

PRACTICAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF RESEARCH INTERVIEWS FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers have for some time followed recommendations to analyze both "how" interview data are generated in addition to "what" is discussed. Yet little has been written about the challenges of representing these sorts of analyses. This paper discusses the challenges of presenting methodological analyses of interview data to research participants and readers in ways that clearly convey how interviews are accomplished. The paper argues that it is imperative that analysts conducting methodological analyses analyze their own talk in relation with others. Considerations in doing methodological analysis in educational research, including challenges, reconciling interpretations of "what" and "how" topics are discussed in research studies, and possible areas of foci are reviewed. One challenge facing educational researchers doing methodological analyses of interviews is developing expertise in analytic methods that go beyond examinations of the topical content of talk. When interviewers subject their own talk to analysis, they learn about themselves, their craft, and the ways in which knowledge about social worlds are collaboratively produced in research encounters with participants. By developing expertise in how to analyze their interview interaction methodologically, novice educational researchers can attend to significant features of their interview practice and in so doing, develop a reflexive research practice.

Introduction

Audiences for methodological analyses of interview talk are usually confined to academics and methodologists, rather than encompassing research participants and public audiences for educational research. Researchers have avoided addressing the issue of how to present methodological analyses of interview data to participants by addressing multiple audiences in their work. Typically, researchers routinely publish findings (addressing "what" questions) directed to scholarly audiences, some of which are also presented to lay audiences outside the academy. They may also publish work that speaks to academic peers with an interest in methodological questions ("how" questions). Unlike many methodological analyses that use transcription conventions conveying additional information about the delivery of talk—such as the Jeffersonian conventions (Psathas & Anderson, 1990) used in conversation analysis—when interview data are represented to audiences beyond academia, transcriptions are frequently edited and represented in reader-friendly guises. These kinds of presentations of research topics are typically seen as reasonable ways to represent research to audiences outside the academy, although participants of studies may question initial and final interpretations and/or representations (see Duneier, 1999; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Wolcott, 1973 for examples of how researchers have dealt with participants' responses to their presentations of findings).

The challenges of representing analyses of *how* interviews are constructed: A case

Wertz et al. (2011) present a methodological text aimed at qualitative researchers that provides demonstrations of different analytic methods, including phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative analysis, intuitive inquiry and discursive psychology. Like her co-authors, Linda McMullen analyzed

texts generated in a course taught by one of the authors in which graduate students interviewed one another concerning “a situation in which something very unfortunate happened” (p. 103). In contrast to her co-authors, McMullen’s analysis focused on “how” the narrative accounts —both written and interview—were constructed by the participant, known as “Theresa”, rather than providing an analysis of the “topic” of the accounts (which dealt with how people faced and dealt with hardship). McMullen’s methodological analysis illuminated two discursive strategies used by the participant to construct accounts of “resilience” — those of “enhancing oneself” and “diminishing others.” Although McMullen takes great care to situate her analysis within the context of the generation of data (i.e., the prompts used for the generation of texts, the focus on “resilience” as a topic by the interviewer), newcomers to this kind of work may initially be baffled by the purpose of this kind of analysis. For example, when I used this text in a qualitative methods class, one student commented that “I found McMullen’s chapter on discourse analysis a little bizarre, confusing, and even shocking.” Rather than recognizing the findings as focusing on the discursive strategies used in the production of the accounts (“how” data are generated), this student read the analysis as focusing on the individual’s experience of resilience as a unit of analysis (“what” was discussed). This student commented further on how McMullen’s findings failed to adequately capture the topic of the interview:

I found her analysis interesting, yet shocking because the tone of the analysis was so different than the way the other researchers analyzed their data. McMullen did a fine job of presenting her point through the data, but I am not sure if I believed that Teresa’s story centered around enhancing herself and diminishing others. I think a lot of Teresa’s story and her language was a result of a desire to survive, not physically, but emotionally...not as a way to build herself up and put down/blame others.ⁱ

In Wertz et al. (2011), given the rare opportunity to respond in writing, the human subject of these multiple analyses, Emalinda McSpadden, reviewed each of the authors’ analyses of her narrative texts prior to publication. In responding to McMullen’s chapter, McSpadden writes: “...the reading of this particular analysis was a strange one. To begin with I felt almost instantly embarrassed. Had I really been such a self-aggrandizing braggart (or “self-enhancer”) in giving my interview?” (p. 346) McSpadden continues by defending her interview account and descriptions of her lived experiences in terms of truthfulness and accuracy (“what” was said), commenting: “It felt, to me, that this researcher did not entirely think so, and it made me question myself, even so far as to reread my own interview” (p. 347). Thus, McMullen’s analysis of “how” the talk were constructed was construed by the participant as questioning the value and authenticity of “what” (i.e., topic) had been said in the interview.

