When will I see you again? Strategies for interviewing over time

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Introduction: the changing politics of interviewing

I have been involved in sociological research since 1988, including three major studies with Janet Holland, Sue Sharpe, Sheena McGrellis and Sheila Henderson and other colleagues. Each of these studies have involved interviewing in a range of forms. In terms of interviewing these three studies represent rather shocking figures: approximately 640 interviews and 70 focus groups.

In this paper I want to reflect a little on interviewing, both in terms of what others say about it and on our own practical experience and considered reflections. Over the period represented by these studies sociological fashions have come and gone and debates have changed, yet the interview has endured as a central element of our research practice. This is not to say that the way we interview has not changed, nor does it mean that we have not learned from experience.

When we began working together on the Women, Risk and Aids project in 1988 we were part of the feminist critique of the universalising character of mainstream social research. At this time interviews were a critical tool in the armoury of feminist researchers seeking to create more located and emancipatory forms of knowledge. Remember Ann Oakley’s 1990 injunction that interviewing women was ‘a contradiction in terms’ and that reciprocity was a necessary and ethical part of interviewing practice. Even at the time there were more cautious voices, such as Janet
Finch’s (1984) ironic reflections on the ease with which the wives of clergymen opened up to her, observing that interviewees ‘should be taught to protect themselves’ from feminist social scientist like her who were too easily able to establish and exploit rapport.

Over the period during which we have been working together we have seen interviews move from being vehicles for the production of feminist knowledge, to exercises in the impossibility of ‘knowing’ - be it feminist or otherwise. Current preoccupations are focussed on interviews as sites of reflexivity and self knowledge on the part of the researcher as well sites of psychic exchanges between parties (Frosh et al. 2002, Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

In terms of our own practice we have maintained and developed an interest in the interview as a social event (a situated interaction) as well as being the means to generate a text in the form of an interview transcript that can be subject to interrogation. Over the years we have explored different ways of documenting, analysing and synthesising these dimensions of interviewing. We have also maintained and developed an interest in the relationship between the ‘extra-ordinary’ nature of the interview encounter and other aspects of the interviewee’s life. This has involved an attempt to understand how interviewees ‘make sense’ of the experience of being involved in research as well as taking seriously the view that at the centre of the interview method is a relationship between two parties. An interest in these two related areas (the research relationship and the research process as part of the life world) has encouraged us to explore the potential of repeat interviewing: which we first experimented with in the WRAP study and which now have been developed into a deliberately longitudinal project.

But before I go on to discuss our experience of interviewing I want to reflect briefly and incompletely on definitions, exploring what exactly is an interview in the context of what Plummer has called a ‘storied culture’ (1995, 2001).

**What is an interview in a storied culture?**
Most text books discuss interviewing along a continuum of formality/informality— at one end we have the highly structured interview practice of questionnaire research and at the other the ‘unstructured interview’ in which an interviewer seeks to steer a conversation through a number of areas in no particular order - or as in the case of some kinds of life history research interviewees are invited to provide an uninterrupted narrative in response to the simple prompt ‘please can you tell me the story of your life’ (Rosenthal, Chamberlayne and Wengraf). Increasingly this basic continuum has had to be supplemented with new addendums such as ‘feminist interviewing’, ‘post modern interviewing’ and ‘reflexive interviewing’ in order to incorporate the way in which developments in sociological thinking have impacted on the core practice of qualitative research.

But implicit within this basic typology of formality/informality is the assumption that interviewing is different from the conversations that takes place as part of everyday life, an interview is ‘extra-ordinary’, a performance, the main purpose of which is to generate ‘data’ for sociological investigation. As a result techniques are developed in order to maximise the productivity of the interview and to balance this against the demands of comparability and analysis. The methodological problem then for such approaches is to account for the relationship that exists between an account provided in an interview situation and the life and world beyond. At the formal end of the scale this is posed in terms of validity and reliability. At the informal end it is posed in terms of the epistemological riddle of the relationship between a life that is lived and a life that is told’.

