fallacy. This material that you gather through your observations and the notes you will take afterwards, must be thought of as a set of data from a specific source and gathered in a particular way. And like all such data requires analysis and interpretation.

More practical things

In order to conduct your observation you will need to gain access to your chosen site. There are a number of well-known strategies here. For example, Les Back worked as a youth community helper during the period of his research into the changing ethnicities of young urban dwellers (1996). Others might be to persuade a group to allow you to sit in on their meetings or discussions. Whatever strategy you adopt it is important to become a familiar part of the scene, to establish rapport with your respondents and make the most of your time there. This involves active listening, engaging people in conversation and being responsive to what people are (or are not) telling you.

Here are some more practical considerations when ‘entering the field’.

Self-presentation

You are acting a role and need to think about the kind of person you should present. This will enable you to blend in to the surroundings, but also may conform to your respondents’ expectations of you as a researcher. Interviewing or engaging in other kinds of participant observation can involve dressing up or dressing down. It is not meant to fool or trick people, but to make people feel comfortable and not to draw attention to yourself by wearing the wrong clothes. Most of the women in my study, for example, had clearly taken care over their appearance when I visited them at home. As a mark of respect I did the same (Gray, 1995).

Once at your location, here are the kinds of things you would be looking for as a participant observer:

- Setting and spatial elements: what is the place like?, what gives it its character?, and how do the spaces ‘organise’ people? (e.g. classroom - how the arrangement of furniture organises the actors), what does the place ‘feel’ like?, and how is it likely to make its inhabitants feel? (think of the difference between a library and a bookshop; an expensive restaurant and McDonald’s; a museum and a shopping centre) and, crucially, what produces these environments?
- Social interaction: how do people ‘behave’ within the setting?, for example, how do people present themselves through body language? What are the codes of body space (think of differences between a playground and dance-floor)? How do people move within the environment, for example, groupings, clusterings, separations and who are the isolated ones?. How do people communicate with each other, for example, greetings; etiquette (who speaks to whom and when?); ‘rules of discourse’; attention - who listens and who speaks? Are there conflicts and resolutions?, and what are the categories which matter: gender, ethnicity, age, ability, hierarchy (formal, e.g. teacher, informal, e.g. ‘leader, head honcho of gang, etc.)?
- Time/narration: movement through time; limits and constraints; rhythms in movement; narrators/actors/controllers/followers; timelessness; loss of self in time.
- Liminality: some spaces and sites are strongly time-structured - most obvious is the work-place where time is considered to be a commodity: it structures working practices and determines working days. But there are sites, mainly designated for leisure, where time is configured very differently: where subjects are encouraged to enter into a timeless world. For example, theme parks such as Disneyworld, require

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a kind of suspension of ourselves which includes our idea of self in time in order that we can engage in the 'total experience' on offer. Shopping malls also engender a timeless quality where wandering aimlessly through the building is encouraged. This is achieved through certain kinds of spatial organisation and a, paradoxically, controlled environment.

Dear diary: keeping a journal

We can see from the above that there is a lot to observe and attend to during fieldwork. It is therefore essential to keep a notebook or journal, specifically for your 'field notes'. If you are in the setting of your study, the only record of your experience there will be your notes. These are usually made after your visit. In your notebook should go your thoughts, observations, any quotes you want to make from what people said to you. Get this kind of detailed observation down as soon as you can. Don't attempt to organise it at this stage - you will already be selecting, shaping and editing in the act of writing. This again will be important data to add to your sources for analysis. Also it is important to pull out of your observations anything which you want to follow up. This could be requiring further information (e.g. about working practices) or suggestions for further research, such as conducting some interviews with 'key' actors. Equally your observations could connect to some of the theoretical work, or existing research: observations can be highly suggestive - nudging at theory, demonstrating concepts, confirming or questioning other research. As C. Wright Mills suggests, these ideas are your own - note them and develop them as the research proceeds. As researchers of social worlds and cultural processes you can be open to ideas, responsive to triggers.

The most important thing to grasp about this method is that, although it often parades itself as 'naturalistic' - you are observing some aspect of the social world as it happens in front of you - you as researcher should render it 'unnatural', open to question and as a constructed part of your research. It should be revealed, therefore, within your account as part of the research process. This will, of course, be obvious if participant observation is your main chosen method. However, there are many studies which often implicitly use aspects of participant observation in order to make sense of their topic, or 'flesh out' their study. The best examples of research will make this element explicit, will be rigorous in their accounts and analysis and clear about the basis for their interpretation. The worst will use this material implicitly, be less open about it - will 'fudge' it. This is often because researchers are not clear about the 'status' of this aspect of their engagement with the subject - is it legitimate, can I do this, isn't it being 'unscientific' and impressionistic? The answer to these questions is yes, unless you are systematic about its use. To emphasise: this is an important feature of the kinds of research projects you are most likely to carry out and you will be doing your research a disservice

unless you find some way of making use of this aspect of your research. It requires confidence and a certainty about the ground of your study - its ontology - and your relationship to it, which is an epistemological question. Furthermore, these are political and ethical questions. They involve you reflecting on your role as researcher and your attitude towards your respondents. How are you dealing with them? What validity are you awarding their statements? What are the issues between you in terms of your identity?: you, as initiator of the research, have certain kinds of power over the research, but, potentially, the researched. But what of other differences and similarities?: gender, ethnicity, age are all quite crucial markers in the kinds of relationships you might have with your interviewees or those you are seeking to describe. It is as well to acknowledge these differences and similarities from the start as they are bound to rise to the surface at some point in the progress of your research, and these will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Working examples

I will now look briefly at some examples where this method has been employed and in particular the kinds of questions to researchers took into their participant observation and how they reflected upon the process.

