Telling the difficult things: Creating spaces for disclosure, rapport and 'collusion' in qualitative interviews

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative interviews continue to offer an established way to collect rich data about everyday experiences of the social world. It is also recognised that data collected during face-to-face interviews are the product of a social interaction with co-constructive elements. Reflection on the research process and methodological transparency, have become mainstays of rigorous qualitative research practice, facilitating critical assessment of research findings. But in what ways can and do researchers co-construct interview accounts and what happens once data are collected? This paper focuses on what happens during the interview, for example the creation of spaces and endurance of silences, or supportive comments made in order to invite and allow disclosures, and what happens *around* the interview encounter. Do 'permissions' to voice difficult, challenging experiences amount to collusion or just good, effective interviewing technique? How/do research relationships – including experiences of power – shift within and around the interview and when does 'rapport' cease?

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Background

Although there are now multiple 'strategies of data collection', augmented more recently by digital technologies, the face-to-face interview continues to be utilized as a popular mode of qualitative data collection (Atkinson et al., 2001:7). This situation according to Denzin (2001:23) has been the case 'for a full century' during which time 'the interview has been the basic information gathering tool of the social sciences' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Over this time, the interview and its recording have usually been taken to be less problematic than other modes of qualitative/ethnographic data gathering and historically was associated with eliciting unbiased (because recorded) and so 'objective' data (Lee, 2004). These associations, and the interview encounter itself, have been subject to both critical consideration and greater scrutiny of the (power) dynamics which can permeate the encounter and so the data collected (Cotterill, 1992; Finch, 1984; Harding, 1991; Letherby, 2004; Oakley, 1981, 2002; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1991, 1993; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996). Yet notwithstanding this the interview continues to provide a familiar and established mode of capturing data in qualitative research in ways which can appear less problematic when set before university research ethics committees (URECS). The interview in all its guises (from highly structured to unstructured) has come to occupy a ubiquitous position in qualitative data collection, consequently requiring less explanation than other, more recent and innovative, data collection strategies. But is what happens in the interview unproblematic and when exactly does interview-based data collection begin and end and what will eventually constitute

'the data' to be analysed? This paper takes a closer look at the assumptions made and practices used by researchers in interview settings in relation to developing 'rapport', trust and collecting data. It then turns its attention to what happens *around* the interview and asks when rapport-building begins and ends, as well as *what* elements of the data collection process inform the data and our eventual analysis. These areas will be informed by researcher experiences conducting two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) on transition to first-time motherhood (Miller, 2005, 2007) and transition to first-time fatherhood (Miller, 2010, 2012).

The interview

It is widely acknowledged that the qualitative face-to-face interview is a site of social interaction in which resulting accounts will have co-constructed elements even where individual, biographical accounts are sought (Birch and Author, 2000; Corradi, 1991; Rapley, 2001). The interview also assumes that individuals have an account or narrative to 'give', which will be (broadly) recognisable in a western context. Thus the premise of the 'modernist subject' underpins most interviewing endeavours in the western world (Alldred and Gillies, 2012). These assumptions are also shared by many University research ethics committees (UREC) who can regard the interview as a familiar and bounded opportunity for data collection, where the *type* of data to be collected can be known in advance and so viewed as (mostly) unproblematic. But all interview encounters involve elements of negotiation involving identity work, power dynamics, emotions and 'emotional risks' regardless of the topic under study, which render this an uncertain and sometimes precarious undertaking too

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(Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Rapley, 2001; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong, 2007, 2009; Sampson, Bloor, and Fincham, 2008; Emerald and Carpenter, 2015). Moreover, 'the emotional framing of interviews' according to Ezzy (2010:163) contributes significantly to 'shaping the content' of the interview encounter too (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015). These considerations emanate from much earlier feminist concerns with representing the 'Other' and debate about speaking 'for' and 'about' the Other. Yet feeling disempowered to explore the experiences of others, who will almost certainly be different in all sorts of ways, could only result in 'silences' and according to Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996:12) 'the reinscription of power relations'. Significantly, these debates led to a concern and concentration on the reflexive practices experienced and involved in qualitative interview-based research.

The face-to-face interview then involves researcher techniques of listening and prompting aimed at making participants feel comfortable and so more able to share/'disclose' their experiences (Birch and Author, 2000; Duncombe and Jessop, 2012). Similarly, the techniques and practices we engage as researchers should be reflected upon, even though the flow of an interview can be hard to predict and anticipate as the interview unfolds. But attempting to establish a sense of rapport – or at least respect, in terms of someone giving their time and engaging with our questions – in a qualitative interview may be/should be different to the more commercialised commodification of research skills used in other forms of information gathering (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). However, regardless of the form of relationship we attempt to establish during an interview, its development can be seen to begin well before the interview takes place, as recruitment, initial contact and interview arrangements are made using different forms of (swiftly changing) digital technologies such as email conversations, Facebook chat, mobile messaging and voicemails.

