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Godfrey, Barry S.

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5 Self-Identity, Empathy and Sympathy in Reading Transcripts

BARRY S. GODFREY

Abstract

When conducting oral history interviews empathetic relationships tend to be created between the researcher and the subject, and this is seen as an essential aid for historical and/or sociological analysis. This article examines the basis of these empathetic relationships - the emotional reaction of the interviewer to what is being narrated by the interviewee. It goes on to question whether it is possible to maintain an emotional/empathetic relationship with 'unlikeable' subjects; whether the emotions created during an interview are retained when the interviews are transcribed, archived, and accessed by researchers who did not carry out the original interviews (sometimes many years after the interviews took place). Lastly, it examines the implications that this may have for interpretive analysis.

As many of the standard texts on interview-based research state, during the interview process a relationship is inevitably forged between researcher and interviewee (Bornat, 2001; Strauss, 1987; Rubin and Rubin, 1985); one which can either short-lasting and rather exploitative in nature, through to lasting friendships (Lieblich, 2002). Because of the feelings of 'closeness' created by interviewees discussing personal details of their lives - sometimes never before revealed, or indeed hidden from family members and friends - researchers have stressed the ethical duties incumbent on researchers (this is especially pertinent where the interviewee perceives the interview to have a therapeutic effect). Certainly there has been recognition that the interviewee can be placed in a dependent relationship - the power imbalances that are routinely discussed in textbooks (Minichiello et al., 1990). Even when the power differential is reduced by adopting sensitive interviewing procedures and situational contexts it is impossible to completely eradicate them - which is perhaps why researchers now stress the reciprocal nature of the interview process.[1] But, although there has been a considerable amount of literature devoted to the power relations at play when interviewing; the steps researchers can take to lessen the power imbalances; and the potential of harming the interviewee,

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little has been written explicitly on the effect the interview can have on the researcher (Morse, 2000; Arksley and Knight, 1999; Jones, 1998). This is despite the care which counsellors take to mitigate the emotional labour involved in therapy (with each counsellor having the opportunity to discuss his or her feelings with another counsellor). Perhaps in stressing the differences between academic research and psychological therapy, researchers have downplayed the emotional aspects of their research. However, the emotional subjectivity inherent in all human interactions means that qualitative researchers working in many disciplines are likely to be affected by some of the information revealed to them. Life-histories, for example, can touch on heavily emotive subjects - abortions, the death of a family member, domestic violence - and those stories seem intensified when the person who is relating them is themselves ill, in distress, or dying. Janice Morse believes that interviewing the seriously ill and dying is 'the most difficult type of qualitative research' to contemplate doing (Morse, 2000, p.538). This may be true; certainly it is a process that can be disturbing, even harrowing, for the researcher: 'Most of you, I know, will be able to recall large blocks of quotations and hear the participant's voice in your head many years after conducting a heart-wrenching interview' (Morse, 2000, p.540-1). Or as David Jones stated about interviewing Holocaust survivors, 'it would be unlikely if the experience of talking about those memories was entirely without cost for either the interviewee or the interviewer' (Jones, 1998, p.49).

As the above quote implicitly illustrates, the emotional relationship made between interviewee and researcher is comprised of two strands - the narrative itself, and the personal/situational context of the interview. Because of its content, the narrative itself can be disturbing to the interviewer, but also the interview context can be affecting (because relating the narrative upsets the interviewee, or the interviewee is suffering, say illness, the effects of old-age or poverty, which the researcher cannot control or mitigate, and so on). In both cases, the emotions of the interviewer are likely to be engaged. Emotional labour has not been particularly well foregrounded in methodology textbooks, but has always played a part in the interview/analytical process. The ability to emotionally and empathetically connect with an interviewee is considered not only to facilitate a successful interview (allowing the interviewee to feel comfortable and secure in relating sensitive personal details), but also vital to the interpretative process. Putting oneself in the interviewee's position can be extremely illuminating. Simple recognition of the moral and contextual standpoints referenced by interviewees greatly assists researchers to understand the social and individual factors that affected their lives. Without empathy, analysis is still possible, but it is likely to be sterile, prone to essentialism, and lacking in insight. On the other hand, researchers who too closely identify with their interviewees can lose the professional detachment and questioning stance that is also necessary for critical research. Nevertheless, there is not a

continuum that stretches from empathy to detachment with researchers positioning themselves somewhere in the middle. As Jamieson and Grounds stated "The research relationship must be based on the interviewer's *empathic neutrality* [my emphasis] and respect for the respondent" (Jamieson and Grounds, 2002, p.22). They adopted this standpoint in their work on men who had served long terms of imprisonment for paramilitary activities in Northern Ireland. Although one imagines this may be a difficult equilibrium to achieve at times, the relationship of trust that was engendered must have been essential for successful research to be carried out.