Sarah Thornton: club cultures

Thornton's study is 'concerned with the attitudes and ideas of the youthful insiders whose social lives revolve around clubs and raves (1995: 2). Thornton is particularly interested in notions of 'the mainstream'; how it operates as a trope within youth sub-cultures, how it is constructed by the media and how it has not been investigated by earlier youth sub-cultural theorists. In this work it is simply assumed as the 'other' of the underground, or specific sub-cultural groups. In this research these sub-cultures are who are described as being more authentic, vigorous and 'real' than the mainstream. Furthermore, as Thornton points out, the 'mainstream' is represented as commercial and feminine, as it were, the 'other' of masculinised authentic sub-cultural worlds. Also that there is a diversity of 'cultures' within the mainstream. She employed methods of media analysis in order to assess how the 'mainstream' and club culture were represented in the media. Her book also provides a brief history of the rise of the disco.

Thornton describes that part of her study which involved participant observation as follows: 'between 1988 and 1992, I acted as participant observer at over two hundred discos, clubs and raves and attended at least thirty live gigs for comparative purposes'. She insists that the purpose of the book is not to celebrate the creativity of dance culture. 'Despite having once been an avid clubber, I was an outsider to the cultures in which I conducted research for several reasons' (1995: 2). She identifies these as:

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- Work v leisure: she was working as a researcher in the clubs whereas everyone else (bar the staff) was there for leisure. Difficult, she argues, to 'lose yourself' - one of the attractions of clubbing - if you are carrying out research.
- Age: she started her research when she was 23 and 'slowly aged out of the peer group I was studying' (ibid.: 3).
- National identity: as a North American investigating British clubs and raves 'I was, quite literally, a stranger in a strange land' (ibid.: 3).

In her study, Thornton follows the Chicago School's commitment to the idea that, in order to come to an understanding of certain kinds of social behaviour, then we must understand the 'symbolic world' in which our subjects live. Thus, her research strategy was to gain access to a number of clubs via a key informant in order to be a part of, but also to observe the clubs as cultural sites.

In Chapter 3 of her book, 'Exploring the Meaning of the Mainstream' Thornton gives an account of her field work in the 'subjective mode'. The chapter's full title is 'Exploring the Meaning of the Mainstream (or why Sharon and Tracy Dance around their Handbags)', it is then subtitled 'a night of research'. On one occasion she is, not surprisingly, offered Ecstasy and describes the encounter:

A white boy, wired and talking a mile a minute, stops me in my tracks: 'Want some "E"?' He's referring to 'Ecstasy' and he's eating his words ... He is a poor advertisement for the effects of his wares. From his aggressive and jumpy delivery, I assume that he is really on some speed concoction or perhaps this is his first night on the job. (ibid.: 88)

Thornton does not tell us at that point whether she accepts the Ecstasy or not. However, a little later she is offered some MDMA by her 'informant' clubber:

We go to the toilets, cram into a cubicle where Kate opens the capsule and divides the contents. I put my share in my glass [of champagne] and drink. I'm not a personal fan of drugs - I worry about my brain cells. But they're a fact of this youth culture, so I submit myself to the experiment in the name of thorough research (thereby confirming every stereotype of the subcultural sociologist). (ibid.: 89)

Thornton does not describe the effects of the MDMA on her - but on a couple of pages later describes a visit to a different nightclub - around 4 a.m. she meets a DJ:

He tells me he's been running clubs since 1979, then snorts some coke off the corner of a friend's Visa card. His blue eyes actually dart about like whirling disco spotlights and his conversation is a chaotic compilation of *non sequiturs*. Ecstasy turns banal thoughts into epiphanies. I see how club organizers, DJs and journalists - the professional clubbers - get lost within the excesses and irresponsibilities of youth. With no dividing line between work and leisure, those in the business of creating night-time fantasy world often become their own worst victims.

Thornton's study is a poignant analytical account of the youthful clubbing scene, she reflects on her observations both as a researcher and construct an apposite theoretical framework for an understanding of the operations of distinction and difference within the dance culture. In addition, she is critical of earlier studies of youth sub-cultures and the design and approach of her study seeks to provide a more appropriate way of addressing the phenomenon.

