

Changing horizons: Semi-structured interviews and fully informed consent

Dr Gary Husband

Lecturer in Professional Education and Leadership

University of Stirling
Scotland



Introduction

This paper explores the complex relationship between researcher and respondent, and their shared experiences through interaction in the interview processes.

This presentation focuses on the co-construction of knowledge through interaction and exchange in the process of data collection through semi structured interview.

The presentation concludes by asking questions of researchers in relation to the considerations required for informed consent and problematizes the notion of 'fully informed'.

The potential for supporting the professional learning of respondents through interview and beyond is also explored.

Impact of initial teacher education on continuous and career long professional learning of lecturers working in further and vocational education.

- 2 countries, Scotland and Wales
 - 2 case study sites
 - Large multi campus colleges each with circa 22,000 students and 1500+ employees
 - 20 purposefully selected respondent lecturers (post teacher education graduation)
 - Semi structured interviews (1hr)
 - Document analysis
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- Results showed that the model and management of initial teacher education had an impact of ongoing choices of professional learning.

- However, these were the looked for results
- Today I want to focus on the surprise results, those not looked for or anticipated.
- The impact on respondents from participating in interviews

Several months after completing the interviews in the two colleges, I received e mails from three of the respondents.

- Each had a specific and unique story to tell beyond their original contribution.
- Each respondent was not known to the others and acted independently.
- Each contributed to my increasing sense of unease (at least initially)
- Each became increasingly important and in relation to each other and the original study, they brought further meaning, especially to the respondents. One might argue now, 'the' meaning, at least to the participants.
- The following are excerpts from the received communications...

'... I didn't expect the interview to be thought provoking and didn't think I would think about it again but I did. I realised after the questions about teaching and training that I hadn't really done any courses or learning for a long time (years). I have looked into things I can do and I have signed up for a course on mentoring that runs in the college every year. I will see how it goes...'

Male Engineering lecturer in Scotland with over 10 years experience



'...the questions seemed to shock me a bit. When you asked about the sort of professional learning I seek out I couldn't answer! I think I got stuck because I haven't looked for courses and things I just did what was available in the college on training days. It got me thinking about what I am interested in, and to be honest my subject hasn't changed much but some of the teaching methods have. I have looked into a Masters degree and one of the modules is about online e learning. I am really glad I did the interview as it has made me do something which is really exciting (and scary)'

Female lecturer in Social Sciences in Scotland with 6 years teaching experience



'...interview was a bit strained as I didn't have much to talk about in relation to professional learning. I have done bits and bobs but nothing more than I'm required to really. Sorry if the info wasn't much use. Anyway, I don't know if it's too late to include but after the interview I realised I'm pretty bored with work, I obviously can't quit and don't want to! but I realised I needed to do something to get the brain working again. I have decided to do an Open Uni degree, it's nothing to do with work but I already feel a bit more positive about my job, I'm guessing I will have to see how it goes, you never know maybe a change of subject in the future!'

Female lecturer in Social Sciences in Wales with 12 year's experience.



- So what's the problem?
- Should we unquestioningly accept positive consequences and additional unplanned impact of participation?

- In problematizing these unexpected communications we can begin to unpick ethical considerations in interview based research.
- What if the respondents had reported negative impacts?
- Would the ethical responsibilities of the researcher be any different?

- The research clearly had an impact on these respondents. In this instance it was positive, but this in no way reduces the need to consider the broader and longer term impacts on research on participants.
- The long term impact of engaging in research as a respondent could be felt long after the conversation has been forgotten.

*No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were;
any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

MEDITATION XVII

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

John Donne

- This offers us the opportunity to explore the scope of human interaction and the construction of knowledge within the interview space. Can we understand what happened?
- Partially drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology and in part using the work of Hans Gorg Gadamer, as a framework for analysis:
 - Understanding occurs against the background of our historical consciousness, our ‘horizon’
 - Understanding is linguistically mediated through dialogue
 - ‘New’ knowledge can be seen to be arrived at through interaction within fusion of horizons
 - The interview in its semi structured form invites the fusion of horizons as understanding is arrived at through interaction, dialogue being a part of this.
 - Neither party can remain unchanged

- In constructing answers to questions, respondents are required to interact, interpret, contextualize and frame responses and critique experience.
- Though in many ways an artificial construct, the interview space does offer many similarities to the spaces in which critical reflection might take place.
- As Kvale (1996) argues (and given these conditions), it is of little surprise then that co-construction of knowledge through sharing of experience within the interaction of an interview, can be developmental or even transformative for both parties.
- However, this is unpredictable.

- This unpredictability in turn invites critique of the notion of informed consent whilst undertaking interview based research.
- Ethical considerations such as those set out by BERA (2011) frequently form the basis of informed consent (Corti, Day & Backhouse 2000). However, pre-agreed consent and information can become adherence only to ritual and lose meaning (Holm 1997).
- Consent can only be considered fully informed if the researcher is reflexive and responsive (Sin 2005). This is about as close we can get. Acknowledging these potential dynamic situations and being prepared to support respondents.
- As outputs of qualitative semi-structured interviews are unpredictable, responsibility for the results and related impact lies with the researcher, the instigator.
- As with the shared examples, this clearly extends beyond the perceived end of the research project.

It's not all doom and gloom!

With foregrounding and reflexive and responsive methods/ologies we can use this to begin to bridge the gap between practice and research.

As co-constructors of knowledge, respondents who can be affected by participation have agency within the research space. Acting not only as sources of data but as co-conspirators in design, analysis and findings.

Suggestions for researchers, organisations and respondents:

- Foreground the possibilities that are offered through critical engagement with interviews.
- Actively pursue co-constructors of knowledge from cross sector/practice/professionalisms in meaningful research participation as partners.
- Avail partners of full resource of organisations.
- Actively engage in meaningful professional formation.
- Organisations can more widely support engagement with research and promote this as part of professional learning and not just informing it.
- Critically review the processes of ethics committees when asking for and assessing ethical considerations in research proposals. Has this become a tick box exercise or is there still real value in detailing ethical considerations towards interview respondents? If so, how is this expressed and shared?

References:

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Thank you

Questions?