Chapter 19

The E–Interview in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors consider using email as a method for carrying out in-depth, qualitative research interviews. Prompted by an experience of conducting e-interviews, they set out some of their key characteristics, embedding their discussion in the methodological and conceptual literature on qualitative interview and on-line research. The authors then offer a methodological consideration of e-interviewing, focusing on three broad areas: the practical, the interpersonal, and the ethical, highlighting the ways in which e-interviewing transforms aspects of each. They end by offering a view of the future of e-interviewing in the broader landscape of on-line qualitative research methods in general and interviewing in particular.

INTRODUCTION

The following discussion about email interviewing, henceforward referred to as the ‘e-interview’ or ‘e-interviewing’ for the sake of convenience, is prompted by the experience of two of the authors (Bampton & Cowton, 2002a; and see also Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, pp. 240-242).

E-interviews were used in a project about teaching ethics in management accounting courses in higher education in the British Isles (Bampton & Cowton, 2002b, 2002c), part of a larger programme of work concerned with accounting ethics. The main data collection method was a postal questionnaire survey of management accounting lecturers. Respondents to the questionnaire were also asked...
whether they would be willing to be interviewed about some of the issues which might emerge from the survey. It was originally envisaged that all the interviews would be conducted face-to-face or, when impractical, perhaps by telephone, both well established methods of interviewing. However, one potential interviewee suggested using email. The researchers conducted only three actual e-interviews and reference to their account of it is not intended to be definitive. Instead, it serves as a springboard for a re-consideration of the issues that it raised for them at the time and for the issues that have emerged in the context of technological developments in the decade that has passed since then. It therefore animates, illustrates and instantiates the methodological reflections on and the practical issues of using this online research and interviewing method. It also supplements a still relatively small body of ‘tales from the field’ in social and business research (inter alia Burke & Miller, 2001; Burns, 2010, Gibson, 2010; James & Busher, 2006, 2007; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

In its broadest sense this chapter considers how new media technologies can advance and transform established social and business research methods (Williams, 1966), although it in no way advocates that these technologies are necessarily ‘better’ than or should supplant traditional methods. Instead, we see the e-interview as, potentially and in certain circumstances, extending and enriching the repertoire of those who use interviews in research or who are thinking of doing so. In other words we hope we awaken interest in this method of interviewing and inspire confidence in its use.

We begin by setting out some of the key characteristics of the e-interview, drawing on extant writings about it, emphasizing that these are neither comprehensive nor definitive and outlining some of the reasons for these limitations. We then turn to a methodological consideration of e-interviewing, framing this as a transformation of the face-to-face interview. We focus on three broad areas of transformation: practical, interpersonal and ethical, although these headings are used heuristically rather than categorically. In other words, we approach the subject through a focus on methodology and do not signpost the way to a greater theoretical treatment of e-interviewing, although this would be a welcome addition to the literature. We end by synthesizing our arguments and making some observations about the future of e-interviewing.

BACKGROUND

A consideration of in-depth email interviews in qualitative research potentially ranges over a vast and diverse terrain. It is embedded in the methodological and conceptual literature on qualitative research, interview research and on-line research. It is also situated in the context of debates about all of these and with the caveat that different ideas about the nature of qualitative research will impact on methodologies and on the methods that support them. Cresswell (2007) for example relates how, in the midst of discussing qualitative data analysis, he was interrupted and introduced to other approaches that arose out of different methodological traditions, leading him to research how different approaches to qualitative inquiry shape the design and procedures of a study. Delamont (2004, p. 90) is also sceptical about interviewing as a valid method for social science research at all because ‘people lie. People delude themselves, they mislead others, and they are very inaccurate observers, recorders, and reporters of their own behaviour’. This view tends to de-stabilize notions that the acquisition of data entails a straightforward process of ‘collection’ (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009). On these terms, interviewing involves processes more akin to data generation, however that may be construed or interpreted.1 Moreover, use of on-line methods is in a state of flux that defies the imposition of a progression narrative (Sade-Beck,