

A Postmodern-Psychoanalytic Perspective on Interviewing

Neill R. Ustick
Australian Catholic University,
Signadou Campus, Canberra
PO Box 256 Dickson ACT 2602
phone (61 2) 62091147, fax (61 2) 62091185
email: neill.ustick@acu.edu.au

Along with many researchers, I have conducted and experienced research interviews in traditional ways. Reflecting on that experience, with the aid of work on interviews, notably by James Scheurich (1997) and Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000), I now see such interviews as more complex than previously. In this paper, I describe my learning journey in developing what I regard as an appropriately sophisticated approach to research interviewing. Initially I discuss the key epistemological question about what kind of knowledge a researcher seeks from interviews and in particular within the interpretivist tradition, where researchers typically seek to explore the meanings participants express in situations. My question, then, is how well traditional interviewing, either older positivist or newer qualitative versions, reveal those meanings. I discuss two cases of writers whose critiques of those approaches have informed my thinking. First, I outline how Scheurich's (1997) postmodern critique of traditional interviewing raises important questions about the conduct and analysis of research interviews. Next, I argue that many of these questions are powerfully addressed in the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) in their detailed report of their research into people's fear of crime. I describe and illustrate their approach to interviewing for such research questions – they call it the *free association narrative interview method* – one that draws upon notions of narrative, Gestalt and uses free association and other ideas from psychoanalytic case study method. It is also one with the potential to contribute freshly to the knowledge that interview research can produce. Finally, drawn largely from Scheurich and Hollway-Jefferson, I offer for readers' consideration a brief and somewhat eclectic set of principles for analysing interview data.

Introduction

Although my usual research role has been to conduct interviews, on occasions I have acted as a research interviewee. Over time, and informed by (sometimes challenged by) some recent accounts of research interviews (notably Scheurich, 1997, Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, Fontana & Frey, 2005), these experiences have provoked me to locate a fresh approach to understanding research interviews. In this search, I have been conscious of problems with 'scientific' traditional approaches but also some difficulties with 'postmodern' perspectives. I am also stimulated by the challenge posed by Amos Hatch (cited by Scheurich & Clark, 2006, p. 401) to re-think the epistemological question of what kind of knowledge I look for from interviews:

Let us re-engage in the paradigm wars. Let us defend ourselves against those who would impose their modern notions of science on us by exposing the flaws in what they call scientifically based research. Let us mount a strong offense by generating qualitative studies that are so powerful they cannot be dismissed.

In his brief outline of postmodern trends in interviewing, Fontana (2001, p. 162) notes that 'Researchers influenced by a postmodern agenda have come to display a heightened sensitivity to problems and concerns that previously had been glossed over or scantily addressed.' My own awareness of some central issues in the conducting and analysis of research interviewing has been awakened and sharpened by many of the insights from postmodern theory. I have, however, gone a step further in seeking to forge a combination of insights from the postmodern work of James Scheurich (1997) and the postmodern-psychoanalytic approach of Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000). This reshaping of my approach to research interviewing is also affected by the reminder provided by Fontana and Frey (2005, p. 695), specifically applied to interviews of gays and lesbians, that interviewing is 'inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically and contextually bound'. I have found that the topics that have interested me are shaped by my specific location as a middle class, male, teacher education academic coming out of the so-called baby boomer generation. Thus, whereas Catherine Riessman (1993) interviewed divorcing people and Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson worked with working class people in housing estates about their fear of crime, my interview subjects have been academics, school secretaries, and education system administrators.

In exploring this combination of postmodern and psychoanalytic approaches, I have found it necessary to address the question of what type of knowledge I want from research interviews, particularly in research that is largely qualitative. That leads me to discuss Scheurich's critique of traditional interviewing styles and analytical approaches and his account of the broad advantages of a postmodern approach. Given that he stops short of practical suggestions of postmodern approaches, I have been led to form links with the work of Hollway and Jefferson in constructing a composite postmodern-psychoanalytic approach.

PART 1 RESEARCH PURPOSE AND VIEWS OF KNOWLEDGE

Some views on positioning

As I have alluded to earlier in the quotation from Hatch, researchers can experience pressures to conduct, and especially to analyse, interviews in 'scientific' ways. Even those researchers committed to qualitative work are often encouraged to rely upon statistical methods of data analysis, now commonly computer-aided. I have found it helpful to question myself about my position as researcher. Although the following options amount to oversimplification, I have found it useful to ask myself "Am I attempting to be a *scientist* who seeks the objective 'truth' about a situation or am I more *the historian* who attempts to discover what meanings the situation have for people?"

The scientist

'The decisions that researchers make in the course of designing and conducting research are guided by their assumptions about the world and about the nature of scientific investigation. Researchers hold many assumptions that directly impinge on their work – for example, assumptions about topics that are worthy of study, about the role of theories in designing research, about the best methods for designing particular

phenomena, and about whether research can ever lead to general laws about behaviour' (Leary, 2001, pp. 12-13).

The historian

'Historians, like bloodhounds, sniff close to the ground. They pay great attention to detail, the particular case, the exception, the diversity of human experience. They are reluctant to generalise. This is an important counter-weight to the social scientist's search for laws governing the human condition' (Welton, 1991, p. 13).

