

Adelaide conference 2013

Title

Setting the scene: the initial idea at OHAA conference Melbourne October 2011:
About 2 years ago, I was listening to a presentation at the Oral History Association of Australia conference in Melbourne. I began to consider whether there was a way of reconfiguring the interviewer – interviewee frame of reference.

I was keen to explore a more creative and potentially, more fulfilling interview technique which allows participants to fully engage in the interview process. I was also interested in developing a co-created space for a conversation allowing greater equity in the relationship between participants and the researcher.

The recording model I am going to describe to you this morning is that of the reciprocal peer interview; a technique that allows each participant pair to perform both roles as interviewer and interviewee / narrator and listener. This technique positions the participants in primary roles at the forefront of the interview process whilst the researcher takes on a secondary role as facilitator and observer. The resulting conversation is thus one of shared authority and minimises issues of power relations.

The technique

is an adaptation of focus group interviews - developed by feminist researchers in the United States: Porter, Neysmith et al – and the only example of its application to date. Its a logical development of participatory action research and thus addresses issues of reciprocity by encouraging mutual contribution and shared ownership of the conversation.

Title: 'Portraits of our lives'

My research lends itself to this innovative interview technique as it explores lesbian identity across generations by comparing and contrasting the oral narratives of older and younger lesbians from personal accounts of their lives. Key life experiences drawn from autobiographical content are discussed in ways that allow each participant to fully engage in the interview and thus to discover and explore contrasting and potentially insightful perspectives.

In this paper, I will be outlining key features of the reciprocal peer interview, look at how I applied it to my research, discuss the benefits and challenges of the technique and look ahead to further creative applications.

Themes

A guiding topical protocol provided suggestions for the participants allowing a discursive mode for reflection; however, the main focus was on allowing the women to share their lived experiences, reflect on commonalities and remark on distinguishing features and differences.

Participants were carefully selected for their capacity to be self-reflexive, willingness to engage and share stories and finally, ability to evaluate and offer constructive feedback. Participants were drawn from a cross section of ethnicities, backgrounds, professions and of course age groups: 50+ years for older women and up to 30 years for the younger women.

As the technique is relatively innovative, it was first piloted in two sets of interviews. Dual recording methodologies were used, both audio and audio-visual. The procedure followed was an initial meeting to explain the purpose of the research, the main interview and finally a post-interview evaluation with the researcher when each participant's individual reflections on the interview process were recorded.

This last part, the post-interview reflections, are the main focus of my paper this morning.

Evaluation – benefits

I'm now going to discuss the outcomes of the interview technique and illustrate these with quotes from the participants recorded in the subsequent evaluation. Firstly, its benefits.

Participant autonomy

The traditional interviewer-interviewee relationship is transformed to one of alternating narrator-listener and listener–narrator in equal measure. This autonomy and reciprocity is a vital feature of the narrative process and considerably enhanced the quality of the discourse:

It actually worked really well...

I couldn't quite imagine how it would work. I thought we might get really stuck and start sounding very stilted asking each other "well, can you tell me..." I thought well, I hope that doesn't happen. But I really did anticipate moments where there would be silence or one or the other would go "oh, what's next or what else can I ask." And so it more than met my expectations...

Unique learnings

Several participants noted the unique nature of the learning that had taken place during the conversation and the fact that such an opportunity was not one they would otherwise have experienced.

... and I came away thinking gosh, that was really rich and didn't we cover a lot;

Whilst a younger woman remarked:

...that was to learn something about a generation of lesbians who I don't have a lot to do with in everyday life.... I don't know much about the history of, or older generations or what people went through. So I really wanted to start, at least try and learn something about those who have been around longer than I have and dealt with different kinds of things than I have. So I can have more of an appreciation of who I can be now.

And from another:

it was really just the opportunity to have an intergenerational conversation with someone else who is older than me, and I don't really get the chance to sit down and do that very often.

Organic dialogue

Another feature was the organic nature of the interview which allowed for spontaneity:

It allows for an actual conversation, like a dialogue to take place.

Whilst a relative lack of prescription could result in participants deviating from the suggested protocol, its benefits far outweighed the occasional forays 'off topic:'

I enjoyed that, it was really good. I did feel like...we got stuck a few times, but it was good to have your list, your guidelines there. But no, I think it went really well. It was quite nice because it seemed to let the conversation flow a little bit more organically...I think we talked about things that weren't even on the list but then came back to ... the main issues.