Staying at this informal end of the continuum we can observe that much of the ensuing discussion has focussed on reflexivity on the part of the researcher as a means of bridging this divide. The notion that, in making visible the practices of knowledge production within the interview encounter, it may be possible to make sociological sense of the story that is told – if not the life that is lived. Tim May (1988) has described this as endogenous reflexivity, which he distinguishes from referential reflexivity – the kind of reflexivity that is a results from the intersection of the knowledge making practices of different communities. May's concern is that while it has become de rigeour for researchers to engage in the former, too little attention is given to the latter referential reflexivity.
May’s comments reflect a growing disappointment with the move to reflexivity that characterised the turn to text in qualitative research. Australian researchers Julie Mcleod and Lyn Yates (1997) have questioned the value of ‘hyperreflexivity’ pointing to the dangers of ‘self indulgent form of self positioning and autobiographical introspection’. In an article entitled ‘can we find out about girls and boys today – or must we settle for talking about ourselves’ they open with a joke that had been doing the rounds of educational conferences in the USA and Australia:

Q: What does the postmodern ethnographer say to the interviewee?  
A: Enough about you – now lets talk about me

While they are in their words ‘cogniscant of feminist, poststructuralist and other injunctions that the researcher be reflexive about their position, recognise their authority and power, and foreground the role they play in the construction of the truths that they are apparently ‘discovering’’ (26), they nevertheless assert that ‘acknowledging these dilemmas need not always lead to a relentless introspective focus or to a debilitating scepticism about researching social relations’ (24).

McLeod and Yates provide this as way of explanation for their decision to adopt what they describe as a ‘distant formal’ position towards the young people involved in their longitudinal qualitative study. In their words ‘we were not intimate and do not seek to cultivate ‘chummy’ relationships with the students. We have chosen to remain fairly anonymous and distant – adult women from the university’ (28). In seeking to ‘minimise intervention’ they have minimised reciprocity, as if this will absolve them from having to account for themselves. While understandable, I would suggest that in doing this McLeod and Yates have made a mistake which is rooted in a failure to distinguish between reflexivity on the part of the researcher and an acknowledgement of reflexivity on the part of the interviewee. Their decision is motivated by the desire not to be swamped in the endogenous reflexivity described by May, but in adopting a more formal style they do not escape the need to account for the interview as a cultural form. Moreover, their decision not to invite young people to engage in intimate reflection may have also undermined the degree of referential reflexivity that is the great potential of the repeat interview method. This is something that McLeod
and Yates themselves recognise and is the reason that they give for changing their style over time.

Another way of understanding the interview is to place the social research process within the life world, where interviewing and being interviewed do count as part of everyday life. It is not only television hosts, Human Resources Managers, journalists, politicians and celebrities who must engage in interviews as part of their work. Silverman (1993) has coined the term the ‘interview society’, pointing to the institutionalisation of the autobiographical form through practices such as the curriculum vitae, the job interview, the doctor’s consultation etc. Plummer writes of the ‘autobiographical society’ that both enables the expression of marginal voices but also results in the commodification of the life story form, with life story telling becoming a ‘technology of the self’ (2000:100).

From this perspective, the social science interview becomes just another setting in which the storied self is elaborated. What may be distinctive about this setting is the participants’ relative lack of experience and understanding of purpose, although reports of ‘research fatigue’ among particular communities suggests that the new ‘knowledge economy’s voracious appetite for ‘evidence’ may mean that the research interview becomes an increasingly recognised cultural form. From this perspective it is also possible to discern fluidity between cultural forms with people adopting narrative styles available in the wider culture in order to get through their interview experience. Matching the style and the situation is a matter of skill. It is important not to be too confessional in a job interview, nor too formal with the doctor.

Within this approach interviewers also gain an explicit identity. Plummer talks of them as the coaxers and cajolers (1995). They can help set the tone of the setting, introduce and license language, and in doing so set up certain kinds of narrative style as acceptable. Thus research interviews can be understood as settings in which individuals are invited to create stories, or what David Morgan calls ‘occasioned accounts’ and in doing so must draw on whatever narrative resources they have to hand. The role of the interviewer is to facilitate this process and the role of the sociologist is to make sense of how and why particular stories can be told at particular moments and places.
The reflexivity that really counts within this approach is the referential reflexivity that is the product of the meeting of the interviewer and the interviewee and can be grasped through the ways in which the resulting story is told, a story that is an important part of the way in which the life is lived. From this perspective the tension between the story told within an interview situation and the life lived outside is no different than that which shapes storytelling of all kinds within the life world. While this tension is ultimately unresolvable, insights can be generated by an accumulation of accounts and a triangulation of data sources.

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Having talked a little about what others say about interviewing, I want to talk in more detail about our own experience of using interviews in three successive projects that have formed the collaboration between Janet, myself, Sue Sharpe and others. In doing so I hope to show the ways in which we have learned from our own experience as well as the enormous potential of the research interview as a means to generate sociological understanding.