Hatch's earlier comment alerts us to the continuing struggle over what constitutes valid or trustworthy knowledge, a struggle where for a decade or more, and still in some quarters, oppositions or dichotomies have been proposed in research methodologies, notably quantitative versus qualitative. Some writers have spoken of 'paradigm wars' (Gage, 1989). Jaan Valsiner (2000, p. 100) describes this view thus:

The distinction between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methods as the core of similar general research orientations in contemporary social sciences has become the topic of many heated (and unnecessary) disputes. These two kinds of methods/orientations are usually talked about as if they were opposing alternatives. There is even a tendency to view the two kinds as belonging to opposite warring 'camps'.

An underlying factor is a basic desire of researchers for valid knowledge. With considerable success in the physical world, scientific approaches can seem an attractive means to that end. However, in social research, especially critical social research which investigates an unstable and changing social reality, there is reason to doubt the 'search for certainty' (and universal laws) and reason to develop approaches sensitive to context and to individual agency, particularly where individuals and not large groups are involved. Writing for an audience of teachers, McLaren argues (1998, p. 241) 'We should stop seeking a language that will provide educational researchers with access to either epistemological or moral truth. Teachers need to know that we live in an era of rival, contradictory and conspicuously diverse truths.' Mishler (in Smith, Hollway, Mishler, Potter, & Hepburn, 2005, p. 316), in criticising Potter and Hepburn's account of qualitative interviewing as essentially positivist, sees their account which emphasises conversation analysis (CA) as close to the philosophy of behaviourism, with its lack of attention to people's thinking and feeling: "Neither behaviourists nor CA researchers have any interest in what their subjects are experiencing or thinking about when they respond or take their turns, whether they are pigeons or conversationalists."

This paradigm choice is addressed by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) who distinguish between two sets of purposes for social researchers. One is to verify (perhaps modify) their own ideas and theoretical framework. This, they believe, regards *research as the reduction of uncertainty* and it is the typical stance of positivist (scientific) research. A second is to investigate the meanings of those they research. These researchers view *research as the exploration of meaning* and it is the common approach of critical social research in the interpretivist tradition. I have increasingly moved towards the second researcher purpose, expressed by McLeod (1994, p. 78) thus

The fundamental goal of qualitative investigation is to uncover and illuminate what things mean to people ... (it is) ... a process of systematic inquiry into the meanings which people employ to make sense of their experiences and guide their actions.

In this shift, I have, like most qualitative researchers, had to modify traditional understandings of several matters, including the terms validity and reliability and my view of the role of the researcher in the research.

Validity and reliability

In the positivist research tradition and in my own case as a person trained in the physical sciences and a school Science teacher for over 20 years, I was familiar with definitions of validity and reliability. *Validity* is generally seen as “the extent to which a measurement procedure actually measures what it is intended to measure rather than measuring something else (or nothing at all) ... To be valid, the measure must assess what it is supposed to measure” (Leary, 2001, p. 65). This standard is sometimes difficult to achieve. Valsiner (2000, p. 110) remarks “In general, data that are derived from phenomena are adequate representations of the phenomena if (and only if) the qualities to be studied in the phenomena remain preserved within the data.” He notes that errors of representation are likely in the social sciences if well-organised structures are used to represent phenomena that are “fuzzy, dynamically changing and semi-structured” (p. 112). In addressing this matter, researchers have used three major types of validity: content, criterion, construct validity (Cresswell, 2005, pp. 164-165). The related but different term *reliability* is defined as the consistency or dependability of a measuring technique.

Connecting the two terms, Leary cites the example of the skull size measurements used by early psychologists to assess intelligence. Skull size measurements done by two or more researchers would typically produce very similar measurements – that is, reliability would be high – but these measurements are not valid, as they do not measure intelligence.

In a period of ‘paradigmatic uncertainty’, notions of validity have become increasingly problematic. In particular, qualitative researchers commonly reject conventional approaches to these notions, appealing for value to be accorded to alternatives, e.g., *apparency* and *verisimilitude* (van Maanen, 1988, p. xi), trustworthiness and authenticity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 100). A related approach is to re-configure conventional approaches, e.g., developing a version of validity suited to *critical social research*. Patti Lather’s (1991) work provides suggestions. Her approach (1991, pp. 66-69) involves a combination of four necessary elements: triangulation, construct validity, face validity (results match the experience of the researched), and catalytic validity (the degree to which research fosters participants’ socially transformative actions). Similar to this last factor is Cresswell’s summary (2005, p. 164) when he notes the movement to “advocate that scores are valid if they have use and result in positive social consequences”.

The researcher’s role in the research

In the interpretivist tradition, the researcher is seen as *socially situated*. Just as Fontana and Frey (2005) recognised the historical, political and contextual shaping of interviews,

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 8) speak of 'the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied' and of (p. 18) 'the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective'. Hollway (in Smith, Hollway, Mishler, Potter, & Hepburn, 2005, p. 314) argues:

The interests of the researcher are multiple, subtle and not entirely transparent to the interviewer her/himself. Like micropower, they are discoverable potentially in every verbal and nonverbal element of the ongoing process and, also like micropower, have effects and therefore should be analysed.

This researcher involvement will be discussed further in what follows.

PART 2 INTERVIEWING, A POSTMODERN CRITIQUE

Why the emphasis on interviews?