And from another:

I think that we just went with how we went and that felt right, and that felt good.

They were encouraged to trust the process!

Initial apprehension

Of course, the issue of interviewer competency, the ability of each woman to interrogate and respond, and thus the quality of the subsequent data is also relevant. An element of trust and faith in the participants and the process was a feature of the interviews and of course, the value and validity of the data. There was initial apprehension:

so I came along thinking it might not work...

And another observed:

*To be honest I was a little apprehensive of going into the actual interview process after meeting **. But it was interesting for me because I kind of prejudged ** a little bit, in the sense that from the first meeting I kind of, I felt she was quite shy and a little bit nervous and I thought "oh, this is going to be really hard work." But I was totally blown away with how easy the whole process was and how well prepared she was.*

Engage and empower

The participatory model is an empowering way to engage participants. This way of privileging the participants is a significant feature of the research from several perspectives: firstly, in divesting control from the interviewer/researcher and transferring it to the interviewees as 'surrogate researchers,' and secondly in the autonomy granted to the participants which encouraged reciprocity and mutual involvement in the ensuing conversation; the result was an increase in rapport and thus the richness of the dialogue. Many women remarked on how privileged they felt to share in the conversation and take part in the research:

I thought it was really really valuable for me – and its great that its contributed to something else as well, but I got a lot out of it. Thanks.

Also:

From my perspective its been a privilege to be involved with it as well, so thank you so much.

And again:

the process of having these conversations has been really invaluable in ways that are more far reaching than in ways which can possible be contained within a study...

For many, it was a unique and memorable opportunity.

And now turning to its limitations

Preparation and briefing

Selection of the participants is a significant issue. I did not know the participants and initially relied on recommendations from my advisory group; latterly, participants were self-selected by a word-of-mouth, snowball technique.

Additionally, participants needed to be self-reflexive, empathetic and have the mental agility to move between both frames as listener and narrator; they also needed to be able to explore personal and occasionally sensitive topics with a virtual stranger.

Thus, the introduction of the participant pairs to each other at the initial briefing and explanation of the interview process was critical to the ultimate success of the research. It was vital to create that 'safe space' - these issues were checked at each subsequent evaluation:

I thought I only had a week... so that was really good because I went back and did some more (preparation). And then I decided that, how to conduct, how to be part of that interview, I was going to just do what you said and see how it went

And from another:

... the (initial briefing) was helpful because it gave me more of a sense of what was going to happen and we got to ask questions

A feature of the semi-structured interview technique is the unpredictability and overall direction of the conversation; the possibility that the lack of prescription can potentially lead to deviation from the suggested topics. I acknowledge this is counter-balanced by the rich quality of the dialogue and the opportunity for digressions that were as surprising as they were thought-provoking. Several participants commented on their delight in such forays off topic.

Guidance vs spontaneity

Of course, the researcher is withdrawn from being at the forefront of the conversation to that of being a 'supportive outsider.' This brings up the question of spontaneity and whether any advantage would have been gained from more specific guidance from the researcher. On this point, several participants felt that on occasions, this may have been useful however, a greater degree of specificity may have detracted from the spontaneity of the conversation:

The (lack of specific direction) seemed to let the conversation flow a little bit more organically...I think we talked about things that weren't even on the list but then came back to ... the main issues.

Where are we now?

Nine sets of interviews (18 participants) have been held so far in Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin and from a diversity of ethnicities, beliefs, life experiences, occupations and localities. I'm considering 2 final sets of interviews bringing the total number of participants to 22.

What next?

Turning to research outcomes, my first priority is to analyse the data using discourse analysis. However in time, I am keen to use the audio-visual materials for more creative outputs employing multimedia – possibly a documentary or creative ethnography: a selective process of producing creative non-fiction or a way of combining academic integrity with a sense of personal experience whilst acknowledging that all ethnography is subjective and co-produced.

Conclusions

In conclusion - I have described to you this morning a way to move beyond the conventional interview to engage with multiple voices; capturing the fluidity of lived experiences in ways that give authenticity and integrity to the life courses of the participants.

The process foregrounds the narrators by privileging their experiences thereby allowing the additional understandings that arise from the participants shared autonomy in the interview process.

The technique of the reciprocal peer interview has considerable potential to inform and be applied to a variety of contexts, themes and subject matter.

Repositioning the narrators in a place of prominence is holistically engaging and ultimately empowering; the technique, whilst still at an exploratory stage, has considerable potential as a radical departure from conventional interview modes.

