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Getting reticent young male participants to talk: using artefact-mediated interviews to promote discursive interaction

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Abstract

During a pilot study that used interviews to collect data from young male apprentices about construction site safety, we were confronted with limited verbal responses. This paper is about how we explored this research problem of ameliorating unresponsive interview interactions. The paper reviews the options that previous researchers have trialled and developed, and specifically focuses on artefact-mediated interviews conducted with young male participants. We focus on the use of images within artefact-mediated interviews to draw out data from less communicative subjects. Our reflection upon this process proposes that the use of both abstract and concrete images within an artefact-mediated interview can produce diverse and enriched forms of data.

Keywords: *Artefact-mediated interviews, qualitative research method, organisational research, young male participants.*

Introduction

Despite the accumulation of years of social experience and research interactions there can be little doubt that the constructed nature of the formal interview raises our levels of anticipation and adrenalin. If this is the reaction of seasoned researchers, we can hardly imagine the apprehension that exists in our subjects, especially those who have limited social experience and lack interactional confidence, such as the young male participants of this study.

In 2005, while undertaking pilot research to examine the value placed on safety for operatives working on construction sites, the researchers were confronted by very limited responses from the young male apprentices that were the focus of the study. After a significant review of the

method, the research was resumed using pictures to stimulate the interaction of these research subjects.

This paper is based upon these experiences that have stimulated us to explore and model artefact-mediated interviews. This paper is therefore based upon a specific problematical situation and how a strategy was developed to generate conversational flow while interviewing young male construction workers. While the paper provides details of this pilot study, exploring these findings is not the core purpose of this article and they serve simply as an illustrative practical example. The main discussion in this paper focuses on modelling the broader options that exist for artefact-mediated interviews to engage participants and illicit conversational flow within interview interactions. We begin by exploring the ways previous researchers have sought to develop the research interview by introducing artefacts into the interaction. After a brief review of the pilot study that instigated our actions and conceptualisations, we model the options for artefact-mediated interviews and their impact on the interview interaction.

Literature review

There is a long history within the literature that indicates the dilemmas of collecting qualitative data through face-to-face interviews and the problematic nature of this interaction for researchers (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This issue is exacerbated when eliciting data collection from young people (Owen, Dickson, Mallett, & Stringer, 2008; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Men, and particularly young men, can be reluctant to share their perceptions and feelings (Monaghan & Goodman, 2007; Simpson & Lewis, 2007).

While there has been a continual debate in the literature about 'what counts' as an interview, it is the wide variations of this format of data collection that have made it such a universally popular instrument. Over time, researchers have developed a diverse range of ethnographic tools to elicit information from participants. The camera and pictures have a long history as a tool for data collection, but can also be used as mediating artefacts within the interview process to stimulate research subjects (Stanczak, 2007). Loeffler (2005) used pictures or photo-elicitation to engage interview subjects. Szto, Furman and Langer (2005) discuss the use of photography and poetry and their role in exploring human behaviour. Carawan and Nalavany (2010) used photography and art for dyslexic adults to assist in their expression of ideas in focus groups. Beloff (1984) and Kose (1985) note that photographs can act as an extension of our memory and that there common use is a 'persuasive means of communication' for children and adults (Kose, 1985, p. 73). The use of photographs and pictures within the interview context can assist in producing information which may not be discovered using traditional question and answer interview methods. Foster (2007) used arts-based methods such as painting, collage, and photographs in her study with poor, working class women to collect data. Germain (2004) used Talking Mats together with cameras to elicit data from disabled children to gain insight into their likes and dislikes of their home and community activities. Talking Mats uses picture symbols representing topics, options and emotions and participants place photographs under the appropriate emotion symbol to show how they feel. Thus Talking Mats give the participants ownership of the 'conversation' because they can move the symbols around until satisfied that it is an accurate representation of their views.

