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5 Online interviews and focus groups

As the previous chapter discussed, online surveys have been widely picked up by social scientists. However, the adoption of online qualitative techniques, such as interviews and focus groups, has been much more limited. This chapter explores these online qualitative techniques and provide an introduction to their use.

The chapter examines some of the key decisions that researchers wishing to undertake interviews and focus groups will have to make. These include considering the relative merits of synchronous, asynchronous, text-based, audio, video, one-to-one and group-based interviews.

case study

Using email as a medium for qualitative interviewing

Busher and James undertook two distinct qualitative studies with tertiary educators (Busher 2001; James 2003). They both used email as the medium for the interviews and later took the opportunity to reflect jointly on how this medium impacted on their studies (James and Busher 2006). In their methodological reflections they suggest that, while email interviewing presents the researcher with a number of challenges, it also offers considerable benefits and that there is value in continuing to refine and develop the methodology.

Busher's 2001 study focused on ten adult educators who were undertaking a doctorate at an English university. The educators were studying part-time, whilst working in a wide range of different environments across the world, with many using English as a second or third language. James's 2003 study examined the professional identity of psychology lecturers in UK higher education. Again participants were dispersed and, as with Busher's study, the process of interviewing was asynchronous and allowed to unfold over an extended period of time.

Busher and James both utilized email as the main medium for their interviews. They sought a 'research method that could capture and reflect narrative accounts of participants' experiences and provoke in-depth reflection of their understandings of their developing professional experiences and identities' (James and Busher 2006: 404). The researchers considered alternative mediums such as face-to-face qualitative interviewing, which was impractical because of the location of participants, and telephone interviewing which was also rejected for practical reasons (for example, time zones) as well as for methodological ones (the belief that it would elicit short answer responses rather than the deep, reflective accounts that these projects required).

Email interviewing was therefore chosen because it overcame issues of distance and time difference, and because the asynchronous, iterative nature of the exchange was believed to facilitate reflection by participants. The researchers also decided that the one-to-one mode facilitated by email was appropriate to their research objectives in contrast to a group approach that might have been facilitated by some kind of online discussion forum.

In their studies of 2001 and 2003 respectively, James and Busher both chose to send questions one at a time to participants. This meant that the interviews took place over an extended period of time, and that participants had the opportunity to reflect, consider and potentially to redraft their answers. This meant that the kind of data generated was considerably different to that generated in a conventional interview. On one hand participants had the opportunity to be more considered and to give longer responses if they wished. The process of interviewing also interweaved with the participant's day-to-day life. On the other hand there are dangers of misunderstandings arising, the focus of the interview being lost and participants dropping out (either temporarily or permanently). James and Busher both took active strategies to manage some of these issues by contracting participants at the start of the interview (setting out the number of questions, expected response times and other processes related to the interview) and using a variety of prompts during the interview process, such as 'Haven't heard from you in a while. I wondered if you still wished to continue the interview?' However, despite these strategies

the process of email interviewing still proved to be longer and more difficult than expected.

These researchers' experiences demonstrate the complex interaction that exists between technology, methodology, the participants, their context and the research objectives. The data that emerged from both of their studies would have been different if they had changed any one element of their study. The use of email interviews was useful in eliciting substantial, reflective responses to interviewers' questions, and in allowing participants to answer in a way that facilitated them to relate their responses to the environment that they were currently operating in. The nature of the data gathered would clearly have been changed by undertaking the same study using face-to-face or telephone-based interviewing. However, it would also have been changed by using other online technologies (chat rooms, video-conferencing software, discussion boards etc.). The rest of this chapter explores some of the options that are available to the online qualitative researcher in more detail, and considers how to use them most effectively in undertaking research projects.

