

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

### **Summary of expert practitioner workshop**

**13 May 2010 at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, London**

#### **Introduction and overview**

A one day workshop was held to disseminate and discuss the methods, findings and implications of an ESRC-funded study that has explored mode effects in qualitative research interviews. The study drew upon the techniques of Conversation Analysis to explore what differences there were (if any) in a set of semi-structured qualitative research interviews, some of which were conducted face-to-face and some by telephone. The study was conducted at the University of York and was led by Annie Irvine (Social Policy Research Unit) with co-investigators Professor Roy Sainsbury (Social Policy Research Unit) and Professor Paul Drew (Centre for Advanced Studies in Language and Communication).

An invited group of 15 experienced research practitioners and leading academics took part in the workshop. Participants had diverse professional backgrounds. The workshop brought together qualitative social researchers engaged in applied policy research, market research and sociological research with academics specialising in the fields of qualitative research methodology and conversation analysis. Bringing together a group with varied but related interests in this way proved fruitful and stimulating, providing multiple perspectives on the central theme and highlighting a wide range of further questions that could be explored.

The workshop was jointly facilitated by the three members of the research team. After a welcome and introduction from Roy Sainsbury, Annie Irvine presented the background to the research, including the rationale and design of the study. This was followed by a data session facilitated by Paul Drew, where participants were able to listen to and discuss audio extracts from two of the interviews in the study's data set (one telephone and one face-to-face). In the afternoon, Annie Irvine presented a number of emerging findings from the study. Roy Sainsbury then chaired a final session where participants offered reflections on the study's approach, its emerging findings and the potential for future research in this area.

The summary below draws out the main themes that arose in discussion. Note that this summary does not include a re-presentation of the substantive findings themselves; publications will be made available at the earliest opportunity.

## **Summary of main discussion points**

### **The relevance of gender**

Questions were raised about whether and how interviewee gender might influence the qualitative interview interaction, for example, with regard to duration and depth. As well as gender being influential in itself, it was also suggested that interview mode and interview topic might interrelate with gender, influencing the interaction in different ways for male and female interviewees. The potential influence of interviewer-interviewee gender matching was also noted. There were mixed views among the workshop participants about the extent to which gender might be a significant variable and it was recognised that the large existing literature on gender and language is contested and inconclusive. Other variables were also noted as potentially relevant to the duration and depth of interviews, for example, professional status, motivation for taking part in the research and familiarity with giving accounts.

### **Social interaction pre- and post-interview**

A question was asked about the extent of social interaction that took place before and after the 'interview proper' for the interviews in this study. Although this did not form part of the systematic analysis, Annie's recollection was that there was far more general social engagement in face-to-face interviews than telephone, both prior to getting down to the business of the interview and between concluding the interview and departing/hanging up. The potential influence of this was discussed. For example, did it make for a more 'businesslike' or 'to the point' encounter in telephone interviews; did this in turn have an effect on interview length or depth of responses?

This notion of 'businesslike' interviews was contrasted with a more 'ethnographic' approach to interviewing. The point was raised that, if telephone interviews are indeed more businesslike and less ethnographic, then this might reinforce or contribute to the construction of interviewees in particular ways (reference was made to the work of Charles Briggs). This could be a particularly important consideration in research with less powerful groups. However, there was recognition that the importance and potential implications of (not) spending more 'ethnographic' time with an interviewee would vary depending on project aims and the characteristics of research participants.

### **Rapport**

There was wide-ranging discussion around the topic of rapport. For example: what does 'rapport' consist of; why, whether and how it might matter; how might an interviewer seek to obtain rapport; how might interviewees' concepts and perceptions of rapport differ from those of the interviewer; why the preoccupation with establishing a 'good' rapport; might a more challenging or uncomfortable encounter be productive at times?

The different scope for building rapport in each mode was also discussed, in that the social interaction prior to beginning a face-to-face interview (see previous section) provides opportunities to 'warm up', which are lacking in a telephone encounter. However, it was noted that whether or not this impacts upon the data in any significant way remains an empirical question.