**Revisiting the interview and learning from experience**

**1:1 interviews**

The Women Risk and AIDS Project and the Men, Risk and Aids project employed in-depth semi-structured interviews with young people aged 16-21 in order to explore sexual life histories, identities and practices. A female (and feminist team) spanning the ages of 25-50 interviewed almost 200 young people from a range of backgrounds in London and Manchester. We chose 1:1 interviews for this study because of the sensitivity of the area of enquiry, but also because we wanted to generate young people’s voices in an area where (at that time) they were absent. Within policy and practice environments young people were spoken for or about by adults. We thought a lot about research relationship in this study, debating and discussing the power dynamics of the interview situation, and the significance of the languages that young people employed in order to talk about sex within the interviews. As a result much of
the work that came from this study was concerned with language and the discourses that construct the gendered subject positions of heterosexuality.

Yet we were interested in more than language. As Janet will discuss tomorrow, one of our preoccupations in this study was the complex relationship between the accounts that young people produced in the interviews and what they actually did in practice. We have mostly accounted for this tension theoretically. Yet on a more practical basis we were able to gain important insights into the fraught relationship between intentions (expressed in interviews) and practice by re-interviewing a small sub-sample a second time. Not only did re-interviewing make this tension explicit but also facilitated reflection on this discrepancy on the part of the young person. In this sense re-interviews can be seen as productive of reflexivity. The re-interviews also lent themselves to the development of case studies enabling us to move from a relatively static account of young people as situated in discourse to a more animated account of the interplay between agency and determination.

**Interviews as part of a wider menu of methods**

The second study ‘Youth Values: identity, diversity and social change’ was a mixed method investigation of young people aged 11-16, employing questionnaires, focus groups (n=62) and individual interviews (n=58) in that sequence. Young people were drawn from schools in five contrasting locations in the UK: an inner city site; a home counties commuter town; a deprived housing estate in the Northwest; an isolated rural village and contrasting communities within an Northern Irish city\(^1\).

The area of children and morality has traditionally been dominated by psychological discourses of development. Starting from a position that accepted young people as having moral agency we chose 1:1 interviews in this study in order to capture young people’s narratives of their own moral development. In order to encourage young people to engage with the past as well as the present and future we developed techniques derived from memory work that involved asking young people to talk about their earliest memory of something being right or wrong, and then to narrate their changing selves from this point.

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\(^1\) The study was funded by the ESRC as part of the *Children 5-16 programme: Growing up in the 21\(^{st}\) century* (L129251020)
Focus groups provided something quite different in this study. Here we were interested in exploring more public moral discourses and to see how young people positioned themselves in relation to these. To this end we developed a number of contentious statements (for example ‘only white people can be racist’, ‘the age of consent should be lowered to 14’) that we invited participants to debate using a game format. Through this method were able to look at group dynamics in the constitution of patterns of consensus and conflict as well as gaining insights from what the young people actually said. The focus groups were treated as an event in themselves as well as a means to invite young people to talk in a particular way with each other and the facilitator.

In common with other researchers we have been struck by the different ways in which participants present themselves and act in focus groups and individual interviews (Frosh et al.2002). We were also aware that in setting up these kind of focus groups we may be asking young people to talk in a new ways that may have unanticipated consequences and we spent considerable time exploring and negotiating ground rules for the focus group discussions.

The various data sources generated by this study - which in addition to questionnaires, focus groups and interviews also included research assignments (where young people interviewed adults about social change) and class work activities (such as responding to problem page letters) - helped us understand young people as sophisticated moral agents, responding to circumstance and context in the making of their moral worlds. Although there is a tendency to privilege 1:1 interview data in that it tends to speak of the culturally privileged individual self, we felt that in order to understand young people’s moral landscapes it was necessary to see them as embedded in families, friendships, institutions and forms of consumption. The various methods sought to acknowledge and gain insight into these different identifications.

**The repeat interview**

In the third study ‘Inventing Adulthoods: young people’s strategies for transition’ we sought to build on the insights from these earlier project:
First, the principle of ‘multi-vocality’, the notion that people may say rather different things (in different voices) depending on circumstances and methods.

Second, the principle of ‘temporality’, that people’s accounts may change over time and that reflecting on these changes is potentially highly productive use of the individual interview format.

The study drew a sub-sample of 100 young people from the earlier ‘Youth values study’. Young people were interviewed individually at roughly nine monthly intervals over a three-year period. Where possible we have sought to ensure that young people are always interviewed by the same person - their own ‘personal researcher’ - who is responsible for a group of interviewees in particular localities, within a devolved research design.