Beverley Skeggs: formations of class and gender

Beverley Skeggs, who, as we saw in Chapter 4, carried out a longitudinal ethnographic study of 83 white working-class women in the North of England, says that her research was motivated by the question 'why do women, who are clearly not just passive victims of some ideological conspiracy, consent to a system of class and gender oppression which appears to offer few rewards and little benefit?' She argues that responsibility and accountability were central to her conduct as a researcher and that her ethnography was 'politically motivated to provide a space for the articulations and experiences of the marginalised' (1997: 23). Her relationship with the women was ambivalent. She had a similar background to the women in her study, especially in relation to class and early education. However, she does not claim to be the 'same' as the women, especially as she had, by the time of the study, graduated from university and was pursuing a PhD. She describes her method thus:

I had entry to different parts of the young women's lives in different ways. With some it was very social, with others it was a quiet chat; the different relationships elicited different types of information. The time spent doing the ethnography was so intense that the boundary between my life inside and outside of the research dissolved. (Skeggs, 1994)

Skeggs began her research with the belief that if she got to know these women, became part of their lives, she would be able to 'deliver their 'real' (even 'true') experiences'. Her approach was based on a 'naturalistic' belief in the powers of observation to reveal the truth. What she found was the opposite. The longer she spent with the women the more confused she became and the women's lives and particularly the formation of their identities were

not revealed as she expected. This is an important insight into the process of participant observation and its usefulness as the kind of method which can tap into social and cultural processes and deeper structural formations of subjectivities. Thus, Skeggs constantly analysed what she was hearing from the young women throughout the research process and her theoretical reading continued throughout the process - each informing the other.

*Les Back: new ethnicities and urban culture -
racisms and multi-culture in young lives*

Ethnographic account of multiculturalism and racisms in young people's lives in predominantly two areas of London - post-war council estates. The research was conducted between 1985 and 1989 and entailed participant observation. One is a mainly white working-class area and the second is a multi-ethnic neighbourhood. During the research he lived in or at close proximity to the research area. He chose youth club settings and worked in the youth clubs.

In addition to participant observation he carried out semi-structured recorded interviews and group discussions. He states his rationale behind the methodology:

to try to get an appreciation of the way young people articulated their notions of identity and ethnicity, but also the way identity was acted out within the context of adolescent interactions. This was particularly important in relation to the ways in which racism entered into the lives of these young people. Account given within the context of interviews would often be contradicted by actions and statements in other settings.

Through using a flexible methodology I developed a close appreciation of both what young people *said* with regard to race, ethnicity and racism but also what they *did* in the context of interaction with peers. (ibid.: 22)

Back is insistent that he draws attention to his own position as researcher within the community:

The point that I want to emphasise is that the following study should be read in the context of research relationships developed by a white male ethnographer. In this sense it is necessary for me to position myself within the field relations that facilitated the study. I am asking the reader to judge the 'truth claims' ... made in what follows in this context. Throughout the study I have tried to point to situations where my social identities may have been particularly important in interpreting the meaning of a particular event or interview extract. A position that I develop throughout the book is that the accounts quoted here constitute interactive samples and are the product of a particular social circumstance - be it an interviewer-interviewee relationship, a group discussion or a dramatic event involving numerous people. (ibid.: 22)

Back's study is an example of a full ethnography: it takes place over time, within specific settings, it employs a range of methods including participant observation. The researcher here literally gets to know, lives with, is part of the group he studies. It is structured thematically, but two major sections deal with the different neighbourhoods. There follows a chapter which looks at the musical cultures which are being created by young people in South London.

These three studies represent very different kinds of research. Their different use of participant observation is clearly a reflection of the aims. Thornton wished to explore the way in which a category of popular music culture 'the mainstream' operated within youth culture and specifically in club-culture. She therefore had to look at the ways in which 'mainstream' was identified and categorised by the relevant media as well as finding a way of understanding what it meant to people involved in going to clubs.

Skeggs, on the other hand, wanted to explore the formations of class and gender: how do we get to be who we are, could be the broadest question. She was also concerned about the powerless groups and how their subjectivities are formed into, she argues, disempowered subjectivities. Hers, then, involved a long-term study, taking some 80 women as 'case studies' in thinking through the complexities of subject and identity formation. Back's desire to examine the construction of urban identities meant he had to find a way of observing identity construction in action, in the public space of a youth community centre, but also on the streets of the different neighbourhoods. Thus, each of these researchers was able to employ participant observation in order to gain insights into the symbolic worlds of the people in their study. They each reflect on their position in relation to their chosen location and the issues arising for them in conducting the research.

Structured conversations (the interview)

I want to begin this section by re-thinking the notion of 'the interview' itself. This is partly because, as we saw in Chapter 1, the interview has a long history and Tolson and others should cause us to stop and think before we allow this mode to become a naturalised part of our research process. I do not, however, want to take the notion of the interview apart to render it unusable in our research. Indeed, I shall insist on its usefulness as a method and encourage ways of thinking about its diverse potential for doing cultural studies work. This potential remains unfulfilled which is in part due to the rather unimaginative and non-reflexive use of the interview. This chapter will explore some innovative approaches to the interview which are relevant to the kinds of questions we might want to ask in our research. It is the case that 'the interview' has entered the common-sense world and most of us have a notion of what constitutes 'an interview' and perhaps even what constitutes the 'correct' interview. Just think about it. You are probably imagining two people sitting opposite each other, one with clip-board or note-pad with a list

of questions. This person would largely ‘control’ the event. The person to whom the questions are addressed is rendered passive, responding only to questions, waiting for the interviewer to set the agenda through their questions. The interviewer, on the other hand, while being in control, is not expected to release any information about themselves to their respondent, nor must they introduce ‘leading questions’ or agree or disagree with the respondent. The interviewer begins the interview and ends it. Now, depending on your exposure to discussions of research methods, you might recognise that description, but you will most likely see through it as an example of an ‘ideal’ type of interview. This kind of interview is carried out for such purposes as large surveys, market research, etc. The responses are coded and analysed through data-handling computer software. The method of this kind of research requires a reliable, measurable and quantifiable set of data which the controlled interview will reproduce across large numbers. There are ‘gradations’ of this tightly controlled model which social science methods have defined, but I think many of us carry this model, even subconsciously, when we plan our research and when we actually carry out interviews ourselves. We have the idea that there is a ‘correct’ way of interviewing, that we might be breaking the rules if we depart from the prescribed role of interviewer, thereby invalidating our research.