The Rorschach Inkblot Test (Exner, 1986) is widely known and utilises inkblot shapes to encourage insight into a patient's unconscious world. Pine, Mogg, Bradley, Montgomery,

Monk, McClure, Schweder, Ernst, Charney, and Kaufman (2005) conducted research into the use of picture-based visual probe tasks as a method to integrate research on adult anxiety, paediatric anxiety, and cognitive neuroscience. The Repertory Grid Technique (Kelly, 1955: Scheer & Catina 1996; Reger, 1990) is a form of interactive discussion where the subject is instrumental in designing personal constructs with the guidance of an investigator. Stock, Davies, and Wehmeyer (2004) conducted research in testing and assessment of individuals with intellectual disabilities that was based on the use of pictures. In a recent action research study in Zambia an Australian researcher instigating the development of small business with mature females supplied the women with disposable cameras so they could bring pictures to the interviews and focus group (Meebelo, 2007).

Much of the literature discusses the use of artefacts to engage *children* in data collection. Shani, Ayalon, Hammad and Sikron (2003) developed a burn prevention educational programme for schools in Israel using pictures as a set of 60 slides that showed dramatic hazardous situations and the consequences of these situations in the form of injuries. Lewis, Osofsky and Moore (1997) studied children's drawings to reveal children's perceptions of violence and their feelings of safety and trust. The use and analysis of drawings has been used as a method for clinical assessment of children's cognitive and emotional functioning, attitudes towards their families, and traumatic occurrences in their environment (Hammer, 1980; Hibbard & Hartman, 1990; Moore, 1996). Dillenberger (1992/93) and Anning (2000) collected data from children through their drawings and creation of models. Smith (2000) used dolls with very young children who were victims of sexual abuse as props so that children could indicate what they had experienced. Kaplan and Howes (2004) used pictures on a developed school based web site with secondary school aged children to promote learning within the school community. Bray (2007) used pictures in the form of an activity

board to gain assent from the children and young people prior to their participation in interviews to provide them with an understanding of the process. McAuley (1996) illustrated a set of questionnaires for young children with a set of cartoons which were gender specific to the child being interviewed. In addition, she asked children to state three wishes accompanying her question with a cartoon version of a genie and a lamp. Evans & Fuller (1996) used toy telephones in role-play activities to facilitate communication with four-year-olds in a classroom research setting.

While the preceding literature provides a number of examples of the use of artefacts in interviews and focus groups as a data collection technique, this body of research mainly focuses on children, adults with dyslexia and disabilities, women, and psychological techniques. There is a paucity of literature on using these techniques with young male participants. The pilot research project that is the focus of this paper adds to the stock of knowledge about facilitating the experiences and perceptions of this cohort.

Moving from the unnatural to the natural conversation

In establishing that the primary focus of the research project was the social and organisational research engagements with young male adults, the research question we found ourselves responding to was – *What methods can be employed within organisations to engage and elicit data from reticent young male research subjects*?

As we have established, the interview comes in multiple forms and is a key instrument in the collection of richer research evidence from subjects within society and within organisations. When researching organisations it is the subjects who provide us with perspectives and narratives as the organisation itself is just reification, socially constructed through their

interaction and actions. Interviews are often described simply as conversations with a purpose (Merriam, 1998). However, how do you get the conversation started, especially with vocally reticent participants? The interviewee participant is confronted by a stranger and is expected to provide quality information we can use to answer our research questions in what could be more accurately described as an 'unnatural conversation'. As experienced researchers we began to questioned the quality of the output from our interviews – to what extent were the interviewees opening their soul with honesty to us, and how much were they consciously or unconsciously hiding , over-rating, or reconstructed their previous actions and intentions, let alone their perceptions of the intentions and actions of others? The problem of placing the interviewee at ease is an imperative that continually confronts qualitative researchers and one we found particularly problematic when working with young male participants. Indeed it was the artificial construction of the interaction within the interview that posed the greatest problem. The introduction of artefacts to assist in breaking down these communication barriers was attempted to bridge the divide between the unnatural relations of the interview and the and natural conversation of the workplace.

There are many researchers for whom interview situations with their faux social constructions are a regular experience, and they can use their high skills of empathy to rub away the slight edges of discomfort from their mature organisational interview subjects. However, for many subjects, the fear of exposing the self, or of appearing foolish, hastens a verbal retreat that no amount of skill and empathy can counteract. In research design we find ways of constructing the study to elicit data from the most willing and able participants but in some studies, there may be a specific need to interview more reluctant or less socially confident subjects and the

use of strategies to overcome this issue determines the quality and quantity of the data collected.