Understanding qualitative methods

As elsewhere in this book, this chapter focuses on the translation of social research methods (in this case interviews and focus groups) to the online environment. If you are not familiar with the use of such qualitative methods as interviews and focus groups, you may wish to consult one of the many general introductions that are available. For a general introduction to qualitative research methods, see Flick (Flick 2009a) or Berg (Berg 2008), or for a practical student guide to conducting qualitative research, see Silverman (Silverman 2009). For a more focused text on interviews, see Kvale and Brinkmann (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008) or King and Horrocks (King and Horrocks 2010), and for focus groups see Stewart *et al.* (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007) or Krueger and Casey (Krueger and Casey 2009).

While there are important methodological differences in the use of online interviews and focus groups, most of the differences are similar to the ones that researchers will be familiar with from onsite research. In this chapter, therefore, the distinction between interviews and focus groups

is made only where the methodological issues intersect with the online environment.

As with the previous chapter, it is perhaps worth beginning with some basic definitions:

- Interviews involve an interaction between a researcher and a research participant for the purpose of gathering qualitative data. Interviews typically gather both factual and interpretative data, and can use a variety of different approaches (structured/unstructured, life history, thematic etc.).
- Group interviews use a similar approach to individual interviews but apply it to a group. It would be common for the group to comprise individuals with a shared characteristic or background. Data is derived from the group's answers to the questions, but also from their interactions with each other.
- Focus groups are a specialized form of group interview in which participants are asked to interact around a particular theme or set of issues. Participants are often selected to be representative of a particular population. Typically focus groups seek to reveal opinions, attitudes, beliefs and reactions rather than to establish facts.

When to use online methods for qualitative research?

As with all online research methods, the use of online interviews and focus groups has both advantages and disadvantages in relation to their onsite equivalents. Madge *et al.* note a number of advantages, such as savings in travel, cost and time, increased flexibility for both interviewer and interviewee, and some indications that participants may find certain types of disclosure easier in the online environment (Madge, O'Connor, Wellens, Hooley and Shaw 2006a; Joinson 2001). Some researchers have argued that the quality of data gathered from online focus groups compares favourably to that gathered in their onsite equivalents (Brüggen and Willems 2009). Others have argued that the use of online methods shifts the power balance between researcher and participants in the participants' favour, allowing them to exert more influence on the interview and to withdraw with less concern if they feel they no longer wish to proceed with the interview (Fielding 2010). When using text-based communication

tools, the researcher is saved the usual time/money costs involved in the transcription of qualitative data.

However Madge *et al.* also note that there are considerable downsides, arguing that participants need a certain level of technical competence to participate, that they may be easily distracted by things in their environment, that there are issues with identity verification and, perhaps most challenging of all, the loss of most visual and contextual communications and clues (Madge, O'Connor, Wellens, Hooley and Shaw 2006a).

Online interviews and focus groups offer new opportunities to the researcher, but they also offer considerable challenges. As with all methodologies, the use of online interviews and focus groups needs to be carefully selected to ensure that the methodology is suited to the research questions being investigated and the population with which the research is being conducted. Online interviews and focus groups are clearly better suited to populations who are digitally literate and who have experience of using the environment in which you are going to conduct online research. So regular chat room users are likely to find participating in a text-based synchronous focus group technically undemanding, while individuals who come to synchronous chat for the first time are likely to find this more challenging.

However, even within these populations there is likely to be variation in the degree of comfort that different individuals feel in expressing themselves in different environments. Karchmer notes that some participants might be more effective speakers than writers but, as Meho responds, the reverse is also true (Karchmer 2001; Meho 2006). In the context of focus groups this issue may take on an additional dimension as groups can be dominated by those with the fastest thinking and typing speeds rather than those with the loudest voices.

When deciding whether to utilize an online interview or focus group it might be useful to consider the following issues:

- **Access:** Is it easy or possible for you to get physical access to the research participants? Conversely, do your participants have easy access to a computer and a reliable internet connection?
- **Technical ability:** Are your participants likely to be comfortable using computer-mediated communications for their discussions with you?