In making claims about the information revealed in interviews, I have found it important to reflect on where interviewing fits into the project of finding information pertinent to a research project. In qualitative research, two commonly employed categories of collecting data are *observations of people's activities* and *self-report measures*. Observation, especially naturalistic observation, has advantages for many projects and is widely used in behavioural research, as Leary notes (2001, p. 78): "Behavioural researchers have been known to record and observe behaviours as diverse as eating, arguing, bar pressing, blushing, smiling, helping, food salting, hand clapping, eye blinking, mating, yawning, conversing and even urinating." Sometimes, however, it is not possible to observe behaviour. Even more significantly, sometimes researchers want to know how participants *think* about certain matters. This leads them to use one or more self-reporting measures, the most common of which are the research survey and the research interview, and in both of which the researcher asks participants questions. The attraction of the research interview for many qualitative researchers lies in some perceived shortcomings of questionnaires or surveys. Quantitative survey-based research, as efficient as it can be (assuming reasonable response rates) in answering certain sorts of measurable questions, is commonly seen to be *poorly suited to answer the very questions its results make visible* (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 2). In addition, it fails to address in any depth the 'what does this mean?' and 'why?' questions that are fundamental to understanding people's experience.

There are strong claims for interviews as means of gathering significant data about people and their perceptions; for example,

For the narrator, the interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story in her own terms. For researchers, taped interviews preserve a living exchange for present and future use; we can rummage through interviews as we do through an old attic – probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures the third time through, then arranging and carefully documenting our results (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11).

At face value, this remark over-simplifies interviewing. It over-emphasises the role of the transcript to the neglect of contextual factors and elements not audible on the tape; it regards the transcript as a simple record. These points are taken up in what follows.

James Scheurich's critique of conventional approaches to interviewing

James Scheurich (1997) takes a postmodernist approach to research interviewing and critiques both conventional approaches to research interviewing and a modified post-positivist approach (notably that of Mishler, 1986). Interviewing, he says, is divided into two parts: doing the interview and interpreting the interview. The interviewer asks questions that are pre-determined and/or developed within the interview, recording answers (usually on audiotape) which are later transcribed and analysed, often using 'content analysis'. The process is seen as unproblematic data gathering, with a sense of the interview as a *'purposeful conversation'*.

He detects the attempt to perform a *scientific* rigour in analysis, a process which he believes decontextualises data. He further identifies six assumptions that he argues are erroneous:

1. The researcher is clear about purpose
2. The questions are clear to, and hold same meaning for, all interviewees
3. Question delivery/relationship have no influence on responses
4. The context of interview has no influence on participants' responses
5. The transcribed text becomes data – other interview features (e.g., non-verbal elements, even pauses) vanish
6. The text is analysed by breaking it into parts ('utterances'), coding them, categorising them, and comparing them across interviews, interviewees

In relation to point 2, positivist survey-based research faces a major problem, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 8) explain:

It is a basic assumption in much social-science research that if the words used are the same, and if they are communicated in the same manner, they will mean the same thing to numerous people in a sample. On this principle, a great deal hangs: the possibility of reliability, and the validity of quantification, comparison and generalisation.

Scheurich's arguments include the following points (pp. 64, 70): 'The researcher uses the dead, decontextualised monads of meaning, the tightly bounded containers, the numbing objectifications, to construct generalisations which are, in the modernist dream, used to predict, control and reform, as in educational practice.' Such an 'objective' analysis vastly underestimates the complexity, uniqueness and indeterminateness of each one-to-one human interaction. This view of interview research

"situates the researcher as a kind of god who consciously knows what she/he is doing, who (if properly trained) can clearly communicate meanings to another person, and who can derive the hidden but recoverable meanings within the interview to support an abstract generalisation".

Usually implicitly, the approach embodies *power asymmetries*, e.g., it is the researcher's project, the researcher develops the questions, the interviewee is under the spotlight (the subject) while the researcher remains hidden.

Alternative (postmodernist) view of interviewing

Drawing on postmodernist theory, a core concept for Scheurich is the fundamental indeterminateness of language, meaning and communication. According to Holquist (1975, pp. xviii-xx), Bakhtin formulates a similar position where language is seen as rooted in a sense of struggle at the heart of existence, involving centrifugal forces aiming to keep things apart and centripetal forces seeking to unify things. Holquist says that, whereas structuralist linguists and some social scientists have posited this struggle as a binary opposition that

leads from human speech to computer language; it conduces, in other word, to machines, Bahktin's sense of a duel between more widely implicated forces leads in the opposite direction and stresses the fragility and ineluctably historical nature of language, the coming and dying of meaning that it, as a phenomenon, shares with that other phenomenon it ventriloquates, man (p. xviii).

I take Bakhtin to mean that a belief in a unitary language is our justifiable attempt to limit or control what he calls 'the realities of heteroglossia' and 'the potential chaos of variety' (in *Discourse in the Novel*, cited by Holquist, p. xix). Holquist refers to Bakhtin's notion of two fundamentals of all communication: forming a consistent system and allowing for the effects of individual contexts.

But these repeatable features ... are in the power of the particular context in which the utterance is made; this context can refract, add to, or, in some cases, even subtract from the amount and kind of meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived only as a systematic manifestation independent of context (pp. xix-xx).