Methodology

The research study that stimulated this conceptual investigation was used to inform a larger industry and PhD research project exploring the value that placed upon safety training in times of accelerated production. This pilot study research was conducted with construction apprentices to determine the perception of safe work practices within the industry. The study underwent a full ethics approval process by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. Confronting the researchers in the pilot study was the issue of how to engage participants in face-to-face interviews. The participants in this study were male 17-21 year old Anglo-Australian apprentices in the construction industry. This group had low literacy levels with many participants attaining only their Year 10 (O level) school certificate. While most students had left the school environment and had moved straight into Vocational Education Training (VET) facilities, others had left formal schooling some year's earlier and received traineeships in order to provide valuable skills training. The study design was based on multiple data collection, involving focus group and individual interviews, to generate a ground theory approach for the analysis.

The study utilised a grounded theory approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) assisted by an ethnographic tool of a set of pictures of unsafe construction work sites. Grounded theory was first articulated by Glaser & Strauss (1967). The approaches of Glaser and Strauss diverged soon after. Essentially, Glaser has always maintained that grounded

theory emerges solely from the data while Strauss argued that grounded theory is constructionist: it is both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (relying on interpretation). We draw from Strauss and Corbin's (1990) conceptualisation that researchers remain co-constructors in the development of theory.

Sample and modifying the research design

The sample for the pilot study included a random selection of 10 carpentry apprentices at a Western Australian technical college between the ages of 17 and 21 years who volunteered to participate in the study. The participants were asked to be involved in the study by their college tutor. It should be noted that only 10 of the class of 18 students agreed to participate. Eight of the participants worked within the commercial construction sector and spent much of their working life on high-rise buildings. Two of the participants were involved in home building construction. Six of the participants were interviewed collectively in a focus group; four of the participants were interviewed individually. All the interviews were digitally recorded. It should be noted that while the sample for the study was small it was a pilot for the larger PHD study that was conducted as a student project entirely self funded. These limitations required the researchers to devise effective and efficient data collection strategies.

Following an initial attempt at direct face-to-face interviews, the researchers, confronted by very limited responses engaged in lengthy dialogue and further exploration to reshape the interview protocols. In order to elicit the participants' perceptions it was thought that an ethnographic approach using guided interviews together with pictures to evoke comment would be of benefit. This interaction was based on the interviewer producing real artefacts to stimulate interviewee responses. A semi-structured interview of 30-60 minutes was designed with questions on the value placed on safety in the workplace particularly when production pressures abound. At the beginning of the interview general open ended questions were posed

as to the safe or 'unsafe' practices on the individual's worksites, for example: *Does safety come first when there is pressure to get the job done quickly?,* and *Are you asked to take shortcuts?* Limited responses and data were collected as the participants were reluctant to contribute to the discussion. The researchers anticipated that this might occur so towards the end of the interview the participants were given copies of a set of pictures of construction worksites, freely obtained on the world wide web, with unsafe work areas and were asked to comment on these scenarios. The research questions were worked into the renewed conversation with specific open-ended questions on how safety was viewed and produced in their workplaces. Rich, plentiful data was obtained from the discussions using the pictures as the stimulus. The rationale for introducing the pictures at the mid-point of the interview was to enable the researcher to use the initial period of the interview to try and build a personal rapport with the subject and then to use the pictures to move the conversation to another virtual location to test the usefulness of artefact-mediated interviews.

Data collection

The interviews with the ten construction workers occurred in a small classroom that the participants utilised regularly in their apprentice studies. The research design for this study included one focus group with six participants and four individual interviews. The classroom setting was reorganised to accommodate the focus group with six chairs placed in a circle around the interviewer at the front of the room. The six volunteer participants for the focus group were invited into the classroom and asked to take a seat within the circle of chairs. The first participant entered the room, pushed past the interviewer and proceeded to the back of the classroom and took a seat behind a desk. The second participant took a similar action taking a seat next to the first; while the third participant placed himself behind a desk in the middle of the classroom. The final three participants sat behind the desks in the front rows of

the classroom, with only one participant seating himself in the focus group chair arrangement (with no desk in front of him). Once all participants were initially seated the interviewer invited the participants to join the one person seated in the focus group circle of chairs at the front of the classroom. After some coaching, all participants complied and the focus group interview commenced. The initial protection devices of taking a seat at the back of the room and behind a desk confirmed the researcher's concern of collecting data from uncommunicative subjects.

