

## Who I was, Where I am, What I want to be

### Methods in focus: Interviewing Methods

#### Introduction

Interview methods are commonly used in research and as such have often been regarded as the 'gold standard' in research practice (Silverman 2001). Understood as 'a conversation with a research purpose' (Gubrium and Holstein 1999), these methods have often been regarded as simple and easy to use. Although much has been written about the different techniques that are contained within the wider family of interview methods (particularly the individual semi-structured interview), there are some techniques that are less well known and have had less written about them in relation to their practice. This resource sheet will introduce some of the lesser known interview methods that were used in the WWW research project (a study which focused on the social and educational experiences of young people in elite educational settings). These methods are: photographic memory interviews and prospective interviews. The focus of this resource will be on the practical experience gained in the WWW researcher project in order to introduce researchers to the issues that they may face when using such methods.

#### Photographic memory interviews

Although many believe the practice of photographic interviewing to have 'waxed and waned' over the years, photographs have regularly been used in research interviews. These interviews have taken many forms: with the photographs being taken by the researcher and introduced during the interview, with the photographs being taken by the participants and introduced during the interview, with the images being taken from elsewhere and introduced by the researcher or the participant in the interview, or with the interview maintaining a focus on talk and only briefing focusing on photographic images. The names that have been given to this practice have also changed across time and practice, with them being referred to as 'photographic elicitation interviews', 'photographic feedback interviews' and 'photographic narrative interviews'.

The method of introducing older (or previously created) images into an interview (in order to encourage reflection and forms of remembering) has received much less research attention. This practice involves the researcher asking the participants to bring photographs that they created or collected some time ago to the interview. These are images that are taken within an era of interest or with a particular focus in mind. The interviewer will then ask the participant about the images (e.g. their content, what the participant remembers about the event/people/issue that is pictured, the context in which the images were taken, the way in which they have been stored and displayed since).

A fascinating example of this approach can be found in Penny Tinkler's (2010) work with women who grew up in the 1950s. Tinkler asked a group of women to share their photograph collections created during this period with her in an interview. She asked them a number of questions about the images and the way in which they were currently viewed and understood. Tinkler found that even the storage of these images was illuminating. In one instance a missing photograph meant the regaling of a tale of a jealous relationship which had resulted in the removal of the image from the book in which it was usually kept.



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#### Memory work

As the name suggests, the photographic memory interview draws heavily on memory as a way of exploring temporal processes (exploring relationships between pasts, presents and futures). The way in which memory is viewed or understood by a researcher will affect the way in which it is approached in an interview. In this sense, the photographic memory interview method draws heavily on biographical research practice and understanding, where, for some time, researchers have asked the question: how much of what is spoken about during the interview is factual recollection and how far can it be considered a reconstruction of events, viewed through the lens of current experience? (i.e. Is memory something that is fixed and a perfect recollection of events or is it fluid and subject to change over time)?

*'Memory provides material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for meaning and possibilities. It involves active staging of memory; it takes an enquiring attitude towards the past and its (re)construction through memory'*  
*Annette Kuhn 1995: 157*

Many social researchers will view memory as something that is indirect, highly selective, unreliable and as reconstructions of past events. As Crawford et al (1992) suggest, memories do not necessarily help researchers to uncover the nature of the event itself, but rather the meaning that the event may have had for a person in the past, and the meaning that it may have now.

#### Examples of practice

The practice of using photographs in interviews to explore memories and their meanings owes a great deal to the work of Annette Kuhn (1995). In her work, Kuhn developed her own strategy for researching memories which involved the use of a photograph:

- 1) Consider the human subjects of the photograph
- 2) Consider the picture's context of production (where, why, how was it taken?)
- 3) Consider the context in which the image may have been made.
- 4) Consider the photograph's contexts of reception (who was it made for, who sees it now?)



The WWW research project was a follow-up study where some of the participants had been a part of a previous (related) project where photographic methods had been used. During the WWW project some of the participants were invited to bring these older images (which had been taken seven years ago) to an interview. The researcher and the participants then viewed the images in the interview and several questions were asked about what the participants thought about their production, how they viewed them now, who they have shown the images to since and where they had been kept in the meantime.

Many of the interviews produced interesting data about the ways in which these images had changed in meaning and significance over time. For example, some participants spoke of their embarrassment of being pictured in the way that they had and told the researcher that they didn't 'represent the real me'. Other participants told tales about the significance of the photos that seemed to be very different to those that had been told over seven years ago. However, some images seemed to be accompanied by the same tales, which was often something that the participants found significant because they felt it was evidence of their 'true identity' remaining the same even after all of these years.

