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2010-03

Mode effects in qualitative interviews: a comparison of semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews using conversation analysis

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What difference does it make when we conduct qualitative research interviews by telephone rather than face-to-face? This important question has received relatively little attention in the methodological literature to date. A study conducted at the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) has sought to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge. The study has taken an innovative cross-disciplinary approach, bringing together methodological expertise from the fields of conversation analysis and applied social policy research.

Key questions

For a variety of practical and ethical reasons, telephone interviews are sometimes used in qualitative social research. However, we currently know very little about what difference this makes to the interaction that takes place. This study asked the following key questions:

- To what extent are there differences in:
  - The duration and depth of interviews?
  - The ways that the researcher displays attention and interest?
  - The incidence of misunderstanding or requests for clarification?
  - The patterns of turn-taking and incidence of speaker overlap?
  - The strategies through which rapport and 'naturalness' are accomplished?
- What are the implications of these differences (if any) for the data that is generated through telephone interviews?
- What are the consequent implications for our analysis and ultimate research outputs?
- How might we wish to modify our interviewing approaches in response to these questions?

Background

Traditionally, methodological text books have advised us that the telephone mode is not well suited to the task of qualitative interviewing. In particular, the lack of face-to-face contact is said to restrict the development of rapport and a 'natural' encounter – elements that are often considered to be important for generating good qualitative data. However, there are also potential advantages of using the telephone for research interviews. For example, there are resource savings in time and travel costs and participants can be included across a wider geographical range. Participants may prefer a more anonymous encounter if the research topic is particularly sensitive and there may also be personal safety advantages in certain contexts. For these types of practical and ethical reasons, it is not uncommon to find qualitative studies in the field of applied social research that have conducted some or all interviews by telephone.

A growing number of researchers are publishing their first-hand reflections on using the telephone to conduct qualitative 'in-depth' or 'semi-structured' interviews. Notably these accounts are, for the most part, presenting a view that contrasts with the received wisdom that telephone interviews are unsuitable for qualitative research. On the whole, these researchers report that telephone interviews are 'just as good' as those conducted face-to-face, achieving successful interactions and generating high quality data. However, although many of these first-hand accounts offer thoughtful reflections and interesting insights, most of their conclusions remain at a fairly general and impressionistic level. Few explain the analytic approach that was taken in order to reach their conclusions. Direct and detailed comparisons of the telephone and face-to-face interview modes seem, to date, to be lacking in the qualitative methodological literature. In this context, a research project was devised at SPRU which sought to address the question of mode-related difference in a more robust and systematic way than has previously been attempted.

Aims and method

The study was small-scale and exploratory, using eleven semi-structured qualitative interviews that had originally been conducted for an earlier study on mental health and employment[1]. For practical reasons, two different interview modes were used: some interviews were conducted by telephone and some were conducted face-to-face. A subset of these interviews offered a unique opportunity to conduct a systematic comparison of mode-related difference. Three particular strengths of this data set were that (i) the interviews were conducted by the same researcher and so any effects of different personal interviewing styles were minimised; (ii) participants were allocated to interview mode by the researcher (largely based on geography) and so the influence of any preference among participants for one mode or the other was minimised (iii) the interviews were carried out prior to devising the present mode comparison study so any conscious attention on the part of the researcher to variation in interviewing practice in each mode was minimised.

The sub-set of data used in the mode comparison comprised five face-to-face and six telephone interviews, totalling just under 17 hours of audio data. Participants included males and females, aged between 32 and 54 years. All eleven participants described themselves as being of white British ethnicity and were fluent speakers of English. The researcher was female, mixed-race, a native English speaker, and aged 29 years.

The key aim of this study was to contribute to a more evidence-based understanding about what differences interview mode might produce in the interpersonal interaction that takes place during a research interview and to consider what implications any such differences might have for the research data. The intention was not to prove or disprove the validity or effectiveness of the telephone mode for qualitative research interviews, but to raise questions about what additional considerations might be necessary if researchers choose, for practical or ethical reasons, to conduct qualitative interviews by telephone.

The study was primarily interested in the possible *interactional* differences that may (or may not) exist between telephone and face-to-face interviews, rather than the substantive content of the interviews. As such, the techniques of conversation analysis were considered an appropriate method. Conversation analysis focuses on the various practices that speakers use to accomplish social actions through talk and on the 'interactional consequences' of selecting one strategy or form of words over another. The approach to analysis centres on the close examination of collections of audio (and sometimes video) data alongside detailed transcriptions, to identify recurring patterns and structures in interaction.

The first stage of analysis in this study involved preparing the eleven interview transcripts to a sophisticated level of detail using the Jeffersonian transcription system[2], which represents features such as rising or falling intonation, changes in volume,

[1] Irvine, A. (2008) *Managing Mental Health and Employment*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report, 537, Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

[2] Jefferson, G. (2004) 'Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction' in Lerner, G. H. (ed) *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the first generation*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

speaker overlap, intake and exhalation of breath, pauses and their duration, laughter or crying. A short extract of interview transcript prepared using these conventions is shown in Box 1, along with a guide to the transcription conventions which appear in this extract. Producing the transcripts in this level of detail allowed for a close examination of precisely what took place in each interview interaction and for the systematic comparison of interactional difference across modes.