Applying a similar argument about the centrality of context to the specific field of research interviewing, Hollway (in Smith, Hollway, Mishler, Elliot, Potter, & Hepburn, 2005, p. 312) is critical of forms of interview data analysis involving

the separation of relatively short extracts of text from the context of the whole interview encounter for analytic purposes. The responses of the interviewee at a particular juncture do not just relate back to the last few utterances of the interviewer and not just to the last question that was asked. They are built up out of the whole history of the research encounter: how they were recruited, what they were told the interview was about; what happened before the tape was switched on, the continuous dynamics (not just conscious) between interviewee and interviewer. This cannot all be represented in the text and so it becomes part of the researcher's responsibility to reflect on these effects and trace them in the context of the whole, providing evidence from the record.

Forming Scheurich's notions into a brief summary, I offer the following points:

- The researcher has multiple intentions and desires, some consciously known, some not. So, too, for the interviewee.

- Language used for questions is not bounded or stable; it is slippery, ambiguous, varying across people, times, places; i.e., what a question means to an interviewer can mean something different to an interviewee; these meanings also can change over time.
- Answers depend on the time and who asks the questions, so that a different interviewer would get different responses.
- Some of what occurs is verbal and some is non-verbal. Some occurs only in the mind of each participant but it may affect the whole interview.
- Sometimes the participants are jointly constructing meaning, but at other times one may be resisting joint constructions.
- A participant may be saying what she thinks she ought to say.
- Interviewees are not passive subjects but active participants, sometimes resisting researcher goals; they 'carve out space of their own' (p. 71) – a dominance-resistance view of the play of power.
- Analysis recognises the presence of the researcher, notably the shaping power of the researcher's conscious and unconscious assumptions and orientations.

For Scheurich, an added dimension of research interviews lies in considering *the interviewee's point of view* and specifically the question 'Who is their audience?' He suggests it might be you the interviewer, themselves, or Imagined audiences, e.g., community/ies or groups of which they are or were a part.

In what might be seen as a concise summary of parts of his position, Scheurich offers several metaphors for three aspects of research interviewing.

- Internal consciousness: 'this indeterminable, ultimately undefinable swirl of activity'
- The interviewee: 'the wild profusion of the Other'
- The interview: 'an open-ended space called Chaos'.

These descriptions may be compared with those given by David Allen and Kristin Cloyes (2004) in their discussion of interviewing in nursing research. They argue that the interview can be seen as *confession*: "When an interview functions as a confession, its purpose is to reveal (make public) the private, internal workings of the psyche" or *testimony*: "When the interview is treated as testimony, its purpose is to tell us something about what happened; it provides 'testimony' about what the participant 'witnessed'" (p. 101). Their analysis which relies on poststructuralist theory leads them to critique the content of interviews, regarded by either metaphor, especially to probe the origins in the culture of the language used by interviewees.

But treating interview data as narrative testimony leaves researchers room to interrogate both the conditions of production (how informants came to talk this way in general and in this interview in particular) and the utility of their reports (e.g. that these are contestable accounts). The juridical framework about confession and testimony ...allows us to tap a set of social practices that can be used to interrogate both kinds of talk. Just as we question 'confessions' in everyday life, treating them as potentially self-serving, or self-deluded, we question testimony by examining the conditions under which it is produced, recalled and reported, and its relationship to others' accounts (Allen & Cloyes, 2004, p. 103).

I conclude this summary of Scheurich's chapter with a final remark he makes: 'What we need are some new imaginaries of interviewing that open up multiple spaces in which interview interactions can be conducted and represented' (p. 75).

PART 3 A 'NEW IMAGINARY' OF INTERVIEWING

I have tried to take up the challenge posed by Scheurich to develop new imaginaries of interviewing. My claim is a very modest one, namely to have found strong links between the work of Scheurich in the US and that of Hollway and Jefferson in the UK. This linkage adopts many of the postmodernist elements of Scheurich's analysis but also extends it with fresh ideas from other intellectual traditions, notably narrative research and psychoanalysis.

It is important to note two initial points. One is that, as Hollway and Jefferson recognise, that this new approach is not suited to all research questions: "It is most powerful when the research question involves understanding people's experiences through their own meaning-frame and when the area that needs to be tapped to address the research question implicates a person's sense of self" (2000, p. 155). A second point is that the research approach assumes a particular image of human beings, what they describe as "an enriched, more complex, nuanced and, arguably, more humane and ethical view of the human subject" (2000, p. 155).

Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson

In 1997, Hollway articulated a fresh approach to research interviewing, particularly for cases where participants are questioned about significantly emotional topics. Sturdy (2003, p. 81) notes the perceived awkwardness of studying emotion.

Emotion is only just beginning to be incorporated into organizational studies and relatively little attention has been given to methodological and related theoretical issues. These present considerable challenges, not least because emotion is considered to be especially elusive-private, intangible, transient, unmanageable, and even 'unknowable' – and is a complex that spans disciplinary divides and attention.

Hollway (1997), later joined by Jefferson (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2001), undertook research into the highly emotional area of people's fear of crime. She describes the research approach as follows:

A central feature of the fear of crime debate is the fear-risk paradox: the finding that those least at risk, namely, elderly women, are most fearful, and vice versa. This article argues that this paradox can be resolved theoretically by placing an anxious, defended subject rather than a rational, risk-avoiding one at the centre of the debate, and explores some of the methodological implications of so doing, especially the importance of eliciting narratives. This methodological position, appropriately adapted for this study's rather different purposes, derives from the biographical-interpretive method first developed in Germany for the collection of life stories of Jewish survivors of the concentration camps (1997, p. 53).

