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**Mode Effects in Qualitative Interviews: A comparison of  
semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews  
using conversation analysis**

**Background paper for expert practitioner workshop**

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## Introduction

Contemporary social research makes extensive use of semi-structured qualitative interviews to gather people's views and experiences on a range of themes. Two principal modes of conducting interviews are face-to-face or by telephone. Particularly in policy-oriented fields, studies tend to be shaped by fairly specific research questions, short timescales and limited resources, making telephone interviews a potentially attractive option. However, within the instructional literature available to students and practitioners of qualitative interview research, markedly little attention has been paid to the practice of qualitative interviewing by telephone.

Many large and well-regarded volumes on qualitative methodology give little or no mention to telephone interviewing. Where brief mention is given, this is frequently of a cautionary nature – telephone interviews are to be avoided in qualitative research or used only as a pragmatic second best. In some cases, authors identify potential advantages of telephone interviews, including resource savings, increased access and inclusion, and ethical concerns around anonymity where topics are of a particularly sensitive nature. Nevertheless, there remains a sense throughout the instructional literature that qualitative interviewing by telephone is something of a methodological compromise.

However, a growing number of researchers are publishing their first-hand reflections on using the telephone to conduct qualitative 'in-depth' or 'semi-structured' interviews – and they describe predominantly positive experiences. For the most part, these researchers report that telephone interviews are 'just as good' as those conducted face-to-face, achieving successful interactions and generating high quality data. Thus, the received wisdom about the (relative) unsuitability of the telephone mode is being challenged in these accounts from practising researchers.

Although many of these first-hand accounts offer thoughtful reflections and interesting insights, most of their conclusions remain at a fairly general and apparently impressionistic level. Very few contributors explain the analytic approach taken (if any) in establishing their conclusions about the comparability of their telephone interview data. Direct, detailed and systematic mode comparisons of telephone and face-to-face interviews seem, to date, to be lacking in the qualitative methodological literature. It is against this context that the present study was developed.

The study's overall aim is to increase knowledge about how interview mode (telephone or face-to-face) influences the interactional structure and content of qualitative interviews and to consider the implications of any such differences for research practice. The study is small in scale and exploratory in nature. However, through this innovative piece of work, we hope to make a contribution to addressing the gap in methodological knowledge about mode effects in qualitative interviews in a more systematic and robust way than has previously been attempted.

## Data

### **Source project: *managing mental health and employment***

The interviews used in the present project were originally conducted for a qualitative study that looked at people's experiences of managing mental health and employment<sup>1</sup>. The study was commissioned by the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) with interviews conducted from January-June 2008. The project's aim was to explore the experiences of people who considered themselves to have a mental health condition and who had sustained paid employment for at least the previous 12 months.

The study involved semi-structured interviews using a pre-prepared 'topic guide'. The main topics to be covered were: personal background (demographics, current job, mental health experience); managing at work (conceptualisation of 'managing', relationship between work and mental health, absences from work, talking to others about mental health, sources of support in and out of work); impacts on income and earnings; and reflections and future plans.

The research design for the original study aimed to obtain 30 semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Interview participants volunteered to the study in response to information circulated via workplaces and support organisations. Response rates were somewhat higher than anticipated and in order to include all 38 willing volunteers, while remaining within planned budgets and timescales, a decision was made to conduct some interviews by telephone.

Decisions about which participants would be asked to take part in telephone interviews were made by the research team, largely on the basis of geographical location. Participants were not offered a choice of interview mode but all of those who were asked to take part by telephone agreed to do so. Their willingness to take part in a telephone interview and the fact that (in broad terms) these interviews 'worked', could be taken to indicate a general level of comfort and familiarity with extended telephone communication among this group of individuals.

