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Before, During, and After: Identity and the Social Construction of Knowledge in Qualitative Research Interviews

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Abstract

After outlining briefly some of the key ideas in symbolic interactionist theories of self, this article will reflect on the author's experiences of interviews during a Research Interviews course and the impact of identity before, during and after the interview. It will argue that a symbolic interactionist view of self and identity is useful for understanding the nature of knowledge produced in research interviews but this needs to be complemented by a Foucauldian understanding of power. It will conclude that combining these two perspectives allows us to see that simplistic notions of reflexivity, which consider only the impact of the identity of the researcher on the research process, are inadequate. Instead we need to understand that the identities of the researcher and the respondents, and the research process itself, are all in a dynamic and mutually influencing relationship with each other.

Before, During, and After: Identity and the Social Construction of Knowledge in Qualitative Research Interviews

Peter Michael Yates

Introduction

This article is adapted from an essay written for the Conducting Research Interviews course, an advanced skills course undertaken as part of research training. Throughout the course participants were required to work in small groups in order to practise their interviewing skills. These interviews were recorded and used as the basis for the final assignment. I found that I was repeatedly confronted by the subject of identity. Issues of identity seemed to me to be highly influential in the interview process and in the material that these interviews produced. This article therefore focuses on the theme of identity and the social construction of knowledge.

After outlining briefly some of the key ideas in symbolic interactionist theories of self, I will reflect on my experiences of interviews during the course and the impact of identity before, during and after the interview. I will argue that a symbolic interactionist view of self and identity is useful for understanding the nature of knowledge produced in research interviews, complemented by a Foucauldian understanding of power. I will conclude that combining these two perspectives allows us to see that simplistic notions of reflexivity, which consider only the impact of the researcher's identity on the research process, are inadequate. Instead we need to understand that the identities of the researcher and the respondents, and the research process itself, are all in a dynamic and mutually influencing relationship with each other.

Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Self

Theories of self and identity have a long history. David Hume (1985 [1739]) disagreed with Descartes' belief in an innate self which can be reasoned and experienced in isolation, arguing instead that the self is experienced only through perceptions and is derived principally through one's interactions with others: "Where am I, or what? ... I dine, I play backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends." (Hume, 1985 [1739], p316) The idea that the self is neither singular nor innate, but rather socially constructed, has been taken up more recently in symbolic interactionism, a body of social theory which focuses upon the process of interpersonal interaction by the use of symbols of meaning (Bilton et al., 1996; Giddens, 2006). George Herbert Mead (2002 [1912]), for example, argues that our sense of self is created through repeated interactions with others and our ability to put ourselves in others' shoes: to see ourselves as others see us, or as Cooley (2002 [1922]) suggested, to see ourselves as we perceive others to see us. Mead (2002 [1912]) departs from Hume by making a distinction between the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'Mes' are those perceptions of ourselves which we derive from others' responses to us, and the 'I' is the organizing force of all the various 'Mes'. Like Hume, Mead concluded that the 'I' cannot be experienced directly. Hewitt (2007) talks in similar terms of a personal or autobiographical self (Mead's 'Me'); situated identities (particular 'Mes' created in particular situations); and a more enduring sense of social identities (those identities we inhabit through our identification with social categories to which we see ourselves as belonging). In any given social situation, therefore, the symbolic interactionist perspective would

suggest that we bring a self composed of situated, social and personal identities (Hewitt, 2007).

Research interviews are a form of social relationship (Dexter, 2006) and as such they can be understood in symbolic interactionist terms. Both interviewers and respondents bring personal and social identities to the situation as well as actively constructing identities through the course of the interview itself (Elliott, 2005). These identities will all have a bearing on the style, tone and content of the interviews, therefore contributing to the construction of the knowledge produced. The symbolic interactionist view of self and identity therefore dovetails with the assumptions of a social constructionist epistemology (Charmaz, 2006). Our understanding of the world is not only contingent upon our own beliefs, values and past experiences (our identities), but also upon the identities of those with whom we interact. Knowledge is created and constructed through interactions between people, between selves and between identities. In Holstein and Gubrium's (2004, p144) terms, respondents are not 'vessels of answers' which the interviewer needs to elicit through skilful questioning; rather, knowledge is "actively and communicatively assembled" through the interview process (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004, p141). The knowledge gained through interviews is therefore knowledge that is constructed in that particular time and place between those particular identities interacting, identities which are themselves in part created through that interaction (Dexter, 2006).

