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4 Where can qualitative interviews take place?

Introduction

In Chapter 3 we discussed forms that the qualitative interview can take. Here we discuss further types of interview, focusing on and considering the implications of the setting for the type of interaction that takes place and the data that can be generated. We examine the importance of various settings for face-to-face interviews, and variants of 'walking and talking' interviews. The discussion continues with interviews where the researcher and researched are in different places: self-interviews where the researcher is not present, telephone, online and e-interviews in cyberspace, where the researched and researcher can be still further apart, although in some instances in visual contact.

Interview settings

Earlier we have discussed pragmatic approaches to issues of research methodology and method, and a pragmatic approach to the location of face-to-face interviews (as might be advocated in text books) would suggest finding a space that is available for use, convenient and accessible to participant and researcher, where you could avoid interruption and make an adequate sound recording of the conversation. Any experienced researcher will smile at this point, thinking of the places and spaces in which they have undertaken interviews, some of which probably met none of these criteria. Privacy might be an issue and so a private rather than a public space is more suitable, the home of researcher or researched possibly, each bringing their own concerns and complications. But private rooms can be available in otherwise public spaces, the researcher's office in a university, or the office of the participant in an organization of which they are part. We can see that just naming these potential settings for an interview further complicates an already complex situation in relation

to the power and positionality (their social status and identity) of the researcher and researched in a range of hierarchies. (See also Chapter 7.)

Positions in hierarchies of gender, class, age, ethnicity and other dimensions are not just aspects of the multiple identities of individuals (or groups) but are experienced, created and enacted in *places*. Think of a school, redolent of power hierarchies; a researcher accessing children in school has multiple levels of power and control to negotiate, and once in contact with the children the adult–child power relationship itself colours the interaction. It is hard for a child or young person interviewed in a school setting not to see the researcher as a teacher, or allied with teachers/adults in this context. On their part teachers and other powerful figures can undermine the confidentiality offered to children, expecting access to any information gathered. But homes too have their own micro geographies and sets of familial power relations, and spaces in homes available for research vary considerably with the social positioning of the participants. It can be argued that the public permeates the private, and the domestic space is increasingly linked to public space through media and the internet in an increasingly two-way process with the growth of social media.

Micro-geographies of interview sites

Often researchers offer the choice of setting to the interviewee, who might like to meet in a public place in which they are comfortable – a café, a pub, a park. Noise affecting the recording, being able to hear what each other says adequately, and privacy are practical considerations here. These can also apply to workplaces of different types: factories, a prison, an open plan office, a school staff room. If other people are within hearing distance, or can enter the space where the interview takes place, this can create tension for both interviewer and interviewee and affect how and what can be discussed. When undertaking research in different institutions and organizations, the researcher may be facilitated by the provision of a suitable room, or left to take their chances in whatever spaces are available.

Aspects of identity can be experienced and enacted in particular spaces and places, but they can also be evoked, affecting the way in which participants respond. Interviewing neighbourhood organization staff and residents about their experiences of, actions in and perceptions of their neighbourhood, Sarah Elwood and Deborah Martin (2000) found different kinds of answers given, depending on where the interview was conducted. For example, community organization directors and staff when interviewed

in their offices tended to give explanations based primarily on the priorities of the organization. Interviewed in other public places or in their homes, they tended to talk more freely about their own opinions separate from organizational goals, giving examples drawn from their experiences of the neighbourhood through other aspects of their identities, for example, volunteering at local schools, relationships with neighbours.

In general these researchers suggest that the interview site itself produces 'micro-geographies' of socio-spatial relations and meaning that reflect the relationships of the researcher with the participant, the participant with the site and the site within a broader socio-cultural and power context that affects both researcher and participant (Elwood and Martin 2000: 649, 650). They advocate that much greater attention should be paid to interview sites, pointing to the importance they have for the research at every level, from research plan and questions, through generation of data, understanding power relations between researcher and researched and gaining insight into the basic questions under study.