- **Research topic:** Is the topic that you are researching bound up with your participants' use of computers/the internet?
- **Environment:** Is there anything about your participant's environment that will make it difficult for them to participate in an online interview/focus group or to attend an onsite interview/focus group?
- **Sensitivity:** Are you likely to raise sensitive topics or risk causing distress to your participant? How will you deal with this depending on whether an onsite or online method is chosen?
- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** What is your approach to anonymity and confidentiality? How is this enabled or problematized by your decision to undertake the research online or onsite?
- **Data handling:** How will you manage the data that is gathered through your interview/focus group? Does conducting the interview online help to manage issues with the resources available for transcription etc?
- **Visual clues:** Are visual/body language/context clues likely to be important to the research that you are doing?

As ever, there are no strict right and wrong answers that can provide you with a definitive answer as to when to undertake something online and when to undertake it onsite. However, working through the questions above may provide researchers with some insights around what is the most appropriate way to proceed.

It is important to recognize that the online/onsite distinction is not always rigidly applied. Many researchers combine online and onsite methods for a variety of purposes. Turney and Pocknee conducted research on attitudes to paternity testing and stem cell research (Turney and Pocknee 2005). They used conventional focus groups to gain insights into public attitudes, but then used asynchronous online focus groups to follow this up with targeted groups (fathers, mothers and people with Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injuries).

Choosing tools for online interviewing and focus groups

Making decisions about which tools to use is important when undertaking all online research. However, the discussion in the previous chapter about which tools to use for online surveys is essentially a technical question

about matching the functionality of tools to the needs of a particular research project. As the James and Busher case-studies have already shown, in the case of online interviews and focus groups the technology and methodology are closely connected. The choice of tool is likely to exert considerable influence on the kind of interactions that the researcher is able to have with participants, and the kinds of data that it is possible to gather.

Undertaking qualitative social research is usually about creating a specialized form of communication between researchers and research participants. Much has been written about the nature of this communication; however, at root it is a form of communication like any other that requires information and meaning to be able to flow in at least two directions. Communication is something that internet technologies have developed to do in a vast number of different ways. Individuals and groups communicate online using email, SMS, chat rooms, discussion boards, blogs, social networking software, video-conferencing software and an ever growing number of other applications. Many of these can be re-purposed for use in social research relatively easily. Indeed, many offer functionality that ideally suits them for use in social research, such as production of transcripts of conversations, or opportunities to include or exclude participants from particular discussions.

Given this explosion of communication technologies, the researcher may feel faced with an over-abundance of tools. Furthermore, online communicative technologies have not just provided alternatives to existing forms of communication, they have also created new forms of communication and this raises further questions for the researcher. An example of a new form of communication is provided by Flickr, the online photo-sharing website. Users of this site post pictures, tag them with keywords, associate them with groups and entitle them. Other users then have the option to comment on those photos, add them to their own galleries and share them via other social media. All of these interactions offer the users ways of communicating meaning to each other. Whether a communication tool like Flickr will be used to conduct something along the lines of an interview or focus group remains to be seen, but the point is that online technologies open up both new ways to do established things and the possibility of doing new things. Researchers may wish to consider both of these possibilities as they design their methodologies. Some of these issues are picked up further in chapters 6 and 8.

Broadly, it might be possible to represent a typology of different tools for online qualitative research along two axes. On one axis it would be possible to distinguish between the time over which the interview takes place. Does it take place asynchronously over a period of time like the Busher and James email interviews? Alternatively, does it take place synchronously with interviewer and participant engaged at the same time? A second axis might be used to represent whether the interview is conducted principally in text or whether it utilizes multi-media tools to provide images, audio, video or any other kind of experience such as 3D gaming environments. This kind of conceptualization might give us a typology as follows:

Table 5.1 A typology of online interviewing techniques

Asynchronous text-based methods Email Discussion boards SMS	Asynchronous multi-media methods Photo and text combinations Video blogs and responses
Synchronous text-based methods Chat rooms Messenger service	Synchronous multi-media methods Video- and audio-conferencing

Synchronous or asynchronous?