My Self

Having outlined a theory of self and identity and argued for its significance in influencing research interviews, I should say something about my self and the identities that I bring to the research process. Gough (2003) warns the researcher against becoming overly self-indulgent and narcissistic, and Gouldner (1973) argues that it would be naïve to assume that we can know ourselves so well as to be able to offer a comprehensive and wholly accurate account of our selves and our values. It would perhaps therefore be appropriate to comment only on those aspects of myself which I think are most relevant for the purposes of understanding the points that I make in this article.

In terms of social identity I am a white, male PhD student in my early forties with English as my first language. I have extensive experience of conducting assessment interviews as a social worker, where my primary experience has been in working in the field of child sexual abuse. However, I have no experience of conducting research interviews. More personally I tend to be very introverted and have to work hard to contribute to large group discussions, usually feeling the need to think carefully about what I say. I am told that this can sometimes create the impression of appearing very serious and perhaps a little aloof and intimidating. However, my confidence can be easily undermined and I am usually very uncomfortable with receiving compliments and being the centre of attention (although inwardly I can enjoy both). The relevance of these reflections will become clearer as I make reference to some of the interviews conducted as part of the course. Where excerpts are given by way of illustration, I will represent myself throughout as 'M' and otherwise the interviewer as 'I' and the respondent as 'R'.

Issues of Identity Before the Interview

Roesch-Marsh et al. (2011) argue that issues of identity influence the development of the research process right from the very outset, long before any actual interviews take place. In particular they reflect from their own experiences on the impact of social identity in negotiating research access,

finding that the categories in which gatekeepers placed them in terms of professional background and status, nationality and ethnicity, age, gender and so on, had implications for the ease of access granted and the level of cooperation and assistance that followed. The authors were therefore aware of actively constructing identities in order to facilitate this process, at times presenting themselves as practitioners, and at other times as students or researchers (Roesch-Marsh et al., 2011). Similarly, on the research interviews course, prior to any interviews, the identities of the participants began to be established during the larger group discussions and choices were made accordingly about whom to join in a smaller group for interview practice. I was aware of making choices based on my perceptions of people's age and experience, insight into the topics, ethnicity and professional background, as well as whom I happened to be standing next to and with whom I had previously worked. I will also have been on the receiving end of others' choices, and all of these choices will have had a direct impact on the relationships and the knowledge which were subsequently produced in the interviews.

Platt (1981) reflects that most research literature assumes that interviewers and respondents are unknown to each other prior to the interviews. This is not always so, and it was clearly not the case with the course participants. In Platt's (1981) sense of sharing group membership and roles the course participants could be seen as peers. We therefore had investments in the relationship both prior and subsequent to the interviews and we also knew that as respondents we would soon become interviewers. The following extract shows that these peer identities had the effect at times of the respondent being helpful to the interviewer, not wanting to leave them struggling when their questions were unclear, and anticipating what we knew were going to be the research questions. Identities and relationships established outside of the interview therefore had a bearing on the content of the interview. Without this relationship I would have continued to seek clarity about the interviewer's question:

Excerpt 1

I: That really doesn't make sense does it! Umm, that because you're working with, you're interviewing a group of professionals who are dealing with a specific issue in their work, um, have you got any concerns about the professional perspective? That still doesn't make sense does it? I'm sorry, move on from that!

M: I mean the concern I do have, I think is... Well there's a number but in terms of looking at how social workers make decisions what I will be getting from those interviews with social workers is their retrospective account ...