At the pragmatic level, as researchers we do desire a room where we can speak privately to the research participant(s). Many researchers have also pointed out that the interview site, in all its messiness and social embeddedness, is a source of information and data beyond that generated in the interview. Seeing the participant in context (in their home, their classroom, their workplace), surrounded by the material culture of their created space, and possibly interacting with others in that space, offers a wealth of information beyond that obtained, and possibly obtainable, in an interview, providing an ethnographic dimension to the exchange.

A further type of interview builds on the access that space and place can provide researchers to the lives, identities, biographies and memories of participants. The walking interview takes place in the participant's environment.

Walking and talking

As with many methods and types of qualitative interview, the walking interview has its roots in ethnography and is not new. Margarethe Kusenbach (2003: 463) describes the 'go-along' method as both more limited and more focused than the generic ethnographic practice of 'hang-ing out'. In this version participants are accompanied on a 'natural' outing, rooted in everyday routines with the researcher asking questions, listening and observing, exploring the participant's practices and experiences as they

move through and interact with their physical and social environment. The go-alongs can be accomplished on foot or in a vehicle. In Kusenbach's study they could last from a few minutes to an entire day, but she suggests 90 minutes as a productive length of time. They provide insight into perception, spatial practices, personal biographies, the web of connections between people and patterns of social interaction.

Andrew Clark and Nick Emmel (2010) provide useful advice about undertaking walking interviews, outlining some of the advantages. Placing events, stories and experiences in their spatial context can help participants to articulate their thoughts; the narratives can add detail to the researcher's understanding and insight; and locations can be used to elicit or prompt discussion, encouraging questioning that might not occur in a room setting. The researchers provided information and a digital camera, and discussed the rationale before the walk so that participants knew what was expected, pointing out that guidance needs to be clear enough to ensure that appropriate data are obtained, but sufficiently open to let participants present their neighbourhood (2). The participants chose the route. The interview was digitally recorded, using a good quality small microphone with a wind guard. The researchers later recorded the route on a map and wrote it onto the transcript of the interview, with annotations on what was being discussed and where photos were taken (see Figure 4.1). People met en route will be seen with the researcher on their own patch and so confidentiality is threatened, and others who join the conversation need to be told that it is being recorded.

With impetus from geographers and the 'new mobilities' paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006), which has turned attention to how mobile research methods can be used to understand everyday experiences through embodied, multi-sensory research experiences, walking interviews are becoming increasingly popular. They are particularly valued in giving some control to the participants who decide where to walk, and for creating enabling research environments (Ross et al. 2009). Jon Anderson (2004), for example, argues with others that identity both influences and is influenced by 'inhabited material places'. He suggests that conversations in place, or 'talking whilst walking', offer the potential to add new layers of understanding for the social scientist. He gives an example of his study of environmental activists, and the practice of taking a 'bimble', to walk or wander around aimlessly. Taking a participant off for a bimble gave both

Figure 4.1 Routes and selected photographs taken on two walking interviews (Clark and Emmel 2010).

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a break from the tensions of the protest site, and offered a different point of access to his participants, evoking memories and connections from the place itself as well as his questions.

We have discussed the importance and potential effects on the research, participants and researcher of the setting in qualitative interviews. But there are interviews in which the researcher and participant are not in the same physical location.

Together and apart in time and space

In this section we discuss types of interviews where researcher and participant are separated in time and space. They might be in different time zones or separate locations at any distance apart. They could be responding to each other *asynchronously* via email or *synchronously* online via the appropriate software or instant messaging (Chen and Hinton 1999). They might use text as in these examples, or audio or video recorded responses. The researcher might be taking advantage of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) to generate participants and conduct the interview (Snee 2008). Chat rooms and other virtual meeting places could be employed (Shepherd 2003). The researcher might undertake an ethnography of a virtual

community (Beneito-Montagut 2011; Ethnography and Education 2013; Kozinets 2010). All of these possibilities change the nature, dynamic and space of the qualitative interview and raise further issues about research in virtual encounters (Hooley et al. 2012; Mann and Stewart 2000).