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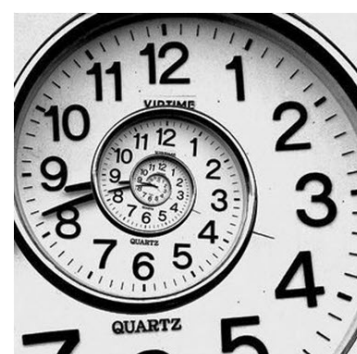
#### Considerations for photographic memory interviews

The following considerations are drawn from the practical experience of conducting photographic memory interviews as part of the WWW research project:

- 1) **Don't expect a free flowing narrative to naturally occur in these interviews just because there are photographs present.** Some of the research texts seem to suggest that this is the case (that images magically conjure up conversation because it gives participants more to talk about). However, as is the case in other interviews, some participants will find it difficult to say very much and you need to consider how you will try to generate conversation about the images. Some participants will simply see the images as self-evident and won't like being asked too many questions about their significance.
- 2) **Remember that the context in which you ask about the images and the type of questions that you ask will impact upon the data that you generate** (how you co-construct this with the participant). For example, if you approach the interview and the images in a particularly reflexive manner then it is likely that this is how your interviewee will also structure their answers for you. In the WWW research project the researcher found that many of the girls were prone to talk about themselves as 'success stories' and as 'good school girls', but this can also be related to the tasks that they were asked to complete as part of the project.
- 3) **Try to refrain from imposing all of your own memories on the participant during the interview** (if like the WWW project you were part of the initial process of creating the images as well). This is not because the aim is necessarily to be objective or value-free, but rather because it can be unnerving for the participant. If the researcher continues to write about the participants even when the project officially ends, it is likely that many of the details of the project will remain with the researcher and less so with the participant. Bringing up old memories can be a sensitive issue, especially if the participant does not want to remember things in quite the same way as the researcher.

#### Prospective Interviews

Prospective interviews also have a temporal focus, though they are more concerned with people's thoughts, feelings, plans and constructions of the future than of past events. Like memory, however, some researchers have suggested that talking about the future can also illuminate a participant's thoughts about the present, or the ways in which their present circumstances may be shaping their imaginings of the future. Thomson and Holland (2006), for example, discuss the way in which the young people in their study imagined their future adulthood through drawing on the capital and resources that were available to them in the present. Both memory interviews and prospective interviews should then be seen as cross-cutting different temporal dimensions (not just strictly focusing on those mentioned in their title).



Researchers may choose to ask participants about the future for a number of reasons: to find out about their immediate or more long-term plans (especially if they can't revisit them at another time), to try to understand change or continuity, or to examine people's understandings of the future (as the concept itself - i.e. What does future mean to them, how do they attempt to define it?).



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How researchers understand and view the future will have an impact on the research that they conduct and the questions that they ask in an interview. There are many different understandings of the future. Brian Heaphy, for example, suggests that we live in an era where time is being conceived of differently, (viewed as an extended present) where there is greater optimism about both the present and the future and neither are seen to be so closely linked to the historical determinations of the past. One of the other interesting ways in which researchers have approached and viewed time recently is in terms of subjective time. A distinction has been made by some researchers between 'objective clock time', and time as it is 'subjectively experienced' by a participant, recognising that the two may not be the same (Thomson and McLeod 2009).

The WWW project set out to explore the participants' understandings and plans for the future. In a prospective interview the young people were asked about their dreams, ambitions, plans, concerns and preparations for the future. In order to ensure that these were fully developed discussions the researcher made use of the 'life grid' (shown below). This is a tool that was originally used with health care patients in relation to their past, present and future, in order to understand how they experienced different medical symptoms or treatments over time.

The grid was adapted to focus on the future; looking at different aspects of the young people's lives at various points in time. The grid was often just placed in front of the participants so that they could talk through the different categories contained on the grid at their leisure. It is important for researchers using such a technique to recognise that the grid doesn't do all of the work for the researcher. Further prompting and questioning may still be needed. The grid can also sometimes discourage participants from talking in less structured ways, as they may produce short statements in relation to each box. Researchers may also want to consider how time is structured in this instrument, and how it may prevent a more fluid exploration of the temporal elements of social life.

#### Thinking about the future...

	One Year	Two years	Five years	Ten years
Friendships/ relationships				
Home/family life				
Education/ employment				
Where you live				
Interests/sports/ hobbies				
Hopes/ aims/ ambitions				
Other				

#### Links and relates readings:

-<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/sociology/research/ptn/>

Thomson, R. and McLeod, J. (2009) *Researching Social Change*. London: Sage Publications.

<https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/1396/1/jrfpaperrevisedFINAL.pdf>