With regard to comparing rapport across interview modes, it was noted that certain interactional features generally considered to be elements of rapport (e.g. sympathy, empathy) might be available

for empirical analysis. However, other aspects of rapport would be more intangible and difficult to operationalise.

### **Burden and fatigue**

It was suggested that telephone interviews might be more tiring, due to having to hold the telephone receiver, for example. This led to further, more general, reflection on interviewer fatigue, for example, personal observations that energy levels and stamina for the task of interviewing vary across the day and on different occasions. Likewise, interviewees may have a range of influences on their mood and energies (of which we may be entirely unaware) at the time they take part in a research interview. This raises wider questions about the range of factors that might affect how 'well' a particular interview seems to come off, reminding us that mode is but one potential influence.

### **Access to and relevance of the physical context**

The salience of the physical context to a research encounter was discussed, given that a telephone interview inevitably does not allow visual access to the participant or their surroundings. With regard to what use is made of this contextual information, there was discussion about the extent to which, in face-to-face settings, interviewer fieldnotes are (i) made at all and (ii) routinely integrated into subsequent analysis. Experiences among the group were mixed. It was acknowledged that the importance of having experience and/or a record of the physical context would vary depending on a particular project's aims.

Regarding the mode effects study itself, the research team explained that no video recordings were made of the interviews and this was acknowledged as a limitation in figuring out how any apparent interactional differences came about. It was also noted that it would be impossible for fieldnotes ever to capture the level of detail that a video recording could, or that conversation analysts would want to work with.

### **Interview structure and use of a topic guide**

There was discussion around the extent to which (particularly in policy-oriented research) semi-structured interview interactions evolved spontaneously/contingently, or were ultimately always being led by the pre-prepared topic guide. This led to discussion about how an interviewer might produce their questions in ways that make the question *appear* spontaneous or contingent. It was suggested that this is part of the craft skill of the interviewer: how to 'practically enact' a topic guide as conversational.

Another comment was that as a study progresses, a researcher may become more familiar with the topic guide and 'internalise' it, enabling more conversational delivery. As such, there was a view that it could be useful to do the first few interviews in any study in a face-to-face settings, in that the interviewer could buy some time for checking through the topic guide (as they familiarised themselves with it), because the interviewee would see that this was what was happening; this would not be immediately obvious to interviewees over the phone. In attempting to compare extracts from different interviews, it was also noted that the length of time elapsed in an individual encounter could have an influence on the 'rhythm' that had developed between the interviewer and interviewee and should therefore be taken into account. One experience among the group was that

interviewees seem to 'learn' an interviewer's questioning style and response expectations as an interview progresses, and so may alter their interactional behaviour accordingly.

The use of questioning styles or formats that are akin to those used in everyday, informal interactions was noted in the data extracts that were played, again raising questions about how a researcher might attempt to make their questions seem conversational.

There was consideration of whether topic guides might be used differently in telephone and face-to-face interviews. Some workshop participants felt that they used topic guides differently in telephone and face-to-face interviews. For example, there was more scope for closely following the topic guide in a telephone interview (or even checking ahead unseen), whereas in face-to-face interviews researchers endeavoured to maintain more eye contact and focus on the interviewee and therefore looked down at the topic guide less. Another experience was that attempting to use the same topic guide for both modes did not work well, and that it was possibly better to develop a different topic guide for use over the phone. It was also noted that in telephone interviews, interviewees would not be able to see the topic guide and so would not have had the same insight as face-to-face interviewees about progression through the interview.

### **Delicacy**

There was discussion of the matter of delicacy, arising particularly from a passage in one of the audio extracts. Workshop participants reflected on questions such as: To what extent do we presume a topic will be delicate? To what extent might the (potential or presumed) delicacy or sensitivity of a research topic influence an interviewer's style? How do we become aware that a topic or question is delicate? What renders a topic delicate? What marks something – interactionally – as being delicate?

Given that the survey literature suggests the (more anonymous) telephone mode might encourage greater disclosure on delicate topics, it was suggested that the matter of disclosure and dealing with delicacy could be an important analytic focus for future mode comparison work on qualitative interview data. However, it was also noted that in the qualitative context (as per the questions raised in the above paragraph), establishing what 'counts' as an instance of sensitivity or delicacy may be very hard to pin down for comparison.