This study has subsequently been funded for a further two rounds of data collection meaning that by the end of our current funding period young people will have been interviewed up to 7 times over a ten year period. In addition the study has employed occasional focus group interviews where small groups of young people from across the sites were brought together to discuss emergent themes such as ‘leaving home’ ‘travel’ and ‘nationality’. In contrast to the group interviews conducted as part of the previous Youth Values study these were not groups of peers, but rather were deliberately mixed from the different research sites. We reused the game format (familiar to them all) and were able to explore the dynamics of how they negotiated differences within the group as well as the ways in which they sought to forge common discourses in order to discuss the themes under discussion.

However the core methodology was the repeat individual interview. Here I will describe the methods we used in more detail.

**Longitudinal interviewing: disruptions, connections and reflections**

*The first interview: ff1*
The first round of interviews for the Inventing Adulthood study were undertaken between April and Sept 1999. All the young people interviewed had completed a questionnaire and most had been involved in focus groups and/or interviews. The interview began by asking young people to look back and map changes since we had last seen them in areas of: education; work; leisure; relationships; home life and family; project of self (including critical moments of change); health, welfare and trouble.

We then invited young people to look forward into the future. One of our main interests in the study was to explore and understand how young people project themselves into the future through planning, aspirations and imagination, and we wanted to create a space within the interviews in which specific future plans were focussed on. We constructed the lifelines as a research tool to introduce at this stage in the interview. The lifelines included a number of discrete elements (home/housing, education, work, relationships, travel and values) and interviewees were invited to predict their situations in terms of these elements in three years time, at the age of 25 and the age of 35. The discussion, which arose from the lifelines, was part of the interview and was recorded, transcribed and coded in the normal way. In addition, researchers recorded the main features of the discussion on the lifeline as the discussion unfolded. Lifelines were completed for the majority, but not all of the interviewees (112/120). In several cases there was not sufficient time to complete lifelines in addition to the main body of the interview schedule. In a couple the interviewers did not consider it to be appropriate.

Our hope for the lifelines were that they would operate as a ‘prop’ in the interview, supporting discussions of the future in a structured way and giving rise to systematic data that might facilitate some comparison across the sample. In practice, the lifelines were received by researchers and young people in a range of ways. For example, as the extract from the following field note suggests, the lifeline could tap into elements of a young person’s identity, otherwise not presented in the interview:
He became animated when the lifelines were brought out. Before this conversation had been a bit stilted. Started on the lifeline before I had chance to explain it. Had already thought it out and was able to tell me details of the colours he would paint the walls in his flat that he will have in 3 years time etc. had clear plans for each of the time slots.

Other field notes reflect that the introduction of the lifeline could seem like an imposition in that it disrupted the flow of the interview.

The interview flowed well, I found the life line actually broke it up a bit, and moved the discussion which was very focussed and issue based to a more abstract level which I thought he was less comfortable with

The lifeline could also be an intervention, suggesting a structure to ideas of the future or revealing contradictions in young people’s plans. This could be positive, facilitating a distinction between grounded plans and more speculative aspirations. However, this ‘testing’ out of the coherence of plans for the future demanded by the structure of the lifelines could also be uncomfortable for young people who might feel exposed as the following field note extract suggests:

Floundered a little over the lifelines, especially finding herself contradicting herself. Realised that she was doing this and wished that she had had time to think about these questions in advance.

Young people often remarked on the lifelines as interesting, challenging ‘making them think’ or as fun and some asked for copies of their lifelines.
The interview then progressed into a discussion of *chances* (how they see their opportunities compared to those of friends) and a discussion of *Adulthood* (what it means to them, their own experiences of feeling adult and their view on the significance of various milestones as marking the passage from youth to adulthood. The interview ended by us asking young people to reflect briefly on the experience of being involved in the study. Before they left we gave each young person a *memory book* that we asked them to complete and bring to their next interview.

*Memory books:*

The idea of using a memory book grew from a number of sources. We were interested in documenting young people’s changing constructions of self over time, and were aware of the limitations of relying exclusively on the interview method. We knew of the potential of using alternative strategies to disrupt a purely narrative presentation of self, such as the use of photographic albums in oral history and cultural studies (Seabrook 1991, Walkerdine 1991); and the use of photographs in autobiographical work with young people (Cohen 1989, Towers 1986). We were particularly interested in methods that had been employed in child therapy whereby young people were encouraged to compile memory boxes in order to create a resource for the maintenance of a coherent sense of self in the face of parental bereavement, adoption and fostering (Jones 1985; Harper 1996; Barnardos 1992). We hoped that young people would bring to their memory books material they saw as relevant to their current and future identities and records of their experiences in whatever form they saw as appropriate.