If researchers are seeking to transfer existing methodologies online, it is likely that they will initially gravitate towards synchronous methods. The opportunity to conduct the interview in real time has the potential to create something that borrows from many of the techniques and methodological approaches associated with face-to-face interviewing or focus groups. Stewart and Williams argue that, by allowing participants and researchers to interact concurrently, an atmosphere is created that allows discussion to flourish and which mirrors in many ways the kinds of interactions that take place in face-to-face social research (Stewart and Williams 2005: 405).

Hinchcliffe and Gavin also found that (text-based) online synchronous interviewing was convenient and popular with the university students who were the participants in their study (Hinchcliffe and Gavin 2009). Similarly, Bullard and O'Brien in their study of 'info-savvy' web-designers found that synchronous online interviewing presented few obstacles to

communication (Bullard and O'Brien 2011). However, it is clear that online synchronous interviews and focus groups have been used most extensively with participants who are already familiar with synchronous communication channels or who at least have high levels of digital literacy, such as Lang and Hughes' focus groups with peer-to-peer filesharers or O'Connor and Madge's research with 'cyberparents' (Lang and Hughes 2007; O'Connor and Madge 2003). How this methodological approach would transfer to those with lower levels of digital literacy is not clear.

Other researchers have found the kinds of interactions that take place during synchronous interviews and focus groups to be more problematic. Davis *et al.* found that participants performed in particular ways in online interviews in comparison to face-to-face interviews, and that online interviews were more prone to ambiguity of meaning (Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr and Elford 2004). Fox, Morris and Rumsey described the process of running an online focus group as 'fast, furious, and chaotic' (Fox, Morris and Rumsey 2007), and Mann and Stewart note that in the chaos of synchronous chat conversational turn-taking can become disrupted (Mann and Stewart 2000). Even in the case of one-to-one online interviews, conversational turn-taking can become problematized as researcher and participant struggle to maintain a structure in the face of delays and disruptions (Markham 2004). When engaged in synchronous text-based communication, people are able to speak when they choose and without regard or awareness that others are also speaking. This can add to the ambiguity of online interactions and can pose difficulties both in terms of managing and analysing online interviews and focus groups, as the researcher is frequently confronted with uncertainty about which question a participant is answering. While some of these issues are solved by moving to a video-conference approach, Fielding notes that turn-taking confusion remains as an issue (Fielding 2010).

If synchronous online interviews and focus groups promise, at least initially, the opportunity to transfer existing methods online, asynchronous methods require researchers to rethink the nature and purpose of interviews or focus groups. Kanayama argues that asynchronous methods create a new concept of time, which fosters new types of interactions with interview participants (Kanayama 2003). Meho reviewed the literature on email interviewing in 2006, and noted that some researchers reported conducting email interviews over many months with sometimes more than thirty email exchanges being made. This kind of extended time

period means that the kind of data collected is potentially very different from that collected in a single synchronous encounter, and this in turn opens up both opportunities (for example, longitudinal data) and challenges (such as how much does the respondent change their perspective over the course of a six month interview?).

Gaiser argues that in the case of online focus groups there are considerable advantages to an asynchronous approach, as it is likely to be more technically straightforward and offer a familiar experience for the user that is similar to email (Gaiser 2008). Deggs, Grover and Kacirek justify their decision to use asynchronous focus groups because of the difficulty of co-ordinating their participants (busy part-time graduate students) to all participate at the same time (Deggs, Grover and Kacirek 2010).

However, Gaiser also notes that asynchronous focus groups present challenges for the moderator in maintaining control and direction. Furthermore Deggs, Grover and Kacirek note that maintaining participation in their focus group over an extended period of time was challenging, with participation rates steadily dropping throughout the life of the focus group (six weeks). They suggest that there would be value in reducing the length of time over which the asynchronous focus group ran in order to maintain a higher level of participation. They also argue that the researcher needs to remain closely involved with the focus group to encourage participants and pose additional questions. However, the researcher also needs to guard against becoming the loudest voice in the online space and to allow the participant-to-participant dynamics of the focus group to unfold.