Four years later, she described the approach in this way (Hollway, 2001, p. 9): 'I outline an alternative theory of the (research) subject, a psycho-social subject, drawing on psychoanalytic concepts that emphasise unconscious conflict, defences against anxiety and the centrality of unconscious intersubjective dynamics in the research, as in other, relationships.'

A critical finding occurred in the early stages of this research project. The initial approach was traditional and it proved unsatisfactory, so that they modified it. The authors found a contrast between "the results of pilot interview schedules conducted in traditional question-and-answer format, in which "why" questions loom large, with those obtained by a schedule based on eliciting narratives from respondents' (p. 401).

Three years later, Hollway and Jefferson reported, and reflected further on, the findings of this research, particularly in its second 'eliciting narratives' format. They interviewed 37 people living in housing estates in northern England concerning their fear of crime, usually twice. They called the approach that they ultimately developed *narrative and clinical case-study* interviewing. As suggested earlier, this was informed by *psychoanalytic theory*, with an emphasis on narrative and *Gestalt* (from the biographical-interpretative method). Here, I outline briefly the elements that form their framework.

Narrative

Consistent with the increasingly recognised "narrative turn" (e.g., Riessman, 1993; Atkinson, 1997) and Squire's summary that "Narratives are an increasingly popular focus of social research" (2005, p. 91), Hollway and Jefferson (2000) believe that narrative plays a central role for making meaning of human experience. They see narrative as a story of a person's own experience, told in their own terms as a meaningful whole, reflectively seeking to see the past in the present.

It is appropriate to note a warning about an uncritical view of narrative, one that Atkinson (1997, p. 325) describes thus: "Narratives are regarded as offering the analyst privileged access to personal experience. It is suggested that an appeal to narratives too often includes inappropriate assumptions concerning human actors and social action." It is also one of which Hollway and Jefferson are well aware. Indeed, they are critical of many versions of qualitative research interviewing which they argue assume that "participants are 'telling it like it is', that participants know who they are and what makes them tick ... and are willing and able to tell this to a stranger interviewer" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, pp. 2-3). To the contrary, stories have a *constructed quality*, according to the motivations, memory and framework(s) of the teller – thus a story is an artifact or representation at least one step removed from the events to which it refers. As Riessman (1993, p. 8) notes, "We do not have direct access to another's experience. We deal with ambiguous representations of it – talk, text, interaction and interpretation". Hollway and Jefferson develop this notion of the complex and constructed nature of people, drawing upon postmodern and psychoanalytic notions central to their analysis:

We are *psycho-social* because we are products of a unique biography of anxiety- and desire-provoking life events and the manner in which their meanings have been

unconsciously transformed in internal reality. We are *psycho-social* because such defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses and also because the unconscious defences that we describe are intersubjective processes (that is, they affect and are affected by others). We are *psycho-social* because the real events in the external, social world are desirously and defensively, as well as discursively, appropriated (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 24).

Gestalt

Drawing on Wertheimer's notions from Gestalt psychology, Hollway and Jefferson add the notion of *Gestalt* by which they mean a whole which is more than the sum of its parts, an underlying order or agenda (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 34). They employ Wertheimer's primary law "that of 'place in context' (that significance is a function of position in a wider framework)" which they say "addresses exactly the problem of decontextualisation of text which is inherent in the code and retrieve method" (2000, p. 69).

In practice, this leads them as interviewers to expect that interviewees have *something in mind*, an overall theme or meaning-frame to which (at least some, if not all) the array of material disclosed or presented in the interview points. As an example, they describe an interview with Jane who at 19 has two children. Although at one stage she speaks in seemingly chaotic ways about her experience on the housing estate, Hollway and Jefferson show that *her fear for her children's safety* is the Gestalt that makes sense of a large amount of the apparently incoherent material (Hollway & Jefferson, pp. 39-41).

Martin Smith, in discussing the role of the unconscious when writing up research and in particular the phenomenon of writer's block, notes the words of Virginia Woolf in respect of the role of the unconscious in her writing:

I suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but ... it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me ... a great delight to put the severed parts together (Woolf, 1940, in Schulkind, 2002, p. 85, cited by Smith 2004, p. 260).

The Clinical Interview, as used by Psychoanalytic Practitioners

Compared with traditional approaches to interviewing, especially those seeking some degree of 'scientific' objectivity, this component of their framework is the most radical. They begin by acknowledging that a key resource for this form of interviewing is applying the recognition of the psychoanalyst's own subjective involvement in interacting with and understanding a patient. They note (p. 33) 'As researchers, therefore, we cannot be detached but must examine our subjective involvement because it will help to shape the way in which we interpret the interview data.' This version of researcher involvement goes somewhat beyond the usual meaning of *reflexivity* because it 'it understands the subjectivity of the interviewer through a model which includes unconscious, conflictual forces rather than simply conscious ones'. This echoes Scheurich's image of the internal consciousness of both interviewer and interviewee, referred to earlier: 'this

indeterminable, ultimately undefinable swirl of activity'. It actually goes further, because it sees researcher involvement as an asset or instrument to be used during the interview. This will be discussed further in the section on examples from Hollway and Jefferson's work.