We also had a longstanding interest in memory work which alerted us to the ways in which the memory work practice of describing a detailed situation in relatively contemporaneous terms, facilitated the expression of a ‘different voice’ than more biographical approaches based on narrative forms. In the memory books we hoped that asking young people to document themselves *away* from the demands of the direct interview situation (more or less in privacy, engaging in a different mode of time) might facilitate the production of different and complementary expressions/constructions of self.
Our plan was to use the memory books as a basis for the second interview. We consulted the young people on their preferred format, and produced a small book that could be used as a diary or scrapbook, with some stickers that could provide headings for the entries. We initially piloted the prototypes on ourselves, each approaching the task very differently, and producing memory books of differing quality, quantity and character. One of our team had created an elaborate and artistic ‘self book’ organised around themes using pictures, writing and graphics. Another had kept a daily diary. Others had a pile of the paraphernalia of everyday life collected together but disorganised. This experience alerted us to the advantages and disadvantages of the method and helped us to gain a realistic expectation of what young people might produce and to think through how the second round interview might best capture these ‘projects’. As a result of our experiments and deliberations we produced a small book that could be used as a diary or scrapbook, with some stickers that could provide headings for the entries. These headings included ‘adult’, ‘change’, ‘problems’, ‘sex’, ‘myself’, ‘relationships’, ‘love’, ‘career’ and many more. The young people could use them or not as they wished. We provided young people with folders, glue, disposable cameras. In our instructions we invited the young people to include material they saw as relevant to their current and future identities and records of their experiences in whatever form they saw as appropriate.

Having distributed the raw materials we then sat back and wondered if anyone would in fact create a memory book. We also got onto the next stage of exploring how we would use them in the interview context. We piloted the memory book interview with one of our sample, who was given an early prototype, and notes on how the interview session went were fed back to the other interviewers. Some key points from the feedback are as follows.

L had a memory book and photos with her. This was something different to manage in the interview. After an initial flick through we went on to talk about education in the last year and then when talking about US used the memory book. This worked well – L talked through her book and told the stories to elaborate on the events and people that were mentioned in her book. I asked a few questions, reflected back as she went through, but generally let her tell the tale…This session was friendly… It was a nice insight into her life – family and friends. Formals, parties, Halloween party – all gave a
flavour of what her life is and who and what is important. Had a very good sense of L at
end of session. (FN Sheena, October 1999)

The second interview (Ff2)
The second interview took place between Feb 2000 – July 2000. We were delighted
and somewhat surprised that forty-nine young people brought their memory books to
the second interview. A few had completed memory books but decided that they were
too personal and they would keep them for themselves. Most of those who brought
the memory books to the interviews let us copy extracts. The length of the books
ranged from three to 50 pages. Over half of the young people in the study had not
produced memory books. Reasons given included the book being too private (2), it
being too risky to write things down where others could find them (1), not being their
style (2), lost (4) and forgot to bring it (6). Where young people brought memory
books with them, a discussion of the book formed the basis of the interview, while
also ensuring coverage of any developments in areas of: education; work; leisure;
relationships; home and family life; heath, welfare and trouble. Where young people
had not completed a ‘Memory Book’ the interview schedule concentrated on mapping
changes since the last interview in these key areas. It also included a question about
nationality, further questions on their perceptions of their opportunities with a
emphasis on generation.

We have written about the memory book method in great detail elsewhere (Thomson
and Holland 2003), here I want to draw attention to the impact of the method on the
interview. One of our aims in developing the memory book method was to facilitate a
second interview that was less driven by our research agenda and more by the young
person. We hoped that the memory books would de-centre the interview process,
bringing aspects of the young person’s experience outside the room into the research
encounter. They certainly changed the character of the interviews of which they were
part, both in terms of the dynamics of the research encounter and the type of data that
was generated. [An extract from field notes from the pilot interviews gives a
researcher response:
‘Initially when she came in with her memory book and photos I was a bit thrown. She immediately placed them all on the table and said something like ‘here they are’ in a way that suggested that she felt like she had done her homework – fulfilled her obligation to the project, that the purpose of our meeting was just to look at the memory book [...] After the initial reaction, I enjoyed the session with the memory book. It felt like we got onto a different level of intimacy – but still fairly boundaried and safe.’ (McGrellis, memory book pilot, October 1999)

Given that the researchers had no time before the interview to read the books and to absorb their contents, the extent to which the material within the books influenced the interview itself depended in part on the willingness of the young person to use the memory books in the interview, and how far the researcher could weave between the memory book material and the interview schedule. Where young people presented highly visual material with clear thematic headings and use of stickers this might be easier than where the books were dominated by text.]