Because the empathetic relationship facilitates interpretative analysis, researchers have tended to restrict themselves to interviewing people with whom they feel they can build a collaborative relationship - few researchers choose to interview people they know (beforehand) that they will dislike and/or cannot 'work' with.[2] Perhaps for that reason the empathetic relationship often collapses into a sympathetic one. Although researchers have studied the poor, the excluded and the socially disadvantaged, few have interviewed the 'morally marginal' in society - those they find *personally* objectionable. Credible researchers welcome study of the disadvantaged, the excluded, and the transgressors in society, who could all be perceived as being victims of personal and social circumstance, but exclude others whose victim-status cannot be established so strongly. This is understandable, but the distinction is made on the basis of personal prejudice - prostitutes not rapists, drug-users not drug-dealers, the tortured not human rights abusers. As Blee, 1998, p.333 lamented, "Historians have paid less attention to the life stories of ordinary people whose political agendas they find unsavoury, dangerous, or deliberately deceptive". Where they have done so, they have restricted themselves to those whose moral agenda is wildly different to their own. By researching ultra-racists and nazi sympathisers, for example, Elwood (1988), or Koonz (1986), are unlikely to be accused of becoming implicated in the moral-political world-view of their interviewees. It is almost impossible to imagine a researcher telling an interviewee that they 'should' not have smoked so many cigarettes in their lives, or 'should' have brought their children up differently, but what about interviews with society's transgressors (criminals, people with addictions, or 'deviant' sexual tastes)? These tend to involve more ambiguous moral and empathetical positions. Whilst researchers have become less inclined to place their own sensibilities at the centre of a moral universe, and more open to a plurality of moral positions, personal sensibilities are likely to remain embedded in the research relationship. It is therefore worth exploring what happens when interview testimonies fundamentally challenge the moral positions personally held and adhered to by the interviewer.

Criminological research often lies at an intersecting nexus of ethical, moral and socio-legal values. It is, therefore, inherently problematic and relies on methodologies (at least at times) that allow the researcher to professionally

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'distance' themselves from the subject of their research, whilst still attempting to understand the context of their subjects' lives. This is not always easy. Carrying out an interview with a convicted murderer, serious sexual offender, or a paedophile, for example, could induce moral perspectives and prejudices that become intrusive during the interview process - whatever preparations are made beforehand. Tony Parker seems to have negotiated this delicate situation adroitly when he interviewed many of the marginal, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged during his long research career. He published a number of volumes that detailed the life histories of serious offenders in various prisons in England and abroad. Parker was out to demolish stereotypes of offenders. Prisoners, particularly sex offenders and murderers, are demonised in the media and the public like to think of criminals as 'a breed apart' (misguided as criminological research reveals this attitude to be time and time again). People like Parker, therefore, played an invaluable role, but his attitudes may not be typical of most researchers; and the astute and accomplished work he produced belies a moral complexity to this kind of research (Parker, 1994).

Lyn Smith, writing about Parker, asserts that he aimed to 'achieve a position of absolute trust and mutual trust between himself and the informant … that he was coming to meet them on absolutely equal terms, in a spirit of openness with no preconceived ideas' (Smith, 1999). That it was Parker's character that, in part, allowed him to describe the lives of prisoners with such craft and sympathy, serves to reinforce the theory that personal moral orientation can play a strong part in the interview/analytical process. Other researchers in similar situation may have felt, indignation, repugnance and disgust, as well as sympathy. It may, indeed, be too uncomfortable for the researcher to acknowledge feelings of empathy, since that may imply psychological transference or even collusion.

We need to separate interview practice from analytical process here. Researchers do not know what will be disclosed to them before an interview takes place. Although a project - say the interviewing of convicted murderers - may be framed to elicit particular kinds of evidence, or approach specific issues, there will be much which is unexpectedly revealed. Entering the prison environment - considering what may 'crop up' in the interview, arranging semi-structured interviews, can all help to prepare a researcher. But no-one really knows how they will react to sensitive, emotional information, or personally affronting/offensive narrative that is related to them. The emotional reaction of the researcher, and subsequent adjustments that the interviewer may make, can both impact on the way the interview is conducted and the course it subsequently takes. However, the acknowledgement of a particular moral framework does not mean that we have to embrace it. When the interview is concluded and the real work of analysis begins, the researcher is still able to understand viewpoints that they violently disagree with, or the narratives of those they dislike, and the strained and heightened emotional relationship that

might have developed in the interview does not necessarily inhibit analysis. Researchers may have (should have?) an emotional reaction to disturbing narratives, but their reactions do not prevent successful analysis.