They believe in interviewers paying close attention to unconscious dynamics – both their own and those of the interviewee and also 'the unconscious inter-subjective dynamics in the interview relationship' (p. 4b). This includes defences against anxiety because they conceive of the participant as the 'defended subject'. This is a key notion. They explain (p. 26):

All research subjects are meaning-making and defended subjects who: may not hear the question through the same meaning-frame as that of the interviewer or other interviewees; are invested in particular positions in discourses to protect vulnerable aspects of self; may not know why they experience or feel things in the way that they do; are motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions.

Implications for their practice

Hollway and Jefferson formed these elements into a coherent approach that they called the *free association narrative interview method*. Their thinking led them to conduct the interview, not by question and answer seeking generalisations, but by a narrative style that respects the respondent's Gestalt and by fostering free association, à la psychoanalysis. They refer to their role as 'eliciting narratives'. More specifically, they state four principles for interviewing:

- Use open-ended rather than closed questions, the more open the better
- Elicit stories
- Avoid 'why?' questions
- Follow up respondents' order and phrasing

I offer three additions to this list. One concerns the focus on eliciting narratives. Hollway and Jefferson note (p. 42) that this often requires that the interviewer avoid checking elements of stories for relevance or following up interesting themes. Instead, the interviewer encourages the interviewee to finish each story uninterrupted. On occasions, Hollway found that this was a struggle, for example when Jane responded briefly and did not complete accounts so that Hollway found herself intervening more than she wanted to. In the second interview with Jane, probably as Jane became used to the process, the interchanges were more fluent.

A second additional principle is the value of interventions that serve a summarising function for what the interviewee seems to be saying but isn't. This might be termed "playing hunches". In the context of discussing the example of Jane, Hollway expresses this as "I think I was trying to put into words what she was conveying to me; namely, her concerns as a mother who felt different from the mothers she saw around her" (p. 48).

Third, I make explicit what Hollway and Jefferson in fact did but seemed not to discuss, namely to interview participants at least twice. It has been my experience that

interviewees respond differently, often more openly, in a second interview. This is not surprising as they have built some rapport with the interviewer. Other factors such as further reflection are at work, too, ones typical of social research. Putting it generally, Valsiner (2000, p. 112) writes that

In any area of the social sciences where development within the phenomena is assumed ... it is not possible to view the phenomena as existing independently of the researcher, in a stable form. The act of using a method ... can be seen as triggering further development within the phenomena.

Examples from Hollway and Jefferson (taken from chapter 3 *Producing data*)

As mentioned earlier, Hollway and Jefferson found a sharp contrast between 'the results of pilot interview schedules conducted in traditional question-and-answer format, with lots of "why" questions, with those obtained by eliciting narratives from respondents.

I will provide some more detail to allow these points to have due weight. In seeking to discover from Ann her experience of fear of crime, the interviewer (Tony) used a fairly standard question and answer method, asking for her generalisations about her responses. The process turned out to be highly stilted, with Ann apparently focusing on trying to find out what the interviewer was after and the interviewer having trouble developing any fluency or depth in the responses. Their conclusion was that they needed to ask Ann about specific events, that is, to engage in narrative. To that end, they developed a new set of questions, nearly all of which invited story-telling; e.g., "Can you tell me about risky situations in your life since you've been living here?" (p. 38).

The questions that they formulated expressed their determination to help interviewees pay attention to specific events. When tested with participants, they found this approach was far stronger, yielding much more detail. As evidence, they cite several examples, such as a case of detecting a participant's Gestalt (the case of Jane, discussed earlier) and another of the value of fostering free association in the participant (Tommy, pp. 41-42). Tommy was a 42-year-old white man, married and living with his wife and (between them) their three children. His demeanour was cheerful and confident but, when the interviewer (Tony) allowed him to form free associations within a particular story, Tommy revealed that as a young man he had experienced extreme anxiety that led to his breakdown upon his father's death. This new awareness about Tommy, contrary to how he portrayed himself, was supported by other evidence within the interviews that the interviewers had previously not recognised, amounting to "a pattern in which unpalatable realities were idealistically glossed" (p. 43).

They follow these examples with two more cases. The first is described as a case of interviewer intervention (Jane, pp. 47-49). This case has been discussed earlier in relation to the use by interviewers of "playing hunches". It interests me for two reasons. One is that, it is when the interviewer is again eliciting stories that an important insight is gained. Another is that the interviewer chooses to be deliberately involved and certainly non-objective. Hollway is explicitly aware of the possibility of "leading the witness" and imposing her meanings on Jane. Instead, she believes that her intervention is offering to Jane a summary of what she is trying to say or perhaps might say if she could express it.

The second illustration is a case of recognition and containment of a participant's emotional pain (Jane, pp. 49-51). Jane has been talking to Hollway about the repeated violence, sometimes horrendous violence, to her of the children's father. Just as interviewees who enter this territory defend against the pain of it, interviewers who hear such accounts understandably usually move the interview on or else offer reassurance. Hollway's approach, and the point expressed in "recognition and containment" is that she as interviewer came to recognise the presence of the pain of which Jane was speaking and then adopted an approach designed to hold or contain that pain so that the interviewee could continue to explore the painful experience. She explains:

When an idea is too painful to bear because of its associated feeling, the defence of projection is used to get rid of the feeling by putting it into someone else. That person then experiences it through empathy. If it is also too painful for the other person, the person throws it out again quickly, or denies its painfulness, for example by reassurance. If, on the other hand, the person can contain the pain, it can be returned 'detoxified' and faced as an aspect of reality (p. 50).