Telephone interviews: Landline and online

In telephone interviews the researcher and participant are each in, and in control of, their own separate space, and possibly at a considerable distance, although their exchange is *synchronous* in time. Different time zones might alter that experience of time and need specific arrangements. Advantages of the telephone interview are that it is cheaper, faster and, with participants who are hard to reach or located in difficult or dangerous places and spaces, safer. A wider geographical spread is possible. Neil Stephens (2007), located in the United Kingdom, used depth-interviews with elite macroeconomists located in the United States.

The telephone interview can be more acceptable to some participants when discussing sensitive topics, for confidentiality/privacy or convenience, for fitting into busy and complicated lives. Disadvantages include the lack of face-to-face contact and so lack of information about the other from their appearance, non-verbal communication in the interaction and the physical context. Amanda Holt (2010), using narrative interviews and critical realist discourse analysis, saw this lack of 'ethnographic' information on the participants' homes and selves as an advantage, enabling analysis at the level of the text. In her view, the lack of non-verbal communication similarly led to greater articulation from both researcher and participant in the exchanges.

Judith Sturges and Kathleen Hanrahan (2004) employed semi-structured interviews with visitors to county jail inmates and correctional officers who supervised the visit. Comparing the quality and amount of data generated and the quantity, nature and depth of the responses these researchers concluded that the findings did not differ substantially in the two methods. Those reluctant to take part face-to-face were pleased to be offered a telephone interview, valued being asked for their views and glad to give voice to issues about the system that bothered them. Although often researchers come to telephone interviews through problems in the research process, and had not previously considered the method, the comparative literature suggests that most found the telephone interviews productive and valid.

Technological development has led to the possibility of calls made online, with similar advantages to interviewing on a landline. Here a further possibility is visual contact (e.g. via Skype™ or Facetime™) where interviewer and interviewee can see each other, and perhaps part of their environment. Visual cues can become available once more, although not the full ethnographic possibilities. The interviewees must also have access to the necessary technology. Paul Hanna (2012) argues strongly that the benefit of using internet technologies such as Skype™ (low costs, ease of access, minimization of ecological dilemmas and the partial overcoming of issues of spatiality and physical interaction) make this a very valuable interview method. These and other rapidly developing modes of contact are expanding the scope and range of qualitative interviews (see too Chapter 8).

The e-interview

In an email interview there are similarly no constraints on location, the participants can be widely geographically separated, including worldwide. While an email exchange can be quite rapid, when using email for qualitative interviews, it is an advantage that the interviewer and interviewee are separated in time as well as space and the exchanges are likely to be *asynchronous*, with gaps of varying length between them. There are numerous advantages of the technique: it is written, producing text, obviating the need for transcription, saving time and resources, although this might lead to a less spontaneous account than produced in other interview methods. For the busy researcher and participant, the email interview offers considerable flexibility about when it takes place, with the participant in control of the flow, their response triggering the next communication from the researcher. The researcher can have several interviews running at the same time, and both researcher and participant can have time for reflection on the responses, and on the future direction of the research. Comparing the instantaneous response in online chat room exchanges, Jamie Lewis agrees that a written email response ‘allows participants greater scope to think about any questions asked and, as such, often encourages more descriptive and well thought out replies’ (Lewis 2006: 5). Time for consideration and reflection was also valued by Kaye Stacey and Jill Vincent using an electronic interview with multimedia hyperlinked stimulus resources with teachers of mathematics, seeking their beliefs, reflective observations and evaluations of mathematics teaching practice. This approach ‘provided

for a richer interview than would have been possible with a face-to-face interview in the more limited timeframe that would have been imposed' (2011: 605).

New skills are required of the e-interviewer not just technically being able to use email (a requirement for participants too) but for timing the flow of questions and judging how the interview is progressing when it is hard to assess the meaning of time gaps. Tactics need to be developed to deal with these issues, perhaps sending a slightly rephrased or amplified question (see Bampton and Cowton 2002 and application of their argument by Opdenakker 2006), or establishing ground rules at the beginning of the research about how long the exchanges will continue. In general it is better not to send all of the questions at once (although an indicative list of topics or issues sent early is useful) but to send them in the form of dialogue and exchange. The spatial separation might be advantageous, reducing the possibility of embarrassment for the participant and less obtrusive, and anonymity can be assured. This can raise ethical and other issues. Nalita James and Hugh Busher (2006) discuss problems of credibility, authenticity and other dilemmas in online interviewing.