Box 1 Transcript extract with transcript conventions

1	Int:	Erm out– outside of work then do you
2		sort of have (0.4) family an::
3		(0.4)
4	Par:	YEAH .tch e::r I just a f– >you know< I got
5		divorced last year?
6	Int:	O::h [°right°]
7	Par:	[er HUH] .hhh er:m I've er just (0.5) er
8		met a new partner
9	Int:	Mm [hm
10	Par:	[and I've got two children: of nine
11		a:nd fou::rteen?
12	Int:	Mm hm
13	Par:	nearly got it wrong [.hhh
14	Int:	[°huh°

Par:/Int:	Speaker labels (Par: = participant; Int = interviewer)	[ ]	Encloses talk produced in overlap i.e. when more than one speaker is speaking
° °	Encloses talk which is produced quietly		
CAPS	Words or parts of words spoken loudly marked in capital letters	cu-	Cut-off word or sound
		(0.6)	Silence in seconds
s:::	Sustained or stretched sound; the more colons, the longer the sound	?	Rising intonation
		> <	Marks speeding up delivery (in talk between the facing arrows)
.hhh	In-breath (more .hhhh to indicate longer in-breath)		

Main findings

In this comparison of five face-to-face and six telephone interviews, it was found that:

- Face-to-face interviews tended to be longer than telephone interviews. In this data set, face-to-face interviews were, on average, 21 minutes longer than telephone interviews.
- This additional duration in face-to-face interviews was due to more talk from the participants. The researcher spoke for less time in face-to-face interviews than she did in telephone interviews. This meant that participants 'held the floor' for a greater proportion of the interview in face-to-face interviews, while the researcher was relatively more dominant in the interaction in telephone interviews.
- As well as talking for longer overall, participants in face-to-face interviews tended to speak for longer stretches at a time, before the researcher stepped in with another question or comment.
- Sometimes the researcher's questions were 'unfinished' or not fully grammatically formed. These types of incomplete questions were more common in face-to-face interviews.
- The researcher frequently offered short words or sounds to show that she was following what the participant was saying, for example, "yeah" or "mm hm". These sorts of vocalised 'response tokens' were given less frequently in telephone interviews.
- There were times when the researcher began to say something but then stopped, because she realised that the participant had not yet finished what they were saying, or that they wanted to begin saying something else. This happened much more often in telephone interviews.
- Sometimes the researcher completed a participant's sentence for them, helped them to find a word they were struggling with, or 'reformulated' their words to show understanding. This happened more often in face-to-face interviews.
- Participants sometimes asked for clarification or reiteration of a question. This happened slightly more in telephone interviews. However, there was no evidence to suggest that misinterpretations occurred more in either mode.

- Sometimes the researcher expressed to a participant that she understood a certain topic area was delicate or sensitive. This happened more often in telephone interviews.
- Sometimes the participant checked with the researcher that what they were saying was 'along the right lines' or that what they had said was sufficient for the researcher's needs. This happened more often in telephone interviews.

Practioner workshop

A one day workshop was held in May 2010 to disseminate and discuss the methods, findings and implications of the study. An invited group of 15 experienced research practitioners and leading academics took part, coming from diverse qualitative research backgrounds including applied policy research, market research, sociology and the methodological fields of discourse and conversation analysis. Bringing together a group with varied but related interests in this way proved fruitful and stimulating, providing multiple perspectives and highlighting a wide range of further questions that could be explored.

Alongside the fairly fine-grained interactional differences explored in this study, there was significant interest in further analysis of how mode might affect the substantive content of the interview data. There were also comments about the potential for a greater focus on telephone interviewing in research methods training. The group agreed that there is much scope for further investigation, not only into mode effects in qualitative interviews but also into the fundamental interactional practices of qualitative research interviewing.

Conclusions and implications for further research

From this small-scale study, we must resist the temptation to suggest firm conclusions; the above findings are tentative and best treated as emerging themes for further exploration. We must also be careful not to generalise about all qualitative interviews. There can be no single response to the question '*does it matter* if we conduct qualitative research interviews by telephone?'. The answer for any given study will depend on many things, including: the topic of inquiry; the type of information sought; the characteristics of the participants who will be interviewed; and the type of analysis we wish to undertake. However, our findings suggest that there *do* appear to be interactional differences between semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews. Thus, we conclude that there is a need to replicate and expand this research using larger and more diverse data sets.

At the same time, it is possible to make some tentative suggestions for researchers conducting telephone interviews. It appeared in this study that telephone interview participants were somewhat more reticent than those taking part in face-to-face interviews and that they felt less confident that they were 'getting it right' for the researcher. This may have been influenced by the researcher's less frequent use of response tokens. As such, a potential practice implication is that researchers conducting telephone interviews might need to do more in the way of 'priming' participants for the more expansive responses that are sought (indeed, welcomed) in qualitative research and offering more explicit encouragement to continue and elaborate as the conversation proceeds.

This study has made an important step towards initiating a more robust and critical programme of investigation into qualitative interviewing by telephone. We hope that other researchers will be encouraged to take up this topic, through further systematic and well-designed research inquiry.

This study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Any views expressed are those of the authors alone.

This publication should be cited as: Irvine, I., Drew, P. and Sainsbury, R. (2010) Mode effects in qualitative interviews: a comparison of semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews using conversation analysis, *Research Works*, 2010-03, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, York.

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