In this last case, we can see an example, framed in psychoanalytic language (of which Squire notes (2005, p. 98) that Ricoeur himself made some use), of the point made by Ricoeur that stories are reconfigured in their reading or hearing: "The process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 26).

Possible Principles for Analysis

Now that the interview process has been reconfigured along postmodern-psychoanalytic lines, there remains the critical question of how to make sense of the information obtained. For Hollway and Jefferson, interview data are problematic in several ways. They explain the difficulties by discussing their research into people's fear of crime.

You interview them. What then? Will you believe everything you are told? If not, how will you distinguish between truth and untruth? Even if you believe everything you are told, will you be satisfied that you have been told everything that is relevant? How would you define this and how would you know? What do you assume about the effect of people's motivations and memory on what they tell you? What will you assume about your effect as interviewer on the answers given? Does your sex, race, age, and so on make a difference? Will men talk as readily about their fear to a woman or a man, or to neither? How do you know? ... How will you analyse your interviewees' answers to make overall sense of them, especially when their accounts are littered with contradictions and inconsistencies? If you conclude that Tom is more fearful than he lets on, or that Anna is fearful out of all proportion to the risks she runs, what is informing these judgments? Why might your conclusions be more, or less, reliable than theirs? (Hollway & Jefferson, pp. 1-2)

For the type of research involved, I find their book to be a powerful and clear exploration of, and reflection on, these matters. In particular, I have extracted the following four principles (Hollway & Jefferson, pp. 55-82) followed by two from Scheurich and three from other sources.

- Identify in the data both the consistencies and inconsistencies, agreements and contradictions, similarity and changes of tone. In part, this addresses the tendency of interviewees to produce “a coherent, rational self” (p. 57).
- Use the whole of the data to assist interpreting parts, in particular, looking for the participant’s Gestalt.
- Utilise a theory of the defended subject (e.g., protecting self-identity) and a psycho-social subject (e.g., identifying discursive frameworks). “All interpretative work ... requires a theory of the subject, though it may be implicit rather than explicit” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 59). These two notions are informed, respectively, by neo-Freudian psychoanalytic ideas and poststructuralist ideas of discourse-power-knowledge.
- Test interpretations for how well they illuminate data beyond their starting point, possibly many elements throughout the text.
- Scheurich urges the researcher to highlight explicitly the baggage she/he brings: disciplinary training, epistemological orientation, social positionality, institutional imperatives, funding sources and requirements, so that the reader has some sense of what she/he brings to the enterprise. Valsiner (2000, p. 112) agrees: “The role of researcher subjectivity in research is hence substantial, and needs to be explicated rather than concealed.”
- Given Scheurich’s point (mentioned earlier) that some of what occurs is verbal and some is non-verbal and that some occurs only in the mind of each participant but it may affect the whole interview, it seems wise for researchers to make notes about interview events (including pre- and post-), both physical and psychological, and to view them as data just as much as the interview transcript.
- A further point concerns the writing up of the research and derives from the emphasis on narrative. Kip Jones (2000), in a review essay of Hollway and Jefferson’s book, expresses his view that he “would have liked even more of the liberation of self-reflexivity revealed within their accounts. If a narrative work is a story about stories, then the fruition of it is found in its re-telling through its writing” (Jones, 2000, paragraph 25). My own response to the book included feeling highly engaged and informed whenever the authors wrote about how their own subjectivity interacted with that of the interviewee.
- Partly implicit in the first and second points above but I believe worth making explicit is the principle of being on the lookout for surprises. This is perhaps more easily stated than practised. In the context of noting the role of the unconscious in his writing up of research findings, Martin Smith (2004, p. 260) refers to it thus:
Some of the most helpful advice I was given when analysing data gained by way of my own research was to ‘look for the surprises’, as the surprises by definition, were not expected and therefore might point to what was new. I have since attempted to clear a space within myself to allow myself to be surprised by data so that I might notice what I didn’t necessarily expect. This allowing for the importance of emergence

- As Paul Thompson (2000) recommends, there may be occasions where relevant data from oneself and/or other researchers already exists and may be used. In turn, if appropriately archived, one's research data can possibly be used by others. In relation to his early research experience which centred on family studies, he reports
 It was however clear to us from very early on that we were collecting a unique set of interviews of great potential value to others, and so we set up an informal archive in the department. The interviews were read over the next twenty years by large numbers of both students and outside researchers, and the result was a far larger number of publications by others than we could have ever achieved on our own—at least five times the output from the research (Jones, 2000, paragraph 12).