As with all types of qualitative interview the email interview must produce data appropriate for your research questions, and both researcher and participant must have time and the appropriate software or equipment to pursue this option. Participants need to be comfortable writing about their experiences. Lucy Gibson (2010) undertook a qualitative mixed-method study of older music fans in three different music scenes (involving participant observation at music events and on virtual music discussion forums, as well as face-to-face or email interviews). Her email interviews took place over months, with long gaps between questions and responses, which varied widely in quantity of content. The process allowed participants to construct complex stories about their lives and experiences with music, having more in common with diaries than face-to-face interview data for Gibson, and the participants enjoyed 'authoring' their experiences.

Nicole Ison (2009) found email interviews useful for facilitating participation in research with people with impaired verbal communication. Her study used a narrative method to understand the experiences of young people with cerebral palsy, seeking their stories of emerging adulthood. Some of the young people who had verbal communication impairment wanted to take part in the research, and suggested that they could use

email. Prior to the interview, Ison met participants, providing some familiarity with the participant and their environment. For Ison, 'the overwhelming value of this method is its capacity to facilitate participation by individuals who are unable to undertake face-to-face interviews' (2009: 170).

Self-interviews

In the self-interview the researcher is physically absent from the interview site, and the interviewee undertakes the interview in their own way in their own space. Emma Keightley and colleagues developed the 'self-interview' to use in the empirical study of memory, drawing on oral history approaches (Keightley et al. 2012). When piloting their study of practices of remembering, particularly about the 'life cycle' and stages in it, their participants associated photography and recorded music with memory and remembering. Initially using face-to-face interviews, the researchers realized that the participants needed more time to think, and to reflect on the memories elicited. They asked potential informants to record themselves talking about photos and recorded music and how these operated as vehicles of memory in their lives. The participants were provided with a guide sheet including the areas to be covered. Removing the interviewer enabled the participants to pause, think and reflect on their chosen images, and possibly to come to terms with any emotions evoked, choosing when to talk and for how long at any time. For these researchers self-interviews can capture the cross-temporal relation between the present in which the participants are remembering and the remembered past, exploring how the past is made sense of in the present.

Audio diaries have long been used in qualitative research. The participant can record their thoughts about their experiences as they occur, without the mediating presence of the researcher, similar to written diaries, but in a more immediate way that is possibly easier for the participant. Clearly, the topic of research and research questions will decide the appropriateness of this method. The researcher is of course guiding the research, is present in the imagination of the participant and can be addressed in the recording.

Lynn Monrouxe used solicited audio diaries in a longitudinal, narrative study of medical students to explore how they narrate their developing professional identity, moving from a 'human' gaze on the world at the start of training, to a predominantly 'medical' gaze at the end. She comments on the data: 'it was hard not to be impressed with the richness and diversity

of the recordings, the ways in which the everyday and the extraordinary events experienced by these medical students became plotted into evocative constructions of their own developing professional narratives' (2009: 86). Monrouxe discusses her response to the emotional demands of some of the narratives she encountered, linked particularly to the longitudinality of the research, and draws attention to the similarity of the settings of the participant in producing and the researcher in reading transcribed diaries – although separate in time and space, both in solitude in the quiet of a room.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the importance of the setting in which qualitative interviews take place and the effects this can have on interviewer and interviewee and their interaction, influencing the type of data that can be generated. These effects can be the most general – the influence of places and spaces on identity, perceptions, memories, emotions, the interaction of hierarchies of power at different levels associated with individuals, institutions, organizations, society. And they can be the very specific on the participants in the face-to-face interaction, including noise, interruptions, distractions. We have indicated the ideal space for the pragmatic qualitative interviewer, and discussed types of interviews where the research activity takes place at a distance through various technologies. In Chapter 5 we discuss the tools that can be used in qualitative interviews.