### **Transcription and the potential value of a CA approach**

There was discussion of the level of detail included in a Jeffersonian transcript and the amount of time required to produce such transcripts. It was noted that interviewer fieldnotes and general recall could not possibly capture the level of detail that could be reconstructed through close and repeated listening to the audio and detailed transcription. 'Basic' transcripts tend to omit a large amount of interactional detail, which might obscure certain elements (such as delicacy) that were perceptible in the audio recording. However, it was also recognised that the extent to which this level of detail was useful or relevant to a particular study's aims would vary.

It was noted that Conversation Analytic approaches could shed light on (i) the particular ways in which interviewees made sense of the interviewer's questions and (ii) the specific way in which responses emerged. Whether or not these aspects are attended to in the analysis, whether or not they matter to policy funders, and the potential implications of omitting such aspects from the

analytic process, were posed as questions. Put another way: our research 'data' is a product of a specific interaction – so what might we lose by moving quickly to summaries and quotes, treating as irrelevant the way in which the interaction actually evolved?

### **The practice of qualitative research interviewing**

Stepping back from consideration of mode effects in qualitative interviews, there was discussion of the more fundamental practices of qualitative research interviewing. It was noted that this is an area that has received remarkably little attention, given the predominance of interview-based studies in social research.

One key line of potential enquiry was around questioning style or question construction. For example: How are questions actually produced in real-life interview interactions (as opposed to the written topic guide or the advice of instructional texts)? Why might the interviewer produce a question in a particular way? How does question construction affect the response provided? What types of things actually do the work of prompting or probing?

### **Summing up and future directions**

Positive feedback during the day itself and in later email correspondence indicated that the day had been enjoyable, interesting and thought provoking for participants. Some participants commented that their perceptions about telephone interviews had begun to alter, having taken part in the workshop. There were also comments about the potential for a greater focus on telephone interviewing in research methods training. While this study has concentrated on fairly fine-grained interactional difference, there was interest in further analysis of how mode might affect the substantive content and ultimate research output. It was noted that this would lead to even more complex questions of how to analyse the analytic process!

The varied perspectives and experiences of the workshop participants confirmed that there can be no single answer to the question 'does it matter' if we conduct qualitative research interviews by telephone. Depending on the topic of inquiry, the type of information required and the particular individuals who will be interviewed, a telephone interview may be perfectly adequate or highly inappropriate. Depending on our specific research questions and the type of analysis we wish to undertake, the types of fine-grained interactional differences that have been observed in this study may be of key significance or largely irrelevant. The kinds of differences emerging from this study may not matter particularly to the research funder or policy audience but make a real difference to the interviewee's experience of taking part in the study and indeed to the researcher's enjoyment of their work. It was recognised that there are many perspectives on what makes a 'good' interview and multiple factors beyond interview mode that may affect how a particular interaction comes off.

Although initiated by the question of mode effects, it was clear that the workshop had provided a valuable opportunity to reflect more generally on the practice of qualitative research interviewing, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The group agreed that there is much scope for further investigation, not only into mode effects in qualitative interviews but also – and perhaps as a

prerequisite – a more systematic, critical and evaluative programme of inquiry into the fundamental practices of qualitative research interviewing.

*Annie Irvine (22 June 2010)*

### **Workshop participants**

Amanda Waring	Centre for Research in Social Policy
Celia Roberts	Kings College London
Charles Antaki	Loughborough University
Debra Gray	University of the West of England
Ella Fryer Smith	Ipsos MORI
Greg Myers	University of Lancaster
Jane Aston	Institute for Employment Studies
Jenny Graham	National Centre for Social Research
Jonathan Potter	Loughborough University
Melissa White	Centre for Labour Market Studies
Raymond Lee	Royal Holloway University of London
Rose Wiles	University of Southampton
Sandra Vegeris	Policy Studies Institute
Sarah Jenkins	Ipsos MORI
Tim Rapley	Newcastle University
Paul Drew	Centre for Advanced Studies in Language and Communication
Annie Irvine	Social Policy Research Unit
Roy Sainsbury	Social Policy Research Unit