McMullen’s response to McSpadden’s reading of her analysis shows sensitivity to the ways in which the participant of the study had read her analysis (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 395):

One of the most humbling lessons I have learned from this project is how little I (and perhaps other discourse analysts, with the exception of some who adopt a critical perspective) talk about the consequences of our analyses for those whose words we analyze....because our analysis is not of the person(s) whose language/talk is being analyzed but rather of (often) culturally and historically relative discursive patterns and how these patterns are used to achieve particular ends, sharing one’s analysis of data even with someone who participated in a research interview would not be common.

Here, McMullen reiterates that the focus of her analysis was on the discursive strategies used in the doing of a particular interview, while recognizing that there is indeed a person attached to the textual analysis. Further, McMullen acknowledges the lack of thought given by researchers to whether or not, or how such analytic demonstrations might be presented to audiences beyond fellow-researchers.

In this single case, we see responses from an analyst, research participant, and reader — all of whom express some discomfort with others' interpretations and sense-making. We have here:

- a reader viewing an analysis as misrepresentative of the topic of talk,
- a research subject's reading of an analysis as questioning the veracity of her account, and
- a researcher aiming an analytic lens on the discursive strategies used to *generate* research data about a particular topic (rather than the topic of the talk), cognizant of a participant's perplexity in reading her analysis and representation of findings.

How might these three readings be understood? Harold Garfinkel's writing on "trust" is useful in understanding the disjunctures between the analyst's intent to make explicit the discursive strategies used in doing a particular task (in this case a research interview for a class project), and this participant's and this reader's perplexed responses cited above. Garfinkel (1967, p. 50 fn) defined "trust" as a "person's compliance with the expectancies of the attitude of daily life as a morality." In the well-known breaching experiments, Garfinkel's students deviated from the unspoken expectancies to which they believed both they themselves were entitled, and that they in turn extended to others in accomplishing mundane conversations. Thus, the basic "trust" entailed in the doing of everyday life was infringed, and bewildered and emotional responses from co-parties ensued. Thus, analysts should not be surprised when participants of research studies and readers without specific methodological knowledge and expertise express bafflement in response to analyses that focus on "how" research interviews are talked into being, or question the need for detailed transcription conventions of paralinguistic features of talk, complete with sighs, pauses, overlaps and assorted other vocal mishaps. The everyday understanding of interviews in society (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997) has little concern with *how* interview data are constructed, but rather *what* is discussed. Both participants of research studies and readers of research findings rely on researchers to tell them about "what" was learned from a study.

An audience for representations of how interviews are constructed

Who, then, is interested in *how* interviews are constructed? Setting aside other possible audiences for this work — that of comedians and film-makers who delight in asking questions and interviewing people for particular effects (e.g., Michael Moore, Stephen Colbert, Sacha Baron Cohen) or politicians and celebrities who have vested interests in their presentations of self in interviews — the principal audience for methodological work that seeks to unpack "how" interviews get done are researchers, interviewers, and methodologists. There is a long trajectory of research examining interviews (e.g., Briggs, 1986; Cicourel, 1964; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). Early work in this line was seeking to examine how interviewers asked questions in order to develop methods to standardize interviews and deal with various characteristics of participant populations. More recently, this kind of work has attended to the implications of specific interview contexts for the ways in which researchers analyze, interpret and represent interview data (Rapley, 2001, 2004, 2012), generate data concerning research topics (e.g., Puchta & Potter, 2004; Speer, 2002) and deal with challenges and interactional problems (e.g., Roulston, 2011, 2014)ⁱⁱ. Researchers doing this kind of work have developed methodological expertise and knowledge about the context-sensitive features of particular research contexts and methods of generating data, in addition to communities of practice around specific approaches to analysis.