O'Connor *et al.* suggest that the format and design of an asynchronous interview is also vital (O'Connor, Madge, Shaw and Wellens 2008). The email interviewer must think carefully about how many questions are initially sent out, so as not to overwhelm the interviewee. The question order and delivery are also important, as is the approach to introduce the interview. O'Connor *et al.* also express concern that the additional time offered by asynchronous methods to think and re-edit responses could lead to a 'socially desirable' response rather than a more spontaneous personal response.

Text-based or multi-media

Text-based tools are attractive to the researcher as they avoid the need for expensive and time-consuming transcription. They offer a number of other advantages too, such as allowing interviewers and participants to avoid potential communication difficulties related to disabilities such as hearing impairment (Hinchcliffe and Gavin 2009) or concerns about personal appearance (Fox, Morris and Rumsey 2007). Oringderff also argues that text-based online environments can offer social equalization as they offer actual or perceived anonymity, and offer both participants and interviewers fewer clues about socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, nationality and disability (Oringderff 2004).

The core limitation to the use of text-based tools is the ability of the researcher and participant to type at an appropriate speed. These issues are considerably sharper in relation to synchronous methods, but do not vanish altogether in asynchronous environments.

Regardless of how effective interviewers and participants are in expressing themselves in text, text-based environments still offer very different forms of communication from a conventional face-to-face interview. Most obvious is the loss of conventional verbal clues. Subtleties like the nod of a head, making eye-contact or a gesture towards a particular participant are key to the way that researchers conduct face-to-face research, but disappear altogether in the online environment. The lack of these various clues brings with it the possibility of misinterpretation of questions or responses, and researchers often find a need to seek additional clarification or reassurance (Meho 2006). Meho argues that in some cases some of these lost verbal clues are compensated for through the use of emoticons and text-speak acronyms such as LOL (laughing out loud) or ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing). Conventions of this kind clearly have cultural associations that mean that they are unlikely to be employed by all participants.

Video-conferencing provides an alternative (and far less commonly utilized) tool for conducting online interviews. Sedgwick and Spiers utilized the tool to investigate the experience of rurally dispersed nursing students (Sedgwick and Spiers 2009). Their participants were familiar with the use of video-conferencing for other purposes (training, meetings etc.) and the technology was well supported in the locations where the students were based. Video-conference was preferred over audio-based approaches (such as telephone interviews) because it was believed that

it would preserve more of the non-verbal and verbal signifiers of meaning, and thus would allow the researcher to capture more subtle data (although this was in part dependent on the high bandwidth/high-quality video approach that was possible within the context that Sedgwick and Spiers were researching). Bertrand & Bourdeau also argue that video-conference software offers richer data by enabling the researcher to observe, record and analyse the movement of the individual's body and face (Bertrand and Bourdeau 2010).

Sedgwick and Spiers reported that participants were happy with the use of video-conferencing for interviews. As with text-based interactions it is likely that some participants are able to utilize the technological environment more successfully than others. Fielding found that his participants in video-conference interviews and focus groups were diverse, and that 'some played to the camera; others had stage fright and showed second thoughts about their images being broadcast' (Fielding 2010). Sedgwick and Spiers also note that although it comes close, the use of video-conferencing remains a different kind of interaction to face-to-face interviewing. It is not possible, for example, to offer a distressed participant a tissue via video-conferencing software and, as Fielding notes, even when video quality is high, establishing genuine eye-contact remains extremely difficult.

Other issues in selecting tools

There is also a range of other issues that researchers may wish to keep in mind when selecting tools for online interviews and focus groups. The following questions are designed to help researchers to think some of these issues through:

- How easy is the tool to use, and is it familiar or unfamiliar to the researcher and the participants? A tool in common usage (such as email) is likely to present participants with fewer problems, but will also carry some cultural baggage associated with the way in which that tool is usually used.
- Does the tool carry or convey a particular institution or organization through branding, URL or any other means? Online spaces convey meaning to participants and so, for example, the use of a higher education institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) will posi-

tion the focus group or interview within a different kind of context from something based in Facebook.