### **Present study: mode effects in qualitative interviews**

A sub-set of eleven interviews from the *managing mental health and employment* study has been used in the present mode effects study. Although small in number, this sub-set of interviews particularly lends itself to comparative analysis regarding the effects of interview mode for the following reasons:

- All interviews were carried out by the same researcher
- Although individual stories were unique, the participants shared a similar employment context and most had experienced broadly similar types of mental health difficulty

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<sup>1</sup> Irvine, A. (2008) *Managing Mental Health and Employment*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report, 537, Leeds: Corporate Document Services.  
Report available: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep537.pdf>

More generally, additional strengths of the data for comparative study were that:

- Interviews were part of the same study and carried out within a concentrated time period
- Interviews were conducted *prior to* conceiving the comparative project, so any conscious differences in the researcher’s interviewing behaviour were minimised
- Allocation to interview mode was arbitrary, so any conscious preference on the part of the participants was minimised

The data set on which the present study is based comprises just under 17 hours of audio data. Some key characteristics of the eleven interviews are as follows:

Face-to-face				Telephone			
Identifier	Gender	Age	Duration of recording (nearest min)	Identifier	Gender	Age	Duration of recording (nearest min)
FCE 01	Male	54	132	TEL 01	Female	32	118
FCE 02	Female	44	113	TEL 02	Female	47	69
FCE 03	Male	49	108	TEL 03	Male	47	88
FCE 04	Male	51	76	TEL 04	Female	47	70
FCE 05	Male	35	96	TEL 05	Female	47	71
				TEL 06	Male	51	79

All eleven participants described themselves as being of white British ethnicity and were fluent speakers of English. The researcher was female, mixed-race (white British/black African), a native English speaker, and aged 29/30 during the period of the interviews.

## Aims

In this study, we are primarily concerned with the possible *interactional* differences that may (or may not) exist between telephone and face-to-face interviews. When designing a qualitative study, the decision to use face-to-face or telephone interviews may be influenced by financial resources, geographical and time constraints, ethical considerations or practicalities (for example, if the research involves the sharing of stimulus materials). Any of these may be sufficient rationale to opt for one mode over the other. Our aim in this study is not to prove or disprove the validity or efficacy of the telephone mode. Instead, our starting point is that if we decide – for any of the above reasons – to conduct (some of) our research interviews by one mode or another, we should be mindful of:

- what differences this might produce in the interpersonal interaction that takes place and the data that results and, in turn,
- what implications any such differences might have for our research practice.

A second point to emphasise is that, within this study, we are not primarily concerned with the interviews’ substantive content. Rather, we are looking chiefly at the way in which the interview encounter unfolds *interactionally*. However, we recognise that the two are inextricably linked and our findings inevitably lead to further questions about the way that interactional difference may, in turn, influence the substance of the data and ultimately the research ‘output’.

## **Research questions**

Our research questions have emerged from both existing literature and through working with the data. The specific lines of enquiry have been developed, clarified and honed as the study has progressed. The key questions that we have come to focus on as we approach the end of our analysis can be summarised under four themes:

### ***Duration and depth***

- To what extent are there differences in the length of interviews conducted via each mode?
- To what extent are there differences in the researcher's approach to questioning?
- To what extent are there differences in participants' willingness or tendency to expand or elaborate?

### ***Monitoring, reception and comprehension***

- How does the researcher signal continued interest, attention and comprehension?
- How does the participant seek or obtain confirmation of researcher interest and attention?
- To what extent do misunderstandings occur (by researcher or participant)?
- Are there differences in the type or amount of clarification required or requested (by either party)?

### ***Turn-taking, overlap and silence***

- What is the balance of talk between researcher and participant in each mode?
- To what extent is speaker overlap or interruption encountered?
- How are overlap or interruption responded to by researcher and participant?
- To what extent are there pauses or extended silences in the interaction?
- How are these responded to (or 'tolerated') by researcher and participant?

### ***Rapport and 'naturalness'***

- To what extent are humour, empathy, sympathy or affiliation used in each mode?
- By what means are these displayed or accomplished?

## Analytic approach

The study has drawn upon the techniques of Conversation Analysis to explore possible interactional difference between interview modes. Central to the conversation analytic approach is the concept that all talk is a form of *social action*. In any spoken interaction, people are 'doing something' with their talk, for example, inviting, complaining, requesting, offering. Speakers take *turns at talk* and they may *design* their turns in a range of ways. The turns in a conversation form *sequences* of talk, with each subsequent turn being contingent on and designed in response to the turn that came before it.

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 format over another. The approach to analysis centres on the close examination of collections of audio (and, increasingly, video) data alongside detailed transcriptions, to identify recurring patterns and structures in interaction.

The first stage of analysis for the present study involved preparing the 11 interview transcripts to a sophisticated level of detail using the Jeffersonian transcription system<sup>2</sup>, which represents features such as rising or falling intonation, changes in volume, speaker overlap, intake and exhalation of breath, pauses and their duration, laughter or crying. A guide to the transcription conventions is included at the end of this paper, along with a short extract of interview transcript shown in both Jeffersonian and 'standard' transcription.