Let me begin to unearth some of the assumptions behind the notion of the ideal interview by suggesting that, rather than thinking about the ideal interview, we should ask ourselves what our research is trying to do. What kinds of disclosures are we hoping to elicit by interviewing people? Once we identify this, then, and only then can we begin to approach an interview design and strategy. It will be helpful here to return to Richard Johnson’s distinction between sociological research and cultural studies research specifically in relation to what kind of material our research methods need to produce. He argues that sociological research is, in the main, still attached to the notion of ‘population’ and ‘qualitative’ interview methods are designed to examine ‘attitudes, opinions, behaviours, etc.’ Cultural studies, for Johnson, on the other hand, is interested through such methods as the interview, to ‘tap into cultural structures and formations’ with the researcher exploring this through a specific case study. Cultural studies projects have an intensity and depth and regard their subjects of study as individuals who are and have been socially and culturally shaped. These formations ‘are precisely social or shared [and] are likely to have a larger range of occurrence than the simple samples suggest’ (Johnson, 1997: 468). This observation has implications for questions of ‘representativeness’ which also tend to haunt researchers (see Chapter 4).

The interview: reflexivity and intensity

One useful tenet for the researcher is to think of this statement: ‘If you want to know what I think or do, it would be as well to ask me.’ However, the

open interview is not just a chat. The aim is to establish a good rapport with the respondent, so that she or he gains confidence and feels comfortable in responding freely. It is better described as a structured conversation, but it is also a discursive event in which the two subjects involved are the key players.

Here we can see that the intentions of the cultural studies interview might have more in common with ethnographically oriented work than with sociology. However, this does not mean that we can abandon all structures, procedures, formalities and simply go off and chat to a few people. Indeed, there is no such thing as an unstructured interview, rather, all interviews are structured but each must be structured in relation to the aims of the specific interviews and the overall study. Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that what distinguishes the 'survey' interview and the ethnographic interview is that between 'standardised and reflexive interviewing'. Thus, 'Ethnographers do not usually decide beforehand the exact questions they want to ask, and do not ask each interviewee exactly the same questions, though they will usually enter the interviews with a list of issues to be covered' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993: 152). Using this technique, the interviewer must be an active listener. Thinking on your feet during the interview is important (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, below).

Work developed by feminist researchers has challenged the strict codes and modes of interviewing for its masculinist bias with its belief in objectivity and denial of the emotionality of research. Feminists have developed a rich seam of work that addresses broader questions of epistemology as well as what a feminist research practice might be like. There are clearly issues around this and different feminists have claimed a feminist research method (Stanley and Wise) while others have argued for research which is conducted from a particular standpoint or position which can only be known by feminists. A feminist subject position, in other words. Here these epistemological positions are reflected in the approach to empirical work and the gathering of research material, be it a questioning of the politics of research, the power relations of the researcher and researched and the openness of the interview method.

Questions of reflexivity have now moved onto the agenda more generally, for example, Holstein and Gubrium pose the notion of the *active interview* which may be useful for your purposes. In this model the respondent is seen as an active producer of meaning, not, as in more traditional models, a well-spring of information, material or emotions. They argue that the interview as such is 'a concerted project for producing meaning' (1997: 121). Through the interview process itself the respondent constructs their subjectivity - builds their character, their stories, emotions, etc. 'The interview and its participants are constantly developing' (ibid.). 'The objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined by predetermined agendas' (ibid.: 123).

This approach goes beyond the 'what' of the interview - the substantive

topic of the research - but it goes into the 'how' of subjectivity too. The framework of a research project will inform the orientation of the interviews and the gathering of empirical material. What is interesting is how this framework can generate the kinds of exchanges within interviews that are productive. During my interviews with women, many remarked that they had either never talked about this before, or never thought about it before. Gender divisions and the inherent power relations in domestic life informed my study and my orientation. Thus, my conversations with women produced a framework and concepts through which they could discuss their lives and express their sense of themselves and experience within those particular frameworks. Some of this was clearly informed by a knowledge of the issues but in many cases it came through the structuring of the conversation.

This mode and way of approaching the interview relate it much more immediately to analysis, or make the framework much more visible throughout the interview with theoretical, empirical and analytical links being made through the process. There follows examples from research that has employed these kinds of interviewing strategies.

Many studies use interviewing as their main method of gathering material. Those within media and cultural studies which have sought to explore media consumption have been criticised for this. What the critics rarely discuss are the actual interview modes adopted by these studies and in particular the kinds of depth which can be plumbed and layers of meaning which can be produced through, say, adopting a life story method (see Chapter 6).