It was only after the interviews that we were able to engage properly with the contents of the memory books, and to reflect on the very different voices that young people expressed within them. Tomorrow Janet will talk about this a bit more. What I want to note here was that as a research tool, the memory books certainly changed the dynamics of the interview and the research relationship. This was something that was experienced as particularly challenging by the researchers who were thrown into rather unfamiliar territory. The memory book interviews are different, there is much less sense of a narrative to them. In fact it is difficult to understand a memory book interview transcript without also having the book in front of you, as discussions jump from topic to topic without obvious links. Obviously there are costs and benefits to de-centring the research process and we would not necessarily recommend using memory books as an interview prop in all circumstances, but where the books and the interviews form part of what McLeod calls a ‘longitudinal archive’ (McLoed 2003) there are extremely valuable.

**The third interview: ff3**

The third interviews were undertaken between Dec 2000 – June 2001. As with the first interview, we began by asking young people to look back, mapping changes
since last interview in the key areas as well as reflecting on important changes that had taken place since the research had started in 1996 - in terms of critical moments, regrets, role models etc. We then moved on to ask young people some specific questions about being involved in the research process, talking about each aspect of the methodology in turn.

After this the interviewer brought out copies of the ‘Lifelines’ that young people had completed in their first interviews, and they were asked to comment on whether they would complete it in the same way now. Again, this acted as a disruptive intervention into the flow of the interview, bringing a shared past into the interview situation in a material way. How young people responded to revisiting their lifelines depended partly on whether their imagined futures had changed. Where there was continuity the reappearance of the lifelines provoked little discussion. But where there were differences they could provide the basis of fascinating discussion of personal change and the relationship between normative aspiration and requisite resources to achieve them. For example, when asked to reflect on the impact of the research process on her life, one young woman explained that doing the first lifeline made her ‘think a lot’, coming to the realisation that ‘I know I’m not too serious about having kids. I’ve become a lot more independent. If I do have kids it will be because I really want to’.

In the same way that the lifelines enable young people to ‘ring the changes’ in their life planning, they have also provided us as researchers with an important mechanism for making comparisons within individual cases over time, enabling us to make links between discrete interview encounters at the level of data as well as in terms of the ongoing research relationship.

The third interviews then progressed into a discussion of adulthood, focussing on whether and how perceptions of adulthood, maturity and independence had changed. Finally, young people were invited to describe themselves in a sentence.

Subsequently young people have been involved in a fourth interview as the study has moved into new funding arrangements being part of 11 studies exploring the relationship between families and social capital. While the core interview framework of looking back and forward in time has remained we have introduced new areas of
enquiry including questions about community, social networks and intimacy that have been extremely productive.

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One of the interesting things about longitudinal qualitative research is the way in which it disrupts the boundaries that are an integral part of academic production. As you can see this study has disrupted the boundary between funded projects that it a core aspect of the way in which contract research is constituted. A core team of researchers have managed to steer a sample through three rounds of funding, adapting and innovating as we have gone. While we may have to report our findings discretely to funders, as far as the young people and the researchers are concerned this is still the same study. It also disrupts the boundary between research and life, or what we have called research time and biographical time. Both the researchers and the young people have changed over the course of the study, and part of what has changed them is the experience of being involved in the study.

In the final section of this presentation I want to reflect a little on these questions – what is it like to be in a longitudinal study.

**Beyond reflexivity? Being involved in a longitudinal study**

At the beginning of this paper I described the decision that Julie McCleod and Lyn Yates made to adopt a ‘distant-formal’ research relationship in their longitudinal study young people in Australia. These were to avoid the traps of ‘hyperreflexivity’ and ‘relentless introspection’ of accounting for themselves in the research process, and to avoid ‘the impact of the project being an overt and integral part of what we were studying’ (1997: 29). Although we did not set out to make an intervention into young people’s lives, we have not denied that we might well be doing so. Our decision to ensure a continuity of interviewer over time was both pragmatic and guided by a concern with the quality of the research relationship. We recognised that it is not a ‘normal’ part of young people’s lives to be invited to participate in regular in-depth interviews by researchers from a university, and that impact of the research
As I have shown, we have attempted to make space for young people to talk about the impact of the research on them throughout the research process.