- How is data recorded, saved and managed? It is essential to work out how you are going to record your data before you start any research. Many tools now offer the opportunity to record sessions. However, if this is not available then some creativity may be required. (Sedgwick and Spiers combined a tape recorder with their video-conference interviews to enable them to produce a transcript.)
- How are confidentiality and anonymity ensured/protected? Researchers should investigate what data is publically available (perhaps through profiles that are generated as part of account creation) and what is collected by the tool that is being used (for example, are participants' IP addresses recorded?). Deggs, Grover and Kacirek recommend that a system is used that allows participants to generate a new username and password for the purpose of the research if they choose to do so (Deggs, Grover and Kacirek 2010).
- What are the financial and other resource issues associated with the tool for researcher and participants? Selection of particular software or tools may involve real costs (such as subscription charges) or necessitate the researchers and participants installing software or downloading plug-ins in order that they can interact. These may limit participants' ability to engage if they are unwilling or unable to add software to their browser or desktop.

It is also important that researchers pilot the use of any new tool before committing to its use for an entire study.

Managing online interviews and focus groups

Many of the challenges associated with managing online interviews and focus groups relate to the disembodiment of the researcher. This chapter has already discussed the challenges associated with the disembodiment of the participant in terms of the loss of data experienced by the researcher. However, interviews and focus groups are inter-personal interactions, and as such are highly reliant on language, visual cues, tone and other communicative subtleties. The move into online environments removes many of these cues and reframes others. Researchers therefore have to think about

how they are going to manage the social, relational and logistical issues in undertaking qualitative research whilst online.

Sampling and recruitment

Many of the challenges of disembodiment are first encountered during the initial approach to potential participants. However, it is also worth noting that many of the challenges associated with sampling and recruitment in relation to online interviews and focus groups are closely related to those experienced by onsite researchers. Rather than rehearse a more general discussion about sampling and recruitment in qualitative research, researchers may wish to consult MacDougall and Fudge, Ritchie and Lewis or Flick (MacDougall and Fudge 2001; Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Flick 2009b).

Much of the discussion around sampling in chapter 4 is also relevant in the context of online interviews and focus groups. It may be worth reviewing that chapter's discussion around issues such as identity verification, understanding the demographics of the population, and engaging participants and sustaining engagement. In essence, the question is whether the use of online methods excludes any individuals or groups or makes anyone less (or more) likely to wish to participate. Many online researchers (Fox, Morris and Rumsey 2007) use the internet as a core element of their strategy to engage and recruit participants, and this is likely to have an impact on the nature of the sample that is recruited. However, it also offers opportunities to recruit participants quickly and in a way that is not dependent on personal access to participants or traditional gatekeepers. Nevertheless, as Hamilton and Bowers point out, website managers and discussion group moderators effectively become a new type of gatekeeper to research populations (Hamilton and Bowers 2006).

Although many of the issues around sampling for quantitative research remain, qualitative researchers are likely to find these less limiting. Interviews and focus groups do not generally seek to be representative, but rather to access the experiences and perspectives of participants to provide richer and deeper understandings of research issues. However, qualitative researchers do need to be careful in the construction of their sample frame and endeavour to avoid recruitment bias. Hamilton and Bowers note that 'if sampling is restrictive in a dimension important to the research question, then the results will not be representative of the experience in question' (Hamilton and Bowers 2006: 824). Salmons argues

that researchers should be particularly attentive to whatever information is available (from academic literature, the census or other data sources) about the participants' access to technology and their digital literacy during the creation of the sample frame (Salmons 2009).