By way of example, I will now turn to Ruth Frankenberg's study of white women's relationship to racism for which she employed a dialogic approach to interviewing in which she encouraged women to tell their life stories but 'I positioned myself as explicitly involved in the questions, at time sharing with interviewees either information about my own life or elements of my own analysis of racism as it developed through the research process' (Frankenberg, 1993: 32).

Her topic was a sensitive one and called for careful approaches to potential interviewees and careful handling of the interviews themselves. Her open and dialogic approach, she argues, democratised the research process because she enabled women to explore their own feelings about race as well as the analysis and politics of race.

The 30 women she interviewed were all white, but came from different social backgrounds and had varying levels of awareness of the politics of race and feminism. Therefore, her interview approach had to take these differences into account. Although her aim was to collect 30 'life stories' no one interview was the same. Central to her dialogic method, she argues, were 'the ways in which I offered information both about myself as inscribed within racism and about my analysis of racism as systemic as well as personal'. By telling her own stories about whiteness, she effectively broke the silence of white discourses on colour and power - she gave the women 'permission' to speak of race and racism. In addition, she consciously employed different

analyses of 'race' in her dialogues with the women, to enable them to express and articulate their experiences. Thus, she gave them a safe and secure discursive position from which to examine their own experiences and feelings. She uses the following example:

Evelyn, a self-styled conservative in her fifties, but one who nonetheless views herself as 'not a prejudiced and biased person', talked toward the end of the interview about who her friends were:

RF: One final question, and then that's probably about it. And again, it sort of goes back to what I was saying about how I see, when I think about white women and race and contact with different ethnic groups, different racial groups. I know that for myself, I was raised in a very white, 99.9 per cent white environment ...

EVELYN: Mhm.

RF: ... and I also know that, the way that my life is set up, and probably the way most people's lives are set up, the people that you spend time with are usually people in the same income bracket, and the same ...

EVELYN: Mhm!!

RF: ... type of person. So I was wondering if that was the same for you? Is it the case that your friends are mainly in your same income bracket and mainly in your same racial group or ethnic group?

EVELYN: It's probably true. But I don't think it was done out of choosing, I think that it just ... well, you have to have a sense of having something in common in the first place ...

RF: Right.

EVELYN: ... and with women generally the first thing is, are you married ... then you have something in common. Do you have children ... then you have something in common. And then it's a question of the husbands ... can they talk to one another? And so it's true, most of our friends, they do have, certainly economically we're about the same level, most all of them are college graduates. A great many of them are engineers, businesspeople. It's true, but I don't think that we do it out of deliberately. I think it just happens to be the way our lives all fall together.

RF: No, that's why I phrased it the way I did.

EVELYN: Yeah.

RF: Because a lot of times, I think that if I asked somebody that question, they would feel challenged ...

EVELYN: Yes.

RF: ... criticised by the question. Which isn't my intention, because what I'm real interested in is just I think things shake down that way.

EVELYN: Mhm, mhm, I think they do too.

RF: And with me, it's been that way in the past, in terms of that my friends have been white people.

EVELYN: Mhm.

RF: And I don't know if that's been true of you, that your friends are ...

EVELYN: Uh, I have one friend that's an Argentinian. [Laughs] Where would I meet all these other people, you see? And so, as I say, it isn't anything that's done deliberately, I think it's our circumstances.

RF: Right.

EVELYN: And there again, when you have friends, friends are people that you can talk to, that can understand why you feel a certain way about a certain thing, you have something in common. And it wouldn't make any difference if they were black, green, yellow, or pink. It just happens ... that ... they ... [tails off and throw up her hands]. We have friends of different ITALreligious/ITAL backgrounds ... atheist, staunch Catholic, and just as many that are Protestant. And also Republicans ITALand/ITAL Democrats. Now ITALthere's/ITAL a difference. [Laughs]

(Frankenberg, 1993: 36-9)

What is striking about this interview is the way Frankenberg reveals her own experience in order to make her respondent feel comfortable. She refers to this as a 'battle of discourses' (ibid.: 39). And in this way: 'Interviewees were multiply positioned in relation to these life narratives. On the one hand, they were coproducers of the narratives. On the other hand, they were observers, both of their environments and of themselves as they retold and reevaluated what had gone before' (ibid.: 42).

These interviews were central to Frankenberg's project, she did not spend time with the women other than during interviews, although these lasted

between three and eight hours usually over two sessions. What is important is her approach to the interviews. She insists that an interview is not simply a vehicle for the telling or expressing of experience, but is a socially constructed encounter. It is an 'incomplete story angled toward my questions and each woman's ever-changing sense of self and of how the world works' (ibid.: 41).

Listening for silences

Frankenberg's interviewing position is that of a 'knowing' interviewer. She consciously introduces discursive strategies which will enable her respondents to talk about a 'taboo' subject, that of race and racism. Another, rather different, dimension of the dialogic interview is discussed by Marjorie Devault (1990) employing feminist theories of language. She insists that many of the everyday practices that form the substance of women's experience and daily lives lack identifiable language and concepts through which to express this experience. She opens up a discussion about the problem of defining research 'topics' and to be able to open the boundaries of accepted or conventional 'topics' of social and other kinds of research in order to incorporate women's experience. Devault's research examines household routines for planning, cooking and serving meals. An everyday activity which all will acknowledge as a - quite literally - essential activity within households. The category available to her - that of housework - was too general to get at the very specific activities involved in 'the work of providing food' (Devault, 1990: 99). She started by telling her respondents about what she was interested in and told them she wanted to discuss 'all the housework that has to do with food - cooking, planning, shopping, cleaning up'. What she found was that the women, whether they liked cooking or hated it, spoke naturally about the various dimensions of the task easily because, as she argues, 'I identified, in a rough way, a category that made sense to my respondents because it was a category that organized their day-to-day activity' (ibid.: 99).