Coar and Sim (2006) found that peer status on the one hand allowed the researcher to gain the confidence of their respondents, the passions of the researcher having the potential to sensitize them to their social world (Gouldner, 1973); on the other hand, respondents saw the interview as a test of their knowledge, with their professional identity at stake (Coar and Sim, 2006). Interviewees will respond according to their own experiences and socio-cultural imperatives (Gadd, 2004), and with peer interviews it is possible that the knowledge of the researcher might produce a defensive respondent.

Clearly then, identities constructed prior to the interview have a bearing on whether and with

whom interviews take place, and mutual perceptions of identity will also influence the content of interviews as they unfold. These identities continue to be constructed between interviewer and respondent during the interview.

Issues of Identity During the Interview

In her account of interviewing friends, Avis (2002) described her struggle to find her authentic voice, finally choosing to enter into quite a reciprocal exchange of ideas much more like a regular conversation. This enabled her to elicit much richer material than her earlier attempts to maintain a formal interviewer role. Similarly, having initially attempted to adopt a relaxed and friendly style, I was struck when listening back to the recordings that I actually then worked hard to construct my identity as interviewer and to establish quite a formal relationship of interviewer and respondent. I set out a clear agenda of what I wanted the interview to cover and firmly established the nature of the interaction. This is illustrated in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 2

M: What I'm hoping that we could do in the next few minutes is to speak about what your research is and to hear a bit more about what you're intending to research, what your research is about.

R: Uh hmm.

M: Um, and then maybe get into thinking about, are you going to be using interviews and if you are going to be using interviews what has led you in that direction.

R: Yeah.

M: And then whether you've got any concerns about, about conducting those kind of interviews, so that's what I'm hoping we can kind of sketch out in the next wee while.

R: Ok.

M: Is it alright to start by asking you just to tell me a wee bit about your research, though, and your work?

Whilst the clarity of this agenda might be very helpful in other contexts, the formality of this role construction seemed to have the effect of inhibiting the respondent, who was in any case hesitant and reflected later that they were uncomfortable about being the focus of attention. I then attempted to encourage and reassure the respondent, but what was created was a rather awkward exchange in which my interventions only served to interrupt and punctuate their responses with continual "Uh huh's" and "OK's", betraying my own anxiety and exacerbating theirs.

Platt (1981) argues that a social norm is violated if, in a relationship of equals, one person tries to define the situation for the other. In another of my interviews there was an interesting example of a respondent resisting my attempts to define the situation by referring to the identities we had formed outside of the interview and in the large group sessions, serving both to disrupt the

construction of our situated identities of interviewer and respondent and flattering my identity as course participant. Initially unable to manage this disruption I ignored it altogether and ploughed on with asking more interviewer questions:

Excerpt 3

M: What is it about the course that has helped you to learn those things?

R: Um, I guess it's the um, the interview group, and the interview practice, and the discussion in the whole class, yeh.

M: OK.

R: Yeah, like, it's like some of them, some of them are quite professional, yeh.

M: Uh huh.

R: Yeah, like you [indicates me], and you [indicates observer], and when you say something I feel like, Oh yeah, it's like that, yeah. When you share experiences I've found that's really useful. Uh hmm.

M: Ok, so something about the whole class, and listening to some of the...

R: It's not just about the listening part, but some part like er, just discussion and sharing your experiences when you are doing your own research. Yep.

This was a very clear example of the possible complications of the peer interview and the way in which our (group) identities and my discomfort (my self being uncomfortable with compliments) evidently influenced the information produced in the interview. Another interviewer would have had an entirely different conversation, and in this example we can also see the influence of the observer upon the interaction. As Dexter (2006) observes, respondents speak specifically for their audience.

Power

The above excerpt shows not only how the identities of the interview participants continue to be constructed through their interaction in relation to each other, it also suggests dynamics of power being played out between the respondent casting themselves as a novice student, and the interviewer being cast as an experienced professional.