The merit of methodological examinations

Why is interest in these methodological examinations merited? Why should educational researchers be interested? Although not yet common practice among educational researchers, these kinds of methodological analyses not only contribute to the "social studies" of interviewing (Rapley, 2012), but

afford researchers ways of examining the methods that they use to elicit data and what this means for the production of knowledge about the social world, while providing possible points for the development of research practice. From this view, it is not enough for analysts to analyze the talk of others. By analyzing their own talk, educational researchers can recognize features and characteristics of their own talk. This work is difficult and painstaking, yet productive for yielding revelations about both research topics and methods (David, 2013). In the remainder of this paper, I outline some key considerations in doing this kind of work; namely: challenges, reconciling interpretations of “what” and “how” topics are discussed in research studies, and possible areas of foci.

Key considerations for conducting methodological examinations of interviews

First, an initial challenge facing educational researchers and interviewers aiming to analyze how interviews get done is that of the development of expertise of analytic methods that go beyond examinations of the topical content of talk. Fortunately, there are many recent texts that aim to introduce readers to discursive approaches to analysis of data, including interviews (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Nikander, 2012; ten Have, 2007; Wooffitt, 2002). A secondary challenge is that to do this kind of work, researchers must become familiar with how transcription conventions differ among various analytic traditions, and allow for different sorts of analytic questions. Again, researchers have much work that speaks to theoretical issues involved in transcription practices and data representation from which to draw (Bucholtz, 2007; Davidson, 2009; Ochs, 1979; Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). There are many details that may be attended to in transcription and much current work draws on and adapts the transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 1985). Excerpt 1 shows how some of these conventions might be applied to transcribe interview talk. Here, these include pauses timed in seconds (3.5), elongations and stressed utterances (u:m), micropauses (.), cut off utterances (w-) and overlapped utterances (indicated by square brackets).

Excerpt 1 (June 2008, 100002_1, 22:10-24:05).

IE: Interviewee

IR: Interviewer

1. IR u:m what are your beliefs about the use of say mind body
2. spirituality u:m approaches to (.) uh patient care with
3. underserved and minority populations
4. (3.5)
5. IE .hhhh (.) w- I don't I'm not sure what you [mean by this
6. IR [uh huh
7. IE question because [I don't like to separate out people=
8. IR [uh huh

Second, educational researchers have conventionally focused on representation of topics discussed in interviews (“what” is talked about), rather than discussing methodological issues arising during interviews (“how” topics are discussed). Yet, more can be done in representing findings from research studies in ways that reconcile both “what” was discussed in interview research and “how” these topics arose. Potter and Hepburn (2012) have outlined eight recommendations that contribute to this reconciliation. In reporting findings from interview studies, three of these that pertain here include (1) making the “interview setup explicit” (p. 557) – including clarifying how participants are recruited and the kinds of tasks that participants are given; (2) displaying the “active role of the interviewer” (p. 557) – including the interviewers’ contributions to the generation of talk; and as discussed above (3) representation of “talk in a way that captures action” (p. 559) – including significant features such as pauses, overlaps, and various non-linguistic features (e.g., laughter). By enacting these recommendations,

interviewers must subject their own talk to the same sorts of analyses that they use to examine the talk of others. This goes some way to speaking to the ethics of doing these kinds of analyses. Researchers conduct these kinds of analyses to learn about themselves, their craft, and the ways in which knowledge about social worlds are collaboratively produced in research encounters with participants. Such work is modest, but no less important, since it encourages humility in the ways we understand ourselves and others. Further, by being more transparent in research reports about how interview data were generated (for example, by including the interviewer's contribution to the talk), educational researchers indicate to participants of their research projects in concrete ways a commitment to the ethical principal of treating others as they would themselves.