A key aspect of the recruitment process is the gathering of consent from participants. The approach that is taken onsite (information sheets, consent forms, verbal explanation and signature) is problematized considerably by the movement online. Some researchers have argued that there is value in retaining hard copy consent-form processes even if the research is actually being conducted online (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006). However, this seems increasingly archaic in a world in which ever more transactions are conducted entirely online. Therefore it is important in consent processes that participants have had the opportunity to become informed about the research and their role within it, to ask questions and clarify concerns, and that this process is recordable and evidencable in some way. Whether it takes the character of an online form, emailing a Word document or recording a synchronous discussion is less important than the fact that the process takes place.

Building rapport

The building of rapport could be conceptualized as involving three inter-related elements: the researcher; the participants; the cultural environment. How the researcher behaves by being open, friendly, flexible and empathetic clearly forms an important part of the process of rapport building. However, the participants also influence how this process plays out and their attitudes, assumptions and experiences will influence this. Finally, the nature of the online environment in which the research is being conducted will influence the success or otherwise that researchers and participants have in striking up rapport.

Conventional qualitative methodologies emphasise the building of rapport as a key component of undertaking research. Madge *et al.* note that traditional techniques employed by the researcher (dressing appropriately, smiling, making eye-contact) have to be abandoned or re-imagined in the context of online interviews and focus groups (Madge, O'Connor, Wellens, Hooley and Shaw 2006b). Orgad notes that many of these physical signifiers are replaced with alternative online signifiers, such

as the interviewer's email address which convey meaning and therefore help or hinder the building of rapport (Orgad 2005).

Recognizing the variety of ways in which meaning is signified, and trust built online, offers researchers opportunities to build rapport. Kivits consciously disclosed personal information to participants as part of this rapport building (Kivits 2005), while O'Connor and Madge provided participants with access to a website with photos and personal information about them to increase their trustworthiness (O'Connor and Madge 2001). Openness of this kind offers one strategy through which some of the limitations of web-based communications can be offset. If participants are to feel comfortable with a researcher, the researcher needs to establish their credentials as a trustworthy human being. In conventional research settings much of this work is done through the verbal and non-verbal signifiers that are employed with varying degrees of consciousness by researchers. Without these signifiers alternatives have to be found that can achieve the same result.

However, researchers also have to recognize that it is not just their actions that can influence the development of rapport. Participants may seek to interact in different ways from the researcher, perhaps pursuing their own agendas or enacting the communication in ways that confound the researcher's notions of rapport (for example, more formal/less formal). When the researcher is attempting to build rapport with a group rather than an individual these issues become more complex still. Oringderff argues that in online focus groups individuals may experience more freedom with a corresponding reduction in the amount of discretion and tact (Oringderff 2004). This kind of behaviour has the potential to undermine the successful functioning of the group and should probably be consciously addressed by the researcher. Similarly, Oringderff notes that in certain groups participants may cease interacting as a group and instead form smaller groups or 'pair friendships'.

Finally it is also important to note and consider the opportunities for rapport building that are offered by the environment within which the interview/focus group is taking place. For example, does the environment enable the sharing of profile photos amongst participants? Does it offer features that enable participants to convey emotions or ideas in paralinguistic ways, such as a button for 'I'm confused'? Does the environment allow you to formalize turn-taking or send messages to a single participant rather than the whole group? Researchers are advised to experiment with

the functionality of the environment to explore these kinds of possibilities and consider how they might be employed in the building of rapport and the management of the group.

Dealing with problems

Interviews and focus groups depend on the establishment of a workable contract between researchers and participants. Much of this is about building rapport and creating an atmosphere in which participants want to engage in the research. However, once engaged the researcher still has to manage carefully the interview/focus group to ensure that it proceeds in a way that is useful. Questions and other researcher inputs are designed to shape discussions in ways that illuminate the research questions or themes. However, the agenda of the research will rarely match exactly that of the participant.