For Foucault (1976), power is almost synonymous with knowledge, with each producing the other. The power dynamics within the interview process are therefore the site of knowledge production. Being aware of the relationships of power within the interview is therefore essential in order to understand the knowledge produced, failing to do so having the potential to impair the credibility of the research.

The concept of the peer interview would suggest being socially equal, but this would be to ignore the dynamics of power and vulnerability that run throughout all interviews and social exchanges. Power relationships will play out according to what Bondi (2003) calls the power-laden differences, the social identities, of age, gender, ethnicity, language ability, professional background, and degrees of experience. Simply ignoring these differences, or assuming commonality in spite of these differences, is liable to reproduce oppression and to be exploitative. The boundaries between selves are permeable and Bondi (2003) therefore argues that interviewers need to remain highly aware of their own beliefs, values and emotional responses in order to be able to empathise with their respondents: to make available the emotional and intellectual material of the respondent whilst at the same time allowing a space in which the similarities and differences between interviewer and respondent can be understood and maintained.

However, rather than necessarily balancing the power between interviewer and respondent and creating a warm and caring dialogue, Kvale (2006) argues that clinical listening methods deployed by modern styles of interviewing have the potential to be manipulative. Using emotional rapport instrumentally, “faking friendship” (Kvale, 2006, p482) in order to penetrate the defences of the respondent (Fog, 2004) and to facilitate deep disclosure might be highly exploitative. Interviewers therefore need to be acutely aware of the power of their role and the purpose of empathy within interviews.

Foucault (1976) discusses how the power relationship of the confessional has transformed into the power relationships of clinical listening methods deployed by the likes of counsellors, psychiatrists and social workers. We could now add qualitative research interviewers to this list. Like the confessor, clinical listeners have the power to judge, punish, console, forgive or reconcile (Foucault, 1976). Sinding and Aronson (2003) seemed to be painfully aware of this in their interviews with relatives and friends providing end-of-life care and with elderly women in receipt of care. They described how the interviews had the potential to ‘expose the failures’ of the respondents and ‘unsettle the accommodations’ that they had made, thereby dismantling the identities that they had maintained of being a ‘good carer’ or highlighting their isolated situation.

A similar issue arose earlier in the interview from which excerpt 3 was taken, whereby the respondent spoke of their intention to carry out some highly sensitive research. I was surprised by this, as my sense was that the respondent had previously portrayed themselves in group discussions as being inexperienced, lacking in confidence, and unsure of their abilities to engage in spontaneous and free-flowing styles of interviewing. I was therefore interested to learn what kind of experience the respondent did in fact have of interviewing. As Platt (1981) points out, prior knowledge can direct the interview towards some areas and away from others. The exchange was laden with power differences (Bondi, 2003) in terms of age, gender, command of the English language, and especially in terms of the respondent’s explicit perceptions of my experience and professionalism. As a result of the way the respondent had presented herself in the larger group, and perhaps as a result of some judgments I had made about the respondent’s age and command of English, I was doubtful that they had a great deal of experience in conducting sensitive interviews. My scepticism betrayed itself in my questions, which could have been phrased in a much more open way. Perhaps my scepticism would have been conveyed however I phrased the questions. The response from the interviewee seemed to confirm that they had little experience, but this may have been because they had picked up on my judgements and did not want to claim a wealth of experience only to be put

down by someone to whom they ascribed some power and authority. I was therefore particularly concerned that I might undermine their confidence, their sense of self, by pursuing this line of questioning further. After trying (probably unsuccessfully) to reassure the respondent that they did have some experience, I backed away from and changed the subject:

Excerpt 4

M: So it's quite, potentially quite sensitive.

R: Yeah. Uh hmm.

M: And have you had any experience of doing interviews before?

R: Hmmm.

M: Or is this new?

R: I have done some journalism interview but not really the research interview, yeh.

M: Ok. So some experience.

R: Um...

M: Some journalistic experience.