At the end of their first interview young people were invited to comment on the research process. Most were positive, commenting that it was unusual and enjoyable to talk this way. A number said that the interview had a cathartic effect, helping them to express and resolve emotions as well to clarify their feelings and ideas about the future. Other researchers have commented on the ‘therapeutic potential’ of qualitative interviews (Bird and Miller 2000), yet neither young people nor researchers enter the research relationship with the explicit intention of engaging in a process of self-transformation. The professional and ethical boundaries that characterise clinical practice are not in place and the therapeutic ‘potential’ must be treated with caution, recognising the costs of self-exposure for the participant’s privacy and integrity. These kinds of ethical dilemmas are not easily resolved, and are not simply within the control of the researcher. For example, some young people actively used the space provided by the confidential interviews in a project of self understanding.

Alan: It's made me feel more stronger, with my feelings about things. The last one, the last interview that we had, I wasn't as open about stuff [...] I'm starting to speak out more. (...) Like if I have any problems you know I would speak them out to somebody that I could trust.

Young people also told us that they had been reassured or warned of the content of the interviews by friends who had already taken part. Their concerns were primarily that their fears may sound childish or stupid, although at least one expressed concern about confidentiality at a later date given his ambitions to become a famous footballer².

By the second round of interviews young people were much more forthcoming in their comments, which reflected their increasing confidence in and with the method. They knew what was going to happen and were able to plan what they wanted to do in

² A concern that proved grounded in that he is now a successful professional footballer with an emergent ‘media profile’.
the interview. Young people were also more forthcoming as to the status that being involved in the research had conferred on them in peer groups, commenting that being selected and listened to in this way made them feel special.

Judy: Its something no one else is doing. Well some other people are but most people aren't which is nice. [...] you feel like the chosen you [laughs] I don't know why you chose me [laughs].

The character of the research relationship was also mentioned, and young people compared it to the ways in which they were able to talk to parents, friends and careers advisers. Of particular interest here are their comments about the impact of the research on their way of thinking.

Robin: You start to think you know, I think you you only start to think and find out what who you are when you talk.

Estelle: I think it has because when you speak to me and things like that, you sort of, it makes you realise about things in your life and you know when you ask questions, you actually don't realise that you have all these answers to all these questions, you don't realise that it's actually you saying them and you realising about yourself [...] after sort of chats like this, you always go away and think about things and about whether you do wanna change in life and things like that.

It should be noted that not all young people reported this, some denied that the research had any impact at all citing pragmatic reasons for continuing (for example in the early interviews missing lessons). The young people commented on not ‘having’ to talk about something that they did not wish to, and in some cases they resisted the demands that the research placed on them. The interviewers were aware that the structure of the research encouraged young people to present themselves as being involved in a progressive and developmental process of change. Some of those young people who did drop out of the study were certainly those experiencing difficult circumstances.
Reasons given for withdrawing from the study included being too busy and lack of interest. The factors contributing to attrition included age (when they left school young people were more difficult to contact and much more busy), mobility (moving house/country) and marginality. Some who withdrew from the research subsequently returned and researchers learned that consent must always be treated as provisional – both consent to participate and consent to withdraw (Miller and Bell 2002). In the following example Monique clearly expresses her agency in withdrawing from the study. The researcher involved observed that this had been a difficult interview, with the interview schedule inviting Monique to catalogue a succession of failures.

INT: Yes, why do you not want to be part of the project anymore?
Monique: I don't know, it's just long.
INT: Long?
Monique: Yeah.
INT: Well it's only short compared to the rest of your life (laughs).
Monique: No I mean long, when I say long I don't mean it's taking too long, it's just long. I can't give you a proper definition. If it was someone my age they would know what I mean when I say 'long'...
INT: Oh no. So is it boring?
Monique: It's not boring it's just long (laughs). It's a long ting, man, can't do it.

By moving into Jamaican patois at the end of this exchange, Monique asserts the difference between herself and the interviewer, and exercises considerable agency in ending the research relationship. Yet, in the next round Monique opted back into the research against the expectations of the researchers. Significantly, she used her subsequent interview to tell a much more positive story about ‘getting back on track’ and overcoming adversity.