Conclusion

As a qualitative researcher, I have found that interviewing, especially semi- or un-structured, provides a powerful means of elucidating the detailed and textured, complex and sometimes contradictory, meanings people develop in their lives, many not revealed or even asked for in survey type research. However, interviews (and thus their analysis) are complex in a variety of respects, notably interviewer-interviewee interactions, in ways that defy simple statistical treatments. Scheurich's postmodernist critique of interviewing both reveals the complexity of interviews and suggests broad directions for improved practice. Together with Scheurich's critique, Hollway and Jefferson's *free association narrative interview method* provides a powerful approach for conducting and understanding interviews, especially for cases involving subjects likely to be defending against anxiety. As Hollway and Jefferson's examples show, this blend of new imaginaries of the research process and the research subject takes account of interview complexity (including acknowledging, and making use of, interviewer involvement) and fosters deep exploration of participant meanings in both interviewing and interview analysis. There remain important questions about how to analyse interviews, about the ethics of interview practice, and also about how to address researcher subjectivity in doing, analysing and reporting interviews. The examples of analysis and of discussions of ethical issues provided by Hollway and Jefferson in chapters 3 and 4, respectively, of their book (2000) are instructive. However, the demands on interviewer emotional maturity and self-awareness, plus insight, as well as knowledge of relevant psychological and sociological theory, are considerable. There are other questions about how this approach may need modifying for cases with relatively little emotional character. Nonetheless, I am attracted to the claim made by Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 155) that the approach is "a method of qualitative research which we believe makes a difference to the knowledge that social science is capable of producing".

References

- Anderson, K. & Jack, D. (1991). Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. In S.B. Gluck & D. Patai (Eds), *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history* (pp. 11-26). New York: Routledge.
- Atkinson, P. (1997). Narrative turn or blind alley? *Qualitative Health Research*, 7(3), 325-344.

- Bullock, A. & Trombley, S. (Eds.). (1999). *The new Fontana dictionary of modern thought* (3rd ed.). London: HarperCollins.
- Cresswell, J.W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Fontana, A. (2001). Postmodern trends in interviewing. In J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 161-175). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J.H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2000). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 695-727). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Gage, N.L. (1989). The paradigm wars and their aftermath: A 'historical' sketch of research on teaching since 1989. *Educational Researcher*, 18(7), 4-10.
- Hollway, W. (1997). Eliciting narrative through the in-depth interview. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(1), 53-70.
- Hollway, W. (2000). Moral intersubjectivity, methodology and empirical research. Workshop Paper No 15, Prepared for Workshop Four, Methodology for researching moral agencies, Friday 17 March 2000. Retrieved 12 February, 2007 from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cava/papers/paper15wendy.htm>
- Hollway, W. (2001). The psycho-social subject in 'evidence-based practice'. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 15(1), 9-22. Retrieved 13 February, 2007 from [http://taylorandfrancis.metapress.com/\(sgzwnn45ccu1ug453xrxj1ea\)/app/home/contribution.asp?referrer=parent&backto=issue,2,11;journal,15,19;linkingpublicationresults,1:102223,1](http://taylorandfrancis.metapress.com/(sgzwnn45ccu1ug453xrxj1ea)/app/home/contribution.asp?referrer=parent&backto=issue,2,11;journal,15,19;linkingpublicationresults,1:102223,1)
- Hollway, W. (2004). Editorial, Psychosocial research. *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 10. Retrieved 13 February, 2007 from http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/criticalpsychology/archive/crit_psychology10_ed.html
- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.
- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2001). Free association, narrative analysis and the defended subject: The case of Ivy. *Narrative Inquiry*, 11(1), 103-22.
- Holquist, M. (1981). Introduction. In *The dialogic imagination by M. Bakhtin: Four essays* (pp. xv-xxxiii). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Jones, K. (2000, November). Big Science or The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. Review Essay: Wendy Hollway & Tony Jefferson (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(3). Retrieved 12 June, 2007 from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-00/3-00review-jones-e.htm>
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Maanen, J. van. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McLaren, P. (1998). *Life in schools* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.
- McLeod, J. (1994) *Doing counselling research*. London: Sage.
- Mishler, E.G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leary, M.R. (2001). *Introduction to behavioral research methods* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991). Life in quest of narrative. In D. Wood (Ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and interpretation*. London: Routledge.

- Riessman, C.K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Qualitative Research Methods Series, 30. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Scheurich, J.J. (1997). A postmodernist critique of research interviewing. In *Research method in the postmodern* (pp. 61-79). London: Falmer Press.
- Scheurich, J.J. & Clark, M.C. (Eds.) (2006). Qualitative studies in education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 19(4), 401.
- Siegel, H. (2006). Epistemological diversity and education research: Much ado about nothing much? *Educational Researcher*, 35(2), 3-12. Retrieved 12 February, 2007 from http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3502/02ERv35n2_Siegel.pdf
- Smith, Jonathan A., Hollway, Wendy, Mishler, Elliot G., Potter, Jonathan; Hepburn, Alexa (2005). Commentaries on Potter and Hepburn, 'Qualitative interviews in psychology: problems and possibilities'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2(4), 309-325. Retrieved 12 February, 2007 from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/sage/qrp/2005/00000002/00000004/art00003>
- Smith, M. (2004). Killing the angel in a room of one's own. Being as unconscious as possible when writing up qualitative research. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 18(2), 255-265.
- Squire, C. (2005). Reading narratives. *Group analysis*, 38(1), 91-107.
- Sturdy, A. (2003). Knowing the unknowable? A discussion of methodological and theoretical issues in emotion research and organizational studies. *Organization*, 10(1), 81-105. Retrieved 12 February, 2007 from <http://org.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/1/81>
- Thompson, P. (2000, December). Re-using qualitative research data: A personal account. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(3). Retrieved 12 June, 2007 from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-00/3-00thompson-e.htm>.
- Valsiner, J. (2000). Data as representations: contextualizing qualitative and quantitative research strategies. *Social Science Information*, 39(1), 99-113.
- Welton, M. (1991). *Toward development work: The workplace as a learning environment*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.