Drawing on this research experience, she argues that there are not always words available to 'fit' women's experiences, arguing for the importance of listening as interviewers. An obvious thing to say, perhaps, but as Devault insists, we might be listening for 'silences' too. Those moments when 'respondents got stuck' but were working hard at trying to find words for what they felt. By way of example she discusses a particular interview:

One woman, talking about why she worked so hard at organising regular meals for her family, told me: 'My husband sees food as something you need to live. But - I don't quite know how to describe it - I really have an emphasis on the social aspects. I mean, the food is an important part, but it's kind of in that setting.'

Another woman tried to define the difference between the regular 'drudgery' of cooking and the satisfaction you might get from providing a good meal -

she referred to this as ‘the good parts’. Also,

several of my respondents referred to an immediate, improvisational kind of thinking they do while shopping. They did not know quite what to call this process. One told me: ‘Most of the time, I kind of plan when I’m at the store, you know? Like OK, we have chicken Monday, pork chops Tuesday - I’ll be kind of, you know, figuring out in my mind, as I shop, what’s what. (ibid.: 103)

For Devault the most interesting points in the interviews are the ‘inarticulate’ moments, the fumbling for words, the ‘you know’s’ for these are moments when people are trying to find words for what they do and what they feel about their lives. Those areas for which there are no ‘ready made’ descriptions or terms or concepts are thus being rendered ‘speaking’. This is another example of the conversational or dialogic character of this kind of intensive interviewing. We can see here how the interviewer and her/his respondent come together in a collaborative project. What the interviewer wants to find are answers to questions, this drive and the respondent’s willingness and desire to articulate their experience, produces a formidable ‘search engine’ of productive discourse which, if listened to carefully, can provide new ways of looking at the world. In this way, the standard topics of our research can be opened up, expanded and provide valuable knowledge for new research questions.

Strategic sampling

When I carried out my study into the uses of the VCR, as I knocked on the door of number 11, it could just as well have been someone at number 25. I was in the process of constructing an ‘audience’ or a community of users where attributes of subjectivity are used to identify and distinguish the women. Thus the respondents, or participants in the study come to stand for (usually) social categories. This is a way of shaping the research, of giving the data depth and meaning. Enabling the researcher, not to generalise, but to compare and contrast individuals located in different subjectivities and life-stages. Many of the small-scale empirical studies upon which cultural studies has been built have been carried out by graduate students carrying out research for doctoral degrees. This immediately places limitations upon what can be achieved. First, one of geographical location. It is likely that researchers will select respondents within easy access of their base, thereby cutting down travel costs and time. Second, questions of access are crucial. This selection of our ‘sample’ is a very difficult part of the research and one in which compromises must be made.

The spectre of representativeness is always present when we are thinking about constructing our ‘sample’, that is those people whom we hope to involve in our study. Perhaps the first problem is in the term ‘sample’. Once

again, this is a concept which refers to a different research model and, as it implies, is designed to function as a representation of the whole. It certainly creates problems for the design of research projects. One of the commonest questions in discussing plans for research is 'how many people do I need to interview?' This is a question generated directly out of the notion of 'the sample'. The numbers, types, locations, identities and combinations of respondents will entirely depend upon what it is you are wanting to explore with them. What is the purpose of the research contact with them and what kind of data are you wishing to generate? In small-scale projects the core of respondents should be identified in relation to their capacity to provide as rich a set of data as can be managed. For example, in my study of women's use of the video cassette recorder, I interviewed 30 women, but, while they were culturally homogeneous, they differed in relation to age, class, education, occupation and number of children. It is important to stress once more, this was not intended as a representative sample of white women in the UK, rather, it provided a series of complex comparisons between the women in relation to a number of themes of the project. Bob Connell has helpfully discussed his approach to selecting respondents, a process which he calls 'strategic sampling'. He concentrated on 'a few situations where the theoretical yield should be high' (Connell, 1995: 90). We can think about our empirical work in this way by asking what potential exists for 'theoretical sampling' and how rich a very small number of interviews can be.

The interview itself

Setting up the interview

Procedures will vary depending on your relationship with your respondents, but it is always advisable to be formal in setting up the interview. An initial letter outlining your project and intentions for the interview, followed by a telephone call to agree a time and location places the relationship on a proper footing. It (should) go without saying that you must be punctual and not take any longer than you have agreed. While arranging interviews is usually considered to be a very practical and quite mundane part of research, this is not always the case.