Increasingly then it is not only what occurs during the interview interaction that researchers need to reflect upon, but also what occurs around it. This prompts the question of when are we actually collecting data — is this only in the face-to-face interview when a recording device has been switched on? Certainly this is a view of the interview shared by many research ethics committees, but the parameters of the (unproblematic) interview are much more porous and leaky than this conception would allow. Importantly, feminist writing on research methods have continued to engage with debates on interview practice, objectivity, 'informed' consent and claims to authenticity (Miller and Boulton, 2007; Mattingly, 2005; Oakley, 1981, 2016). But recognising the interview as a social interaction in which objectivity, in any positivist sense of the word, is not a guiding principle requires that we pay closer attention to the aspects of the encounter which shape what we take to be the (eventual) data. How/do research relationships – including experiences of power – shift within and around the interview and when/does 'rapport' (or concern) cease? These questions are reflected upon using experiences and data from two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies outlined below. As these studies involved interviewing mothers (original study) and fathers (the subsequent study) I have been able to reflect on my own assumptions about ideas of any shared gendered understandings in the data collection process. These could equally well be reflected upon in relation to other shared or different attributes/experiences such as class, 'race', age, being a mother (or not).[1]

The studies

The two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies carried out in the UK focused on women's and men's experiences of transition to first-time parenthood. The first of these focused on women's experiences of transition to first-time motherhood. In this study 17 women were followed through a year in their lives as they became mothers for the first time. These participants were accessed using snowballing, which involved asking other mothers at a local school to act as potential gate-keepers. The eventual sample consisted of white, heterosexual women with a mean age of 30 years (at the time of the first antenatal interview). This was slightly older than the national average age for first births in the UK at the time, but typical of the trend among professional women to delay decisions about reproduction. The iterative research process involved interviewing the women on three separate occasions, followed by an end-of-study postal questionnaire used to collect demographic data and feedback on their experiences of participating in the study. Prompt-style interview schedules were designed for each of the three interviews covering broad areas around expectations, birth, mothering experiences, information seeking, perceptions of self and others, and work intentions.

The first interview took place before the birth at between seven and eight months into the pregnancy. The second interview took place between six and eight weeks following the birth and the final interview was carried out between eight and nine months postnatally. The first interview began by asking the women to describe how they had felt when they found out they were pregnant. In the subsequent interviews participants were asked to begin by describing what had happened since our last meeting. This approach gave the women the opportunity to produce their accounts of anticipating and later experiencing mothering and motherhood in the ways they wished. Interviews took place in the home of the participant or at a location of their choosing. The longitudinal design of the research mirrored the period of transition giving the data collection period fluidity not achieved in one-off, 'snapshot', interviews. Emerging concepts were explored across the data collection periods. The interviews were all recorded with the participants' permission, and at the end of the study, following verbatim transcription, the tapes were given to those participants who wanted them.

During analysis, the complexity of the narrative enterprise soon became clear as the data revealed the ways in which individuals react to pressures to conform to dominant social narratives (for further details of the process of analysis see Miller, 2005 chapter 1). As the data were analysed over the course of 49 interviews, the most striking contrast was between the anticipatory narratives collected during the antenatal interviews and data from the final interviews, which were carried out between eight and nine months after the birth. For all the women, transition to motherhood was different to how they had envisaged it — often harder and lonelier.[2]

The companion study on Transition to First-time Fatherhood was carried out after the motherhood study (commenced between 2005 and 2007) and initially followed the same research design of three interviews running across one year. However this timeframe was subsequently revised and later data collection has been undertaken with (some of) the sample as their child have reached their second birthday and more recently started school. The sample consisted of 17 men becoming fathers for the first time, who responded to advertisements and 'opted in' to the research project (a requirement set by the UREC, see Miller, 2012 for further reflection on recruitment). The mean age of the participants was 33.7 years at the time of the first interview; ages ranged from 24 years to 39 years. The men were employed in a wide range of skilled jobs that would mostly position them as middle-class; they were partnered (some married), white (several in ethnically mixed partnerships/marriages), and heterosexual. Their socio-economic location (by occupation) and corresponding choices could be argued to be greater than those than less advantaged groups might enjoy. Both samples were from dual-earner households. The samples from the two studies were not related in any way, but both groups were recruited from across southern England.

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[1] For further details, I have reflected upon aspects of these characteristics in both the concluding chapters of my books; *Making Sense of Motherhood* (2005) and *Making Sense of Fatherhood* (2010).

[2] A current study is returning to some of the participants from this original Transition to Motherhood study in order to collect retrospective accounts now their first-born child has reached 18 years of age.