Over the course of the study most of the young people became increasingly confident in interviews, more able to direct the course of the conversation and more instrumental in how they used the interview space for themselves. This could give rise to tensions between the interview schedule and the story that the young person wanted to tell. One of the results of this was that interviews became progressively longer, although we are now finding that fourth round interviews are shorter.
But the longitudinal research process also affects the researchers involved, generating genuine familiarity with research participants. As a team we attempted to be reflexive about this relationship, making space for the interviewers to record and discuss their feelings on the basis that such emotions were an important part of understanding the research process (Hubbard et al 2001) and the research topic (Lucey et al 2003). While we might expect a longitudinal method to complicate the already complex boundaries of the research relationship, the researchers generally felt comfortable in their role. Yet researchers’ feelings about the research process also gave us important insight such as the normative effects of the repeat interview structure as noted by Sheena McGrellis:

I am increasingly conscious of the fact that we appear in young people’s lives on a semi regular basis, and ask about their thoughts and aspirations for the future among many other things. We hear about relationships and their investment in new relationships and friendships, about their experiences of education and plans for further education, for employment and travel. We allow them to talk and record their thoughts and feelings. And then we meet them again and ask for an update. They know we have a recording of what they said last time. For those whose lives remain on course this, I suspect, is a very gratifying and confirming experience; for those whose lives don’t turn out quite as planned this may not be such a great experience. I’m not sure how we measure this and whether or not this is a factor that will be linked to attrition. [fieldnote]

One of the things that we have struggled with most as a research team is the extraordinary vantage point that the longitudinal data set provides us. This came to a head when we began to write up individual case profiles based on an accumulation of interview accounts and other data sources. Over the course of the study we had, when necessary, offered young people support outside the interview situation in response to particular crises. In writing and reading case profiles and extended case studies we shifted from a position of being ‘in the present with young people’ towards one of having a highly privileged ‘analytic’ perspective on their lives, gaining insights into their particular characters, patterns of behaviour etc. It felt increasingly strange not to share this knowledge with the young people concerned, but we were also worried
about the impact that reading our case profiles may have on them. (Certainly they had not been written with that in mind). We considered and decided against giving young people copies of their case profiles, but agreed to offer them copies of their tapes, which we did at their fourth interview. So far we have had little feedback from young people as to what it was like to hear their tapes beyond it being ‘funny’ or ‘weird’ but we intend to explore this more fully when we next meet them.

Throughout the research process we have sought to feedback our findings to young people through regular newsletters and through access to a project website where they can not only access reports and papers, but also make contact with other participants through a chat room. In our view this kind of reciprocity is the least that we can offer in the light of the commitment that young people have made to the project. We also recognise that we have significant responsibilities to the participants in terms of how we present the material that we have generated from the study. As interview material accumulates we have been drawn towards using case studies. Yet as the data gains depth it also becomes increasingly difficult to anonymise and we struggle to balance the need to do justice to the data while also maintaining participants’ confidentiality.

Conclusions:
Finally, I want to make a few points to conclude my discussion of interviewing.

First, I want to acknowledge that there is a vibrant politics of interviewing which is affected by fashions in academic thought. While these are important debates, which draw attention to particular dimensions and difficulties of the process we call ‘interviewing’ it is also important to learn from and trust in our own experience of ‘doing it’.

Central to our own practice has been an understanding of research as an event as well as a means to generate data. Interviews are part of the lifeworld that we study. And it is important that we gather ethnographic data from interviews as well as reflexive data about interviews, as well as relying on tape recordings of what is said.

My third conclusion relates to ethics and the recognition that at the heart of the interview lies a relationship that must be taken care of. This means both the
interviewer and the interviewee. I haven’t said much here about how upsetting it is for interviewers to be stood up yet again, or put to voicemail for the 10th time. There is also a great deal to be learned by reflecting on this relationship as I hope the many extracts from field notes used in the paper suggest.

My fourth conclusion is that interviews are but one strategy, that produce particular kinds of voices. What we have learned is that the interview can be productively disrupted (for example by using lifelines and memory books) but also that ideally interview data should be supplemented with other data sources, which make visible/audible different kinds of voices and identities.

My penultimate conclusion is that research is part of life. The contradiction between the life lived and the story told may be a bit of a red herring, and certainly one not to get bogged down in. This becomes particularly obvious with a longitudinal design. The interviewer is part of the story and it is good practice to be systematically reflexive and to accept that you as well as they are a source of data. Yet this is a relatively minor part of the story. As I have said, we have found researcher’s reflections to be a useful as a source of data as long as they are written contemporaneously and historicised as data. We have also found it important to ask young people to reflect on the research as well, over time.

Finally, I want to emphasise the importance of the temporal. Too often social science research relies on snap shot studies, which in turn lead to theories and explanations that are over determined and static. Life is just not like that, as Doreen Massey (1994) argued ‘it is not the slice through time that should be the dominant thought, but the simultaneous co-existence of social relations that cannot be represented as other than dynamic’ (265). The repeat interview is an extremely powerful tool for capturing the articulated character of the real and for moving us beyond a two dimensional sociology.

References


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