In her study of women artists, Bette Kauffman (1992) was dismayed when she found how difficult it was to arrange interviews with them in New York. Many who had agreed to be interviewed broke appointments, re-arranged times, delayed the interview by days or weeks and, in some cases, refused to be interviewed in their studios, Kauffman's preferred location. In a very interesting piece which reflects on this, she explains how this difficulty, which was not experienced with a group of women artists in Philadelphia, was revealing of the very social identity that she wished to explore, that of the woman artist. She assumed that the New York women would feel more at ease on their own territory, thus shifting the power relations between researcher and researched.

the research process

Most of their studios were in their homes and competed with domestic obligations and space and many of the women preferred to be interviewed in more public spaces, for example, in an art gallery or restaurant. She concluded that in this way the women confirmed their public personae as artists and that her methodology had not coincided with their experience and self-identity. The evasive strategies employed by the women artists were therefore a key element in Kauffman's eventual understanding of their self-identity. Kauffman's experience reminds us of the important of getting the location right. What she did was to follow a methodological 'truism' as part of her training as a researcher which told her that interviewing people on their own patch will put them at ease and shift the power relations between researcher and researched.

Preparing for the interview

Taking into account the various kinds of interview available to you, think about what kinds of information or discussion you wish to facilitate. Whatever mode of interview you adopt you will need to draw up a list of 'topic areas' that you want to cover with your respondent. It is best to start off your discussion by asking a general question, for example, 'Could you start by telling me how you got interested in ...?' Or 'Could you take me through your usual daily routine?' This category of question enables your respondent to start from a confident position of knowledge and gives them time to 'settle in' to the interview. If you are going to tape-record the interview, and this is highly desirable, you will have cleared this with your respondent and need to check that your technology is functioning efficiently. Make sure that you position the microphone nearer to your correspondent than yourself and, if you are at all uncertain, ask to do a 'sound check' before you start. When I tape-recorded interviews I noticed very often that the conversation changed and became much more relaxed when the recorder was switched off. Be prepared, therefore, to remember what is said during these more informal or 'off-stage' moments (Goffman, 1972).

During the interview

We have already discussed the dynamic nature of interviewing and there follows a discussion of the significance of gender, ethnicity, class and age differences during the encounter itself. Here I simply want to indicate some points for your consideration:

- A pilot interview is invaluable in determining whether your approach, your questions and your topics are effective. This can then be used to review your interview schedule and the ways in which you are asking the questions.

- Allow for diversification and be an active listener. This is obviously important for the dialogic interviews we have already discussed, but it is also important for more structured interviews too.
- Revealing something of yourself during the interviews often has surprising consequences as you will see from Song and Parker's discussion that follows. But it also opens up the discussion, enabling your respondent to have some knowledge of you, your research and your feelings towards the topic under consideration.
- Try to anticipate what your respondents expect of you. They will certainly have some expectations about you and what 'being interviewed' might entail. Depending on the interview type, you may have to begin by getting rid of the notion of the 'formal interview' model described at the beginning of this chapter. This will put your respondent at ease when you reassure them that it will be an informal discussion with no right or wrong answers!
- Most importantly, have respect for your respondents. They are being generous with their time and will be of great help to you. Turn up on time, thank them at the end of the interview, ask them if they have any questions and offer to let them see the transcript of the interview and/or the final product of your research.

Group 'interviews'

There are some research areas and approaches for which group interviews or discussions will provide useful material. However, as is the case for all decisions about method, you need to be clear about why the group interviews are useful, what kind of data are you expecting them to generate as well as an awareness of the specific problems group interviewing presents. One of the most obvious reasons for selecting groups to interview together is because you want to explore how people interact with each other in relation to your topic. How, for example, might people express their views on a popular television serial, or on growing up male, or their attitudes towards their work. This is to recognise and mobilise the importance of interaction in social identity and how people account for themselves in discussions others. This might be very different from the ways in which we might account for ourselves in a one-to-one. Researchers who have used this method include David Morley (1980, 1986) and Liebes and Katz (1993), all of whom were interested in how groups generated discussions about popular television and how their understandings and interpretations could be seen to be ideologically formed. Marie Gillespie, in her study of young Punjabi people in South London, was interesting in 'group talk' amongst her respondents more than what they might say to her as a researcher. She therefore listened to 'friendship groups' as they talked about their likes and disliked, the kinds of programmes they

liked on television, etc. and in this way tapped into more ‘naturalistic’ talk. Her role in discussions ‘involved surrendering the initiative and allowing talk to flow as far as possible without intervention on my part’ (1995: 67). Another researcher interested in thinking about the dynamics of group talk is David Buckingham and we will look at his research in more detail in Chapter 7.

Group discussions can also be used at an early stage in a project. Talking to a group of interested and involved people about your topic in the early stages of your research can be an extremely useful way of generating ideas and concepts which can then be used to formulate your approach to further interviews. Of course employing group discussions presents problems associated with any group interaction. For example, some group members will dominate the discussion, will lead the discussion their way and focus on matters of interest to them to the possible exclusion of other viewpoints. Groups may assume that you are looking for consensus and will aim their discussions towards agreement on issues, rather than allowing difference and contradictions to emerge. The discussion, therefore, will have to be managed and as a facilitator you will need to develop strategies to get fulfil the maximum potential from a group discussion.

