

Intersubjectivity workshop

Interviewing as insider or outsider

with Laura Hodsdon & Lucy Frears



Ethnologist Francis Densmore with a Piegan Mountain Chief. Photo credit Library of Congress

What we're going to do in this session

- Introductions to us & ... who are you?
- Introduction to interviews & intersubjectivity
- Activity 1 – Observed interview
- Discussion 1 - Stages of the research interview
- Activity 2 – Pros & cons of being an outsider researcher
- Discussion 2 – How do we close the gap?
- Activity 3: Attentive listening
- Activity 4: Interview practice
- A recap

1. Traditionally, an interview was seen as a “research instrument” (Talmy, 2010), a “straightforward, unproblematic technology for investigating objective facts, subjective experience, and authentic feelings” (Talmy, 2011, p. 26). Data collected through interviews was considered to be a procedure or series of steps to be undertaken (Cresswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Gillham, 2000). Interviewing in this tradition was often seen as the generation of “context-free truth” or “facts” through an “objective” and “neutral” perspective (Alvesson, 2003)’.

(Groves, Chan and Verenikina 2020: 5)

‘... a different interviewer would solicit different words perhaps even a very different story or version of it ..[...].
there can be no pretence of neutrality or objectivity’.

(Lynn Abrams 2010: 54)

Our subjectivity affects 'what our interviewees do or do not say, and the questions we do or do not ask'

(Tooth Murphy 2020: 35).

Activity 1 - Observed Interview

Group work

Interview: Why did you come here?

A is the researcher

B is the interviewee

C is the observer

What have we found out?

What have we found out?

- We will try to connect with the other person to get good answers.
- Some differences between 2 people – such as status, gender, age etc.. are salient/ noticeable immediately or during certain exchanges...

‘...everyone carries shades of insider- and outsider-ness arising from concurrent memberships in different cultural groups and contexts (Lee, 2016; Zempi, 2016)’ (Groves, Chen and Verenikina 2020: 8).

And ..identities are dynamic, ‘Participants can move in and out of similarity and difference in relation to the researcher.

(Tinker & Armstrong, 2008 in Groves, Chen and Verenikina 2020: 8)

Discussion 1:

What are the stages researchers go through re: a planned interview (rather than a field interview)?

Stages of the interview

1. Trying to contact people – explaining what you are doing. Social media/ email lists/ networks/ posters/ snowball through one contact etc..
2. Recruiting dialogue - a conversation via phone or email.
3. The interview (impressions start while walking in...)
4. Transcription (might get sent to interviewee to check)
5. Contact - are they are happy with the content etc..
6. (Analysis – doesn't involve interviewee but they will want to know how to access it).

Activity 2: what are the pros & cons of being an outsider researcher?

Background:

Cornwall's culture and language were suppressed by the English. Cornwall is not a separate country (like Wales or Scotland) but is a part of England. Now there are more English people living in Cornwall who are born outside Cornwall with no generational ties in Cornwall, than Cornish people in Cornwall. Cornish people are a minority in Cornwall.

Scenario:

An English researcher (who has moved to Cornwall) needs to interview people living in Cornwall (including Cornish) about a revived traditional Cornish event they are involved in.

Task:

Using different stages of interview - come up with some possible advantages and disadvantages of being an outsider researcher.

Pros of being an outsider researcher

1. People will explain everything to you because you do not know.
2. You might be seen as someone outside any infighting/ power struggles or group/ community issues (such as how one pronounces this or that) and so people might speak more freely to you.
3. You are official - you have power- some groups have been trying to get attention & official research for a long time. The community might feel an outsider will be heard/ have connections.
4. You're not tempted to share – 'The fact that I was not an insider within this community meant that I did not bring with me the agenda of my own story to tell, nor my own emotional investment, meaning I was free to listen authentically to interviewees' testimonies' (Tooth Murphy 2020).

Cons of being an outsider researcher

- Cannot benefit from immediately being trusted or welcomed as someone that understands that group - this can affect recruitment and interest in the project and affect its success.
- An “insider” researcher might have had more detailed, deeper, and superior insights into cultural nuances’ (Groves et al 2020).
- Can miss references or important points that could be followed up.

‘Ultimately, as much as we may share many characteristics and experiences with our interviewees, we must be ever mindful of becoming too comfortable in our assumed knowledge.’

(Amy Tooth Murphy 2020: 40).

How do we close the gap between researcher and interviewee/ participant?

- Trust and rapport are important in closing cultural distance between interviewer and participants, even more important than having a shared cultural identity (Au (2019), Lee (2016), and Milligan (2016)) – referenced in Groves et al 2020.
- Interest in the culture and getting it right – ‘...demonstrating a willingness to ask and learn about her participants’ specific contexts closed the “cultural distance” between the researcher and the participants and resulted in more accurate interpretation of the data’ (Groves et al 2020).
- Say how the interview will be used & the approximate timeline.
- Be an ‘attentive listener’.
- “Feminist oral history, as part of the drive for self- reflexivity, has called on researchers to adopt the maxim ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ (Tooth Murphy 2020: 37).

Activity 3: Active listening exercise

Split into pairs

a. Attention deficit!

Speaker: speak for 1 minute

Interviewer: listen & then... stop listening...

Activity 3: Active listening exercise

Swap roles in your pair

b. When have you been an outsider?

Researcher: Ask the question & then listen attentively in silence.

Speaker: Answer the question

Activity 4: Trying to foster connection & respect in the interview

Different small groups – try your interviews again with a different person interviewing.

Why are you here? x2

1. Say how the interview will be used & what input –can they read the transcription?
2. Practice attentive listening & empathy etc...

‘Different aspects of the multiple identities of participants are salient and influential on the research process at different times, and therefore, classifying researchers as cultural insiders or outsiders ignores the complex relational identity work that occurs within interviews’

(Groves, Chan and Verenikina 2020:19)

‘If researchers are attempting to reach marginalised communities, they must be aware that they *may* be gifted some of those communities’ stories, and that they may not. They must be further aware that the stories they hear will most likely be different to the stories those communities tell among themselves’

(Tooth Murphy 2020: 43)