The focus group interview began with open ended questions discussing general safe and unsafe work practices. The data collected within the first half of the interview contained little detail or useful information. Towards the end of the interview, the researcher introduced a series of ten pictures depicting actual examples of unsafe worksites with varying degrees of safety breaches, given to each participant. The pictures displayed worksites that were poorly maintained, dirty, lacking scaffolding and had poor electrical fittings. The interviewer moved into specific workplace safety discussions drawing on the pictures to illustrate revisiting the research questions. At this point the interview developed into a lively discourse with participants declaring the 'stupidity' of the pictured scenarios as well as revealing that they had personally witnessed such situations in their work places. Numerous examples of safe and unsafe work practice was freely revealed, supported and discussed among the participants in a lively manner. It was evident that these apprentices were passionate about their trade and were keen to work safely.

In order to test the successful application of the use of pictures to generate discourse, four individual interviews with participants were conducted. These took on similar scenarios as the focus group. Two of the four participants initially proceeded to sit behind a desk at the front of the classroom rather than seat themselves opposite the researcher. These two participants sought the 'protection' of the desk and distance from the interviewer. As with the focus group, the early interview questions produced little insight into the workplace procedures. The introduction of the pictures again produced detailed and lively discussion from the individual participants. Without the use of the pictures the face-to-face question and answer interview would have been completed in under five minutes. Introducing the pictures extended the discussions to 15-30 minutes and a wealth of real-life examples of safe and unsafe work practice was revealed. Once again the pictures elicited passion for safe work practices from the participant.

Exploring the use of visuals in guided interview precedents

The findings of this 2005 pilot research study indicated that that safe work practices may be compromised when production pressures abound. However, this paper concentrates on exploring the techniques used to acquire the research data from the 17-21 year old male participants. Our experiences indicated that using pictures as an ethnographic technique to gather data within a semi-structured or open interview to be a useful technique when engaging participants who may be less able or unwilling to communicate in organisational situations. However, this generalisation can only be made for young male participants due to the limited testing of this technique and the small purposeful sample.

In this study the researchers recognised that gathering data from young men was a critical challenge. Men, and particularly young men, can be reluctant to share their perceptions and feelings (Monaghan & Goodman, 2007; Simpson & Lewis, 2007; Holmes, 2006). Therefore the strategy of introducing the interview questions with pictures of actual workplace safety breaches was devised in the hope of eliciting quality responses from the participants. Although, the researchers held some expectations that this group could be difficult to talk to, the extreme reaction of the participants was a surprise. The initial response from the focus group participants in choosing to sit at the rear of the classroom behind a desk was completely unexpected. The interviewer was a female in her mid-forties and would not be considered generally by her colleagues as confrontational or as unapproachable. Yet this group of interview participants found this to be the case. It could be argued that it would have been a more appropriate strategy to engage an interviewer who was closer in age and perhaps also male to conduct these interviews. However, this pilot study was self-funded with no budget available to engage research support. We argue that this dilemma is one that confronts other researchers – often there is limited funding available to conduct research and employ 'appropriate' field researchers; so supporting strategies that overcome these issues provides researchers with additional research tools and options when confronted with research dilemmas. The alternative is to only conduct research that fits the researcher's attributes and restrict significant deviations from this model.

Curious about the reaction of the participants to the interviewer, the researchers discussed this non-verbal reaction to the interview with an industry colleague whose role included a considerable workload of sourcing and developing training for construction workers. She is of diminutive stature, middle aged and would not, in our opinion, be considered a threat to a male construction worker. However; she recounted similar experiences in engaging this group

in conversation. She explained that in one-on-one conversations with construction workers in their work places, rather than engage eye contact with her, participants often drew patterns and pictures in the sand with their work boot as they spoke to her, or squatted on the ground in front of her and drew in the sand with their fingers. Our research study and the preceding example illustrate that there is a need to develop better interview techniques with specific reticent groups of organisational subjects.

