

## Mode effects in qualitative interviews: A comparison of semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews using Conversation Analysis

Contemporary social research makes extensive use of semi-structured qualitative interviews to gather the views and experiences of individuals on a range of themes. 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. The data which is gathered from such research contributes to real-world policy decisions. It is therefore important to know more about the extent and nature of differences in the communicative interaction and the resulting data that occur between face-to-face and telephone interviews, and to consider the potential implications of any such differences.

At the present time, the two principal options for conducting qualitative research interviews are face-to-face or by telephone. A range of pragmatic and ethical arguments have been offered in the literature as to why one or other of these two modes might be preferable. However, the ways in which the *spoken interaction* and *resulting data* are affected by qualitative interview mode have not been robustly or systematically investigated to any significant extent. While there is a substantial body of literature falling under the broad heading of 'interview mode comparison', the majority of this focuses on standardised survey interviewing, with little empirical work on mode comparison in qualitative interviews.

Drawing on an existing corpus of telephone and face-to-face interview data, this ESRC-funded study is using the method of Conversation Analysis to explore directly the question of mode effect in qualitative research interviews. The study's overall aim is to increase knowledge about whether and how interview mode influences the structure and content of qualitative interview interactions and to consider the implications of any differences for the data that is thereby generated. Findings will be of importance to qualitative researchers across a range of disciplines and may have wider relevance to other professions and industries that use semi-structured interview approaches in their dealings with clients or customers.

### Study objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

- Explore, using the method of Conversation Analysis, the range of interactional techniques and practices that are employed by researcher and participant throughout the qualitative research interview.
- Identify, through systematic comparison, whether or not there are differences in the range and use of interactional techniques and practices employed in face-to-face and telephone interviews.

- Consider the salience and potential implications of these differences (if any) in light of contemporary academic and professional understandings of effective practice in the conduct of semi-structured qualitative interviewing.

## Method

The study is using the method of Conversation Analysis to examine and compare the interactional patterns and techniques that are evident in telephone and face-to-face qualitative research interviews. Conversation Analysis (CA) concerns itself with identifying the strategies that individuals use to accomplish 'social actions' through talk and the interactional consequences of choosing one strategy or format over another. This is pursued through the close examination of collections of audio and transcribed data, to identify recurring patterns and structures in interaction. Transcripts are prepared to a sophisticated level of detail, using symbols to represent features such as rising or falling intonation, changes in volume, speaker overlap, intake and exhalation of breath, pauses and their duration, laughter or crying.

Originally developed as a method of examining naturally occurring conversations, CA has since been applied to a range of more formal or 'institutional' interactions. In recent years, the potential of applying the techniques of CA to *research* data has also been demonstrated in relation to standardised survey interviews, focus group data and also in a number of (re)analyses of qualitative interview data.

Drawing on established concepts in the CA literature, including turn construction, turn taking/turn yielding, receipt, overlap, repair and alignment, this study is exploring the nature and content of the interaction between researcher and participant during the qualitative research interview, with a focus on whether and how these interactional details differ across interview mode. The study will consider the methodological implications of a finding of mode-related difference or lack thereof.

## Practitioner engagement

A practitioner workshop, involving individuals working in applied social research and other relevant academic and non-academic stakeholders, will be held in Spring 2010. During the workshop, emerging findings will be disseminated and participants will be invited to discuss the salience and potential implications of the study findings for research practice. The outcomes of this discussion will feed into the final project report. The workshop will also provide a forum to explore collaborative opportunities for developing a larger-scale investigation into qualitative interview mode effects, for example, by identifying further existing data sets which may be amenable to such comparative analysis.

### **If you would like to be kept informed about this study, please contact:**

Annie Irvine, Research Fellow, Social Policy Research Unit (University of York)

Email: [aj513@york.ac.uk](mailto:aj513@york.ac.uk)

Tel: 01904 321 951.

Web: [www.york.ac.uk/spru/research/summs/mode.html](http://www.york.ac.uk/spru/research/summs/mode.html)