Following transcription, analysis has proceeded through a number of stages, beginning at the most overarching level with quantitative measurement of interview length and amount/proportion of time for which each party held the 'conversational floor' and then proceeding through to more qualitative lines of enquiry, for example, the 'actions' performed by speakers' turns (e.g. requesting information, summarising gist, seeking clarification, offering empathy), the management of transitions between speakers' turns and instances of 'interactional trouble', for example, misunderstanding or confusion.

It will not be necessary for participants in this workshop to have a detailed knowledge of conversation analytic approaches. However, for those who are unfamiliar and would like to know more, the following provide accessible introductions:

Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford, Oxford University Press – See: Chapter 17 'Language in Qualitative Research' (pp.363-369).

Kitzinger, C. and Toerien, M. (2009) The turn of talk. No interpretation please! *In Depth* [online]. Available: <http://www.aqr.org.uk/indepth/summer2009/>

Annie Irvine (29 April 2010)

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

## Transcription symbols

Par:/Int:	Speaker labels (Par: = participant; Int = interviewer)
=	Links talk produced in close temporal proximity (latched talk)
° °	Encloses talk which is produced quietly
* *	Encloses talk which is produced in 'creaky' voice
<u>underline</u>	Underlining used to mark words or syllables which are given special emphasis of some kind
CAPS	Words or parts of words spoken loudly marked in capital letters
s:::	Sustained or stretched sound; the more colons, the longer the sound
.hhh	In-breath (more .hhhh to indicate longer in-breath)
[ ]	Encloses talk produced in overlap i.e. when more than one speaker is speaking
(word)	Parentheses indicate transcriber doubt
(this/that)	Alternative hearings
((description))	Description of what can be heard, rather than transcription e.g. ((shuffling papers)). Also used to denote that word(s) have been removed for the purpose of anonymity, e.g. ((employer))
cu-	Cut-off word or sound
(0.6)	Silence in seconds
(.)	Silence of less than two tenths of a second
↑	Marks high pitch
?	Rising intonation
> <	Marks speeding up delivery (in talk between the facing arrows)
(h)	Indicates laughter while speaking (aspiration)

## Example transcript using Jeffersonian transcription conventions

1 Int: [Yeah .HH erm \*u:[::\* and  
2 Par: [( )  
3 Int: in (0.2) erm out- outside of work then do you  
4 sort of have (0.4) family an::  
5 (0.4)  
6 Par: YEAH .tch e::r I just a f- >you know< I got  
7 divorced last year?  
8 Int: O::h [°right°]  
9 Par: [er HUH ] .hhh er:m I've er just (0.5) er  
10 met a new partner  
11 Int: Mm [hm  
12 Par: [and I've got three children: of nineteen  
13 sixteen a:nd th::irteen?  
14 Int: Mm hm  
15 Par: nearly got it wrong [.hhh  
16 Int: [°huh°  
17 Par: Next- fourteen next month .hhh erm so: we- I live  
18 in ((county))  
19 Int: Mm hm  
20 Par: Erm (0.4) \*so erm (0.2) w-\* I dunno what- what a-  
21 huh [huh .hh  
22 Int: [yea(h)h  
23 Par: ERM I mean I do (0.2) \*er\* (0.2) .hh (0.4) >what  
24 do I do (.) what do I do< tch >°oh I support°<  
25 I've got a season ticket for ((football team))  
26 [sad sod  
27 Int: [Oh right huh huh .hh  
28 Par: although I'm actually from ((city)) so I'm  
29 actually [a ((football team)) supporter  
30 Int: [↑Oh right  
31 Int: Yeah  
32 Par: huh huh [which is even] worse

### 'Standard' transcription of the above extract, as produced for the original study:

Q: Yeah. .. And in, out, outside of work then, do you sort of have family and...?

A: Yeah .. I, I just you know, I got divorced last year (laughs). .. I've .. just .. met a new partner .. got three children of nineteen, sixteen and thirteen, nearly got it wrong, next, fourteen next month .. so we, I live in [county] .. so. .. I dunno, what, what (laughs) I mean I do .. what do I do, what do I do? I've got a season ticket for [football team], sad sod, although I'm actually from [city] so I'm actually a [football team] supporter (laughs) which is even worse.