R: Yes.

M: OK, alright. So what was it you were hoping, then, to learn from this course, that we've just been doing?

This excerpt highlights the potential to undermine the sense of identity of the respondent, the power of the interviewer-confessor, and the difficult spontaneous decisions which interviewers need to make accordingly. Once again this exemplifies the construction of identity within the interview, and how the dynamic relationship between identities influences the knowledge produced.

Kvale (2006) argues that the power relationship between interviewer and respondent is always asymmetrical: The interviewer defines the interview situation, asks the questions, directs the conversation and seeks information according to their agenda and research interests. This was exemplified in excerpt 2. This imbalance of power does not mean that the interview is necessarily exploitative or manipulative, but certainly it has the potential to be so. From a Foucauldian perspective, however, power is not something that simply one person holds or exercises, but operates within all relationships and always produces resistance, as we saw in excerpt 3. This is not likely to be as simple as the respondent discontinuing the interview, which Sinding and Aronson (2003) argue might be very challenging to their valued identity of being helpful and making a social contribution. Respondents are more likely to engage in more subtle counter-measures, such as opting not to answer, deflecting questions, going off topic or questioning the interviewer. One

needs to allow “the objects to object” (Kvale, 2006, 489). Interviewers need to be aware of the power of their position within the relationship as well as the power-laden differences of social identities, and they need to do their best to ensure the informed and freely consenting participation of the respondents.

Issues of Identity After the Interview

Given the power dynamics in interviews and the performance of both interviewer and respondent, like any performance there are likely to be anxieties and insecurities on both sides about how well the interview has gone, and for the respondent how good a respondent they have been. Have they spoken too much or too little? Have they been helpful and insightful in their answers? Have they said what is actually true for them? The respondent identity is potentially fragile and may need some reassurance after the interview. Sinding and Aronson (2003) made a point at the end of each interview to affirm the valued identities of the respondents. During the de-brief after one of my interviews I expressed some concerns that I had not asked the right sorts of questions and had therefore caused the respondent to be short and restrained in their responses. The respondent was apologetic that they perhaps had not managed to talk more freely. My doubts about my own interviewing ability served to raise doubts for the respondent.

Even further after the event, Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) argue that researchers make choices about whether, what and how to transcribe, the process of transcription itself involving some level of analysis. Richardson (1990) describes how researchers make choices about what to include in their analysis of interviews, and what they regard as important or trivial (Elliott, 2005). Reflections upon and analysis of interview transcripts will be informed by the identity of the researcher and will also serve to shape the knowledge that is finally produced. These reflections will continue to inform the growth of the identity of the researcher, as Mead (2002 [1913], p130) states:

The growth of the self arises out of partial disintegration – the appearance of the different interests in the form of reflection, the reconstruction of the social world, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers the new object.

Even after the interview, then, the research process continues to influence the identity of the researcher, which in turn will influence the analysis and interpretation of the research data.

Conclusion

I have argued that symbolic interactionist conceptions of identity and Foucault’s concept of power provide useful insights for understanding the interview process. In qualitative interviews knowledge is actively produced in the interaction between the multiple power identities of interviewer and respondent. These identities continue to grow and change throughout their involvement in the research process, from the moment the research project begins to the final draft of the report, and through any subsequent reflections. The concept of ‘reflexivity’ is often used in a rather limited way to describe the importance of maintaining an awareness of how the researcher’s identity has been influential throughout the research process. For example, Robson (2002, 172) defines reflexivity as “an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process”. Such static and simplistic definitions ignore the situated nature of identities and the “intersubjective dynamics between

researcher and researched” (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. ix). They disregard the evolving nature of identities and the impact of the research process on the identity of the researcher. By combining a symbolic interactionist view of self and a Foucauldian understanding of power we can see that a more complex conception of reflexivity is required to understand the place of identity within the research process, one which recognises the dynamic and mutually influencing relationship between the interviewer, respondents, and the research process itself.

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