Participants enter an interview with their own set of values. They freely agree to participate in the interview (although it is difficult to detect implicit and opaque organisational coercion), however they can choose how much they wish to contribute, and importantly how much they wish to conceal. The degree to how much information is obtained is determined by the degree of mediation on the part of the interviewer who can choose to have either a more-participatory or more observatory role within the interview. When using artefact-mediated interviewing to illicit richer responses, the images themselves can be abstract as in Rorschach Inkblot Test (Exner, 1996) or concrete as in a photograph of a severed electrical wire. The responses to these images can be either attitudinal concepts or concrete opinions. That is, how they feel about a situation or actions taken in a situation. The key to eliciting rich responses from the participants using these techniques is to provide artefacts that engage the participant and evoke comment. Table 1 compares some of the existing research methods using artefacts to elicit responses from participants with the use of pictures within interviews. There are a range of individual, subject and object relationships exhibited within the field of artefact-mediated interviews.

Table 1: A comparison of existing artefact mediated research techniques

Criteria	**Rorschach Ink Blot Test**	**Shani & Rosenberg**	**Pine et al**	**Stock et al**	**Kelly's Repertory Grid**	**Interviews Using Artefacts**

Images	Abstract	Concrete	Abstract	Concrete	Abstract	Concrete & Abstract
Participants / Interviewer	Scripted	Open	Open	Open	Scripted	Open
Response	Conceptual	Concrete	Conceptual	Concrete	Conceptual	Conceptual & Concrete

Examining the categories within the table above, it can be seen that these existing methods using artefacts as ethnographic tools for data collection offer a range of options for the researchers, who can construct a design relevant for their context. Artefact-mediated interviews can be constructed using:

1. Abstract or conceptual imagery;
2. Scripted or more open interviews; and
3. Prompted to gain concrete or conceptual responses.

Reviewing the previous artefact-mediated interviews used in the study: the imagery that was used was both abstract and concrete, using an open interview format to elicit both concrete and conceptual responses. The decision for the research design is first to determine what form of responses will be most valuable for the study, and then to formulate appropriate image interactions. The matrix above provides a complex set of options that researchers can use to customise their own research tools.

Conceptualising artefact-mediated interviews

The previous analysis has focused upon how the interviewer can re-construct the interview to generate an improved conversation flow and a more effective data gathering process for research. In this approach the interviewer introduces images or artefacts that may be able to stimulate the interviewee. This changes the dynamics of the situation. Instead of a focus on question and answer, the direct interaction of the two individuals is directed to the image or artefact. Responses are elicited about the image or artefact rather than ‘to’ the interviewer.

The focus is shifted from personal interaction to a response about an image or item from the field of practice. The interviewee is stimulated by a context 'taken' from the field of practice that contrasts sharply with the detached context of the interview situation. The interviewer may feel relaxed in a formal situation designed to extract conceptual understanding from descriptions of feelings and actions about the field of practice. However, the interviewee may feel more able to discuss and describe feelings about the field of practice when they are focused upon an artefact or image that symbolises their everyday experience. The research subjects begin to lead the interaction, taking over the active role in the interaction and 'autodriving' the exchange (Heisley & Levey, 1991). However, we would postulate that artefact-mediated interviews are not just a useful tool for situations where organisational employees may be reticent, but can also be part of the research design for researchers to gain deeper understanding of the meaning associated with specific phenomenon (Patton, 1990). In such cases, artefact-mediated interviews extend the opportunity for participants to lead the exchange, expressing their intentions, enabling them to vocalise richer descriptions, and engage in self-evaluation. Indeed, the situation can be constructed so that it is the participants who provide or choose the artefacts at the centre of the interview interaction.

Conclusions

The pilot research project discussed in this paper has shown that considerable worthwhile information was obtained from young male construction workers through the use of visual artefacts to encourage discussion and revelation of workplace safety values and scenarios. However, the most significant learning from the intervention centred on the researchers and their learning about interactional construction. They learned far more from the research than was expected! Although this project used a relatively small sample: one focus group and four

individual interviews in one construction trade, it has given some insight into the validity of this technique.

The use of artefact-mediated interviews in this study broke down communication barriers between the interviewer and interviewee, with the participant addressing the artefact and describing, comparing or valuing the image or object. This type of interaction guided the subject and extended the interaction to produce a richer data flow about the artefact, and hence to the interviewer. The limitations of this study were the small sample size within one industry. Further research could be conducted with larger groups and across different employer groups to develop these concepts and propagate the techniques in related fields of research.

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