Typically researchers have a range of tools to help to manage the environment and conduct of the research. Particular locations might be chosen, furniture organized into particular configurations, the researcher might choose to wear particular clothes, to encourage turn-taking by the use of eye-contact and so on. All of these different and subtle signals help to convey to the research participant the nature of the encounter, expected behaviour and how to participate. When the interview is moved online many of these strategies need to be rethought.

The following strategies might be employed to help researchers manage online interviews and focus groups:

- **Contracting:** beginning interviews with a discussion about the purpose and format of the interview to help set some ground rules.
- **Netiquette:** attending to the online etiquette (netiquette) that is commonly in use by research participants. It may be useful to remind people if you feel someone has breached netiquette, for example by flaming (insulting) someone else.
- **Pre-prepared responses:** it can be useful to have some prepared sections of text ready, given the speed with which (synchronous) online interviews and focus groups move. These could be concerned with providing stimulus to the discussion or with dealing with challenging behaviour by reminding people of agreed behaviours. The use

of pre-prepared text can allow researchers a little more time to read and respond to contributions.

- **Sending individual messages:** many discussion tools allow the researcher to message individual participants during a group discussion. This can be useful to clarify meaning, check on whether participants are OK and address problem behaviours.

An additional problem for researchers in online environments is dealing with participants who just vanish. Participants may leave because they have experienced technical problems, because they get bored, are committed elsewhere or because they object to the actions of the researcher or another participant. For researchers this can be disconcerting, and they may wish to follow up with participants by email or phone to further explore the reasons for their departure.

Analysis

In many ways, the analysis of data collected during online research is the same as the analysis of other kinds of qualitative data. A big advantage is the default production of full text transcripts or video recordings of the interview. However, it is also important to remember that the medium shapes the nature of the interaction and the kinds of data that are collected. As Fielding argues, 'No research technology, from pen and paper through to AG[access grid], is a neutral "carrier" to the field. All research technologies reconfigure the field' (Fielding 2010). The nature of the data being gathered therefore has a relationship to the way in which it is gathered, and the analysis needs to reflect on this and consider its implications.

Depending on the tools and methodologies employed by the researcher, the kinds of data that have been generated will vary. Furthermore, the epistemological and methodological approach will shape the researcher's analytical approach to the material that they have gathered. However, there are a number of issues that researchers might wish to attend to as they analyse the material that they have gathered:

- **Inaccuracies:** online interview transcripts are typically littered with typing errors and spelling mistakes, as well as the use of text speak and paralinguistic signifiers (LOL, :-> etc). The researcher needs to consider how much of the analysis needs to explore and reflect the mode of expression.

- **Spatiality:** how far should the analysis take account of the physical location and life context from which data have been generated? Orgad argues that combinations of online and onsite data can enrich the analysis and help researchers to understand what online data is saying (Orgad 2009).
- **Conversational flow:** how does the altered nature of conversational flow (for example, less sequential in synchronous, slow genesis in asynchronous) alter both the nature of the data collected and the analysis?
- **Silence:** how should the analysis attend to silence and pauses in transcript data? Often transcripts will be time-coded in a way that makes it easy to examine pauses, but they may not mean the same thing socially as they might in a face-to-face interview.

In summary

Online qualitative research remains a relatively new area in which methodological approaches are still becoming established. The rapid development of new forms of communication technology complicates this still further. As researchers begin to establish methodological processes for email, discussion boards or chat rooms, new technologies are developed (for example, social networking software and smart phones) that necessitate the recontextualising of methodologies in both technical and socio-cultural terms. Given this context of change and flux, it is unlikely that online interviews and focus groups will ever reach a point where methodology is stable. Researchers therefore need to be reflexive in their methodologies and learn from their experience, the experience of others (including participants), and from the changing social and technical environment around them.

Further reading

Online interviews and focus groups have not been as extensively discussed as online surveys. *Online Interviewing* (James and Busher 2009) provides an overview of key methodological issues and is particularly strong on asynchronous interviewing. *Online Interviews in Real Time* (Salmons 2009) provides a practical approach to synchronous interviewing.

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