It is not possible to separate out people into likeable and unlikeable interviewees. Indeed, the same interviewee may be 'deserving' of sympathy, condemnation or both at various points in an interview, but that is by-the-by. Nor can the analytical process simply rely on a sympathetic milieu to provide insight. An emotional response to the tears or distress of interviewees does not provide insight or engender an ability to comprehend the narrative being related. Interpretative practice must derive solely from empathy (or sympathy), but also the understanding and appreciation of context (Richardson and Godfrey, 2002). But perhaps by using transcribed interviews researchers can simply avoid the emotions that are engendered in the interview process? Possibly the secondary analysis of the interview will negate intrusive emotion and allow a more 'objective' analysis?

Many thousands of interview transcripts are now archived in England and across the world, and are available to the public (on condition that the user complies with the regulations of the particular collection). When an interviewee details a particularly distressing narrative, do the interview transcripts retain that emotional charge?

At this point it would be easy to simply reject this proposition out of hand. Reading transcripts surely cannot be compared with looking into the eyes of a distressed interviewee and hearing disturbing memories first hand? When somebody relates a disturbing episode in their lives, and is clearly upset by re-living the memories, there is a rawness and directness to the experience that affects the interviewer. It would be difficult for a researcher (one presumes) to gaze dispassionately at the visible distress of the person they are talking/ listening to - one can walk away from a transcript more easily than an interviewee, after all. Researchers (even of a younger generation than the septuagenarians and octogenarians often interviewed for oral history projects) probably will have themselves experienced a significant loss at some point in their lives. They may not have had identical experiences to the person they are interviewing, but close enough perhaps for empathy (and sympathy) to emerge. Empathetic identification may not be so deep for transcript readers, because they are twice removed from the process. First, they can only imaginatively visualise the respondent, which might lessen the impact of the distressing story they 'hear' narrated. Second, because the interviewee may, by the time of reading, be deceased. In the future, transcript readers may read about people who died decades (centuries?) ago.

As anyone who has studied a large number of transcribed interviews will know, written narratives of loss/suffering can still have a powerful effect. However, the transcript cannot convey the emotional charge that is created during the original interview. We should not, perhaps, be too precious about

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this, for it is also the case that memories related in an interview cannot carry the full force of being there at the time of the events described.

As the intensity of the interviewer's emotional experience recedes, do analytical skills alter proportionately? I put the question as bluntly as that so as to show the fallacy of an argument that suggests one relies on the other. The ability to analyse an interviewee's words does not rely on an emotional connection being made, and nor is it the case that the more intense the emotion, the more successful the interpretation will be. Although there is emotional labour involved in collecting or reading distressing stories, it is quite possible to interpret the narratives related without a surfeit of emotion. Historical or social science analysis relies on the development and application of theoretical perspectives, contextualization with available primary and secondary sources, and plausible explanations being formed. Although it is clearly not the intention of this article to belittle the effect that emotionally charged stories can have on a researcher, there is no reason why dispassionate analysis cannot subsequently be successfully carried out.

Given the possibilities that archived interviews offer historical research, in the near future it is likely that researchers will use interview transcripts to an unprecedented extent. The implications for their use are beginning to be discussed (see Bornat, 2002; Godfrey and Richardson, in press), but there is some way to go before the full ethical and methodological implications are fully appreciated - including the ability of transcripts to capture and reproduce emotional reaction, and the impact that may have on the analytical process. I welcome the coming debate.

Notes

1. Patai states that ethical research is probably impossible if that term is taken to mean complete equality between researcher and subject (Patai, 1991, p.139). She critiques those who believe that adherence to ideological positions, such as feminism, can prevent the researcher from exploiting their subjects. In this she is surely correct, and this 'tick-box' glibness has been critiqued elsewhere (Richardson and Godfrey, 2002). See also Borland's (1991) re-assessment of an oral interview carried out by herself with her grandmother.
2. Although it is possible to imagine that a psycho-social reading of interview transcripts, which may contradict and question the professed story of their interviewee, could lead to feelings of distrust (even betrayal) growing between researcher and subject (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). However, one rarely hears of interviews that resulted in alienation between researcher and interviewee, and when they do occur, they are rarely written up into academic research.

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