Third, what are possible areas of foci? First and foremost, new researchers are challenged to situate their studies within an ever-increasing array of methodological advice literature. By developing expertise in how to analyze their interview interaction methodologically, interviewers can attend early to significant features of their interview practice (Roulston, 2010). This kind of work can assist them in being reflexive and reflective researchers, and develop research designs for studies that are theoretically and methodologically coherent. For example, in an interview course I teach, one assignment calls upon students to:

Transcribe 3 minutes of talk from an interview that you have conducted using Jeffersonian transcription conventions. Select a segment of interview interaction in which you are talking. For example, you may be summing up what your participant has said, or asking questions. Use the questions below as a guide to thinking further about interview interaction and your style as an interviewer. (See Appendix 1 for further information)

Students are usually amazed to see how much more than “words” can be conveyed in a transcription; and are called upon to carefully examine how interview participants orient to their questions, as well as how they themselves respond. This kind of work commonly results in students reflecting further on the questions posed and how these are delivered within interview contexts, as well as outlining potential changes in future research. For one example of this kind of work, see Roulston and Shelton (In Press). Second, since interviewers and researchers pursue an infinite variety of topics in countless ways, once initial interviews have been conducted, researchers themselves may identify salient features for analysis. This is an ethnomethodological project, in that researchers examine whatever facets of interviews that they have conducted that emerge as interesting. Rawls (2002, p. 26) explains it this way:

EM....involves a search for what the questions are that represent the problems and taken for granted methods that members of any particular enterprise face for themselves. These methods are what members use to produce the recognizable coherences of action and speech that comprise social order as they know it.

For example, in a graduate course on interviewing that I taught, some of the topics that arose among students' reflections included the development of rapport; discussion of sensitive topics; ascertaining questions of relevance about which participants might speak; and the generation of data with young children and adolescents. All of these topics are discussed in methodological literature – but by closely examining how their own interview data were generated, students were able to identify specific features of research practice visible in their interviews that they need to attend to in future work. In doing this work, students were actively engaged in the study of the social order of interviewing: “actual, evident, and witnessable in its details” (Rawls, 2002, p. 52).

Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper, I have argued that methodologists, educational researchers and interviewers are audiences for analyses that focus on how interview data are generated. Further, I argue that it is imperative that educational researchers subject their own participation in research interviews to analytic consideration. Findings from these analyses may be discomfoting; but in this discomfort, I argue that we as researchers will be better placed to consider how we talk, how we represent the talk of others, and how we might talk in ways that generate understanding between and among people. By focusing on the “seen but un-noticed” activity (Garfinkel, 1967) of talking research data into being, we can better understand ourselves and others.

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Appendix 1: Reflection on interview style

Transcribe 3 minutes of talk from an interview that you have conducted using Jeffersonian transcription conventions. Select a segment of interview interaction in which you are talking. For example, you may be summing up what your participant has said, or asking questions. Use the questions below as a guide to thinking further about interview interaction and your style as an interviewer.

Question-answer sequences

- Did the interviewer pose a single question? If not, what other questions did the interviewer ask? Which question did the interviewee respond to? In what order? What might be made of that?
- If a question also functioned as formulation of prior talk, what ideas were retained? What was deleted? What was transformed?
- Did the interviewer include possible responses in the question? If so, did the interviewee take these up in their response? If not, what happened next?
- Did the interviewee answer the question at the first possible opportunity?
- Did the interviewee answer this question, or use their turn to initiate a different topic?
- Did the interviewee answer the question with another question?
- Was that question aimed at clarifying the meaning of the previous question?
- If not, how did it relate to the prior utterance? What happened next?
- Did the interviewee pause prior to responding? What did the interviewer do next?
- Were there stumbles, slips, or repairs in the interviewer's or interviewee's talk? What might be made of that?
- If repair is evident in the transcription, did the interviewer and interviewee successfully demonstrate an understanding of one another's utterances? How was this achieved? If not, what happened next?
- Did speakers provide any assessments of one another's talk? What happened next?
- How was turn-taking accomplished?
- Were there any interruptions or overlaps in the question-answer sequence?
- Were there silences during the talk? How did speakers orient to these?

Write a reflective statement that focuses on the following issues:

- What does this kind of transcription reveal that is not apparent in your earlier transcription of this interview talk?
- What do you notice about your contribution to the interview interaction?
- Describe the features of the Question-Answer sequences that you have transcribed.
- How did the participant respond to your utterances and/or silences?
- What have you learned from this exercise about your interaction in the research interview?
- How does this analysis of your interview practice inform you methodologically?

ⁱ This excerpt from a discussion posting of course readings is used by permission of the author.

ⁱⁱ Methodological examinations of standardized interviews has continued, but are not discussed here. See Maynard, Houtkoop-Steenstra, van der Zouwen, and Schaeffer (2002), Houtkoop-Steenstra (2000), Schaeffer and Maynard (2002).