Class, gender, ethnicity, age: differences which make a difference

In discussions on method by feminists, the interview is recognised as a site of power relations (Roberts, 1981). This is to say that the researcher is in a more powerful position than her respondents both during the interview itself and often, although not always, in her acquisition of social and cultural capital. Feminists working on surveying, documenting, exploring women’s lives and experience have argued for and practised a range of ‘respondent-friendly’ strategies. For example, open conversational interviews of the type discussed above, ‘allowing’ respondents to determine the agenda or direction of the interview and being open to questions from respondents. Les Back provides a rare example of a male researcher who has reflected on his role as a male researcher and ethnographer. He argues that the relationships which he developed with both male and female respondents during his fieldwork were ‘ordered by [a] gendered form of participation’ (Back, 1993: 230). Back begins his reflection on his fieldwork by acknowledging his reluctance to make contact with and interview women. This is a strategy that is underpinned by a feminist research politics which admits to the inappropriateness of a male researcher exploring women’s lives. For Back this has two consequences. First, male researchers are allowed to disregard gender and, second, this strategy suggests that gender is not an issue in male-to-male, and we might add, female-to-female interviewing situations. Our identities as male/female black/white, older/younger researchers crucially affects the research encounters and the openness, or otherwise, of our respondents and

interviewees. We need to be able to acknowledge these complexities, the inequalities of gender and ethnic relations and the difference generation might make to power and authority.

Miri Song and David Parker take these reflections further by deploying theories of the fluidity of identity in their understanding of the shifting positions of the researcher during the interviewing process. They were both, in separate research projects, interviewing Chinese young people in Britain and found that their 'experiences of mixed descent Chinese-English and Korean-American researchers 'positioned [them] in terms of both commonality *and* difference *vis-à-vis* [their] interviewees' (Song and Parker, 1995: 241). Their cultural identities shifted, in the perceptions of their interviewees, in relation to, for example, their background, their mastery of language, their experience of racism, appearance, and so on, finding that their disclosures were helpful in developing the conversations. Parker summarises it thus:

The contact that I had with other part-Chinese people in my research profoundly affected my conceptualisation of identity formation. These shared experiences encouraged me to venture more of my *own* experiences in a way that I did not with respondents who were not of dual heritage. The result was less stilted exchanges and telling remembrances of falling outside of the prevalent black/white, Chinese/non-Chinese categorisation systems. A number of the part-Chinese people I interviewed summarised their sense of identity in terms exactly corresponding to the sort of vocabulary for which I had been struggling. (ibid.: 246)

Song argues that notions of similarity of difference do not necessarily shape the way interviews proceed in any kind of predictable or systematic way. Rather, they were 'very much contingent upon each moment in each interview'. 'Interviewees' assumptions about my cultural identity were central in shaping what respondents chose to disclose to me, as well as the matter in which interviewees disclosed information about themselves' (ibid.: 248). However, for both Parker and Song, the key shared ground of experience between them and their interviewees was that of racial discrimination. Theirs is a usefully reflexive piece on the dynamics of interviewing and the highly contingent nature of the interview from moment and moment.

Ellen Seiter discusses the political problems of interviewing about such a popular form as television and in so doing raises the question of class difference. She usefully analyses in great detail a single and troubling interview that she and a colleague conducted as part of a study of soap opera viewing. She identifies class, gender and generational difference between researcher and researched as contributing to the 'failure' of the interview with two white men who had responded to their advertisement for a soap opera study:

throughout the interview, it was uppermost in these men's minds that we were academics. For them, it was an honour to talk to us and an opportunity to be heard by persons of authority and standing. They made a concerted effort to

the research process

appear cosmopolitan and sophisticated. For them, our visit offered a chance to reveal their own personal knowledge, and their opinions about society and the media. *They had no interest whatsoever in offering us interpretative, textual readings of television programs, as we wanted them to do. In fact, they exhibited a kind of 'incompetence' in this regard.* (Seiter 1990: 62, my emphasis)

Seiter suggests that what is at stake here is the difference in social identities between the academic researcher and their subjects. Her interviewees offended her feminist and socialist politics. They were recalcitrant and refused to 'behave like ordinary, everyday viewers'. Given that one of the men had responded to their newspaper advertisement asking to interview soap opera viewers, Seiter is understandably annoyed. While she is right to consider the class difference and the differently valued cultural capital of academic researchers and the ways in which this will influence and shape the interview, we could look at that interview text in a very different way. We could ask a number of questions which are highly significant with regard to the popular, distinction and class difference. An analysis of the interview could reveal the social formation of the two men - their working lives, their class and sexuality and explore questions of subjectivity and identity in relation to the popular as well as the academic understandings of 'ordinary' viewers. What is of interest here, I would argue, is the kind of interview method which sought to focus attention on specific readings and use of soap operas, running away from the researchers' control into more rich and revealing disclosures about class, gender and the popular. Thus, the interview and Seiter's welcome reflections on her experience of the encounter, provide an important example of the recalcitrant nature of respondents if they are determined to take control from the interviewee.

The interview is clearly a valuable research method but one that should be approached with caution, always being informed by the kinds of questions we have explored in this chapter. Also, we must be circumspect and beware of claiming too much on the basis of these constructed events, thus it is important to reveal those limitations and of the particularly contingent and provisional nature of the technique. In the following chapter I will look at other forms of 'interview' in examining the influence of autobiography in cultural studies.