CASE RESEARCH INTERVIEWS: ELICITING SUPERIOR QUALITY DATA

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Abstract

This paper reports on the process and stages of interviewing 53 respondents from five case study organizations. The purpose of the paper is to examine rapport development with the informant in a case research interview. The evidence indicates that solid rapport elicits superior quality data. The paper charts the key stages in the development of respondent rapport. Practical advice is provided for case researchers as to how rapport can be developed with interviewees during the qualitative interview.

KEY WORDS: Case research, interviews, rapport, social action research

INTRODUCTION

Case research entails researcher understanding of the dynamics of the interview present within single settings [Eisenhardt, 1989]. Typical case study data collection methods principally include observation and interviews. The conduct of interviews is not without difficulties and requires researcher acumen [Bourne and Jenkins, 2005; Silverman, 2006]. This is due to the nature of social interaction involved in the interview event. The interview is commonly concerned with linking events and meanings during the construction of a social reality, as experienced by organizational members [Van Maanen, 1998:xxi]. Essentially, case research involves description and understanding of actual human interactions, meanings and processes [Gephart, 2004]. The researcher is generally in the presence of the person interviewed [Maxwell, 1992]. The researcher must draw inference from what occurs in the encounter to broader actions and perspectives of the interviewee. It is, therefore, important that the interviewer understands the nature of the situation and the inter-personal relationship. In this paper the authors describe methods by which case researchers can conduct and manage face-to-face interviews to elicit high quality data in the form of thick description of organizational settings and rich insights into organization members' meanings of social reality.

Interviews, no matter how well designed and planned, often fail to elicit data of requisite quality. Even the most efficient researcher can encounter unforeseen problems. These are especially evident for interviews concerned with the nature of work specifically and social scientific inquiry more generally. An initial problem is the existence of suspicion on the part of the interviewees when the researcher is investigating contentious organizational issues. The respondent may agree to an interview, but be reluctant to divulge the level and detail of information required. The consequences can be highly problematic and even derail the entire research project.

To overcome any existent suspicion of the researchers' motives, or even where no such suspicion is evident and the interviewee is curious about, or even positively oriented to the research topic, the researcher must manage the interview relationship. In order to encourage positive engagement of the highest form there is a simple rule of thumb: the better the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the richer the quality of the data elicited. This is because experience shows that when

interviewees are comfortable and trusting, they relate richer stories and elaborated explanations. The principal caveat to rapport development is when it becomes sub-optimally high and narratives ensue that are lengthy, but non-research related. Thus, the process encompasses a number of elements: relationship development, agenda-related time and agenda-focussed discourse.

This paper describes, from the experiences of the authors, how the development of rapport with interviewees elicits higher quality data. The paper describes how the path to rapport is commonly a step process that evolves over the course of the interview. The paper describes how the stages have to be moved through subtly at the optimum pace to simultaneously establish credibility, confidence and trust whilst maximising research agenda related discourse. Research agenda related time can be lost in rapport development as often it involves social discourse on non-agenda matters when the hope is that there is pay-off in data quality elicited when the discourse returns to the research agenda. The paper offers guidelines on the optimization of interview time given task and people related criteria.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section considers the role and importance of rapport in relation to how respondents construct meanings of their social reality. The third section explains the main research project from which the interviews used in this paper are drawn. The penultimate section outlines the stages of interviewer-interviewee rapport development. The final section of the paper offers a number of practical guidelines to help future case researchers develop and cement respondent rapport during the qualitative research interview.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPONDENT RAPPORT

Strangely, there is no universal definition of respondent rapport during the qualitative interview. Some authors view rapport as 'frank and open discussion' [Goudy and Potter, 1975], while others see it as a degree of acceptance or cooperation on the part of the interviewee to a research project [Blohm, 2007]. Notwithstanding definitional ambiguities, respondent rapport is recognized as a particularly important element in both standardized and less structured interviewing [Fowler and Mangione, 1990]. In this paper rapport is defined in global terms, involving the exchange of meaningful dialogue that captures how respondents interpret their social world.

However, establishing respondent rapport also presents the researcher with a dilemma. On the one hand the researcher is eager for the interviewee to convey information and extrapolate meaning and understanding about the problem under investigation. In this vein it is posited that the interviewee ought to be put at ease and reassured about his/her role and confidentiality. Yet at the same time, it is argued there is a need for a level of detachment in the name of objectivity and scientificity to the interview method. Over-rapport may run the risk of consensus and the creation of a situation where the interviewee seeks to provide information that is thought to be expected or wanted by the researcher. Several studies even seek to measure rapport in quantitative terms with scales for certain factors, such as when the researcher smiles, gender, age and correlations of comparable characteristic features of the researcher and interviewee [Williams, 1968, see also Goudy and Potter, 1975 for a review].

Despite the claim of pseudo-scientific credibility through the rigors of research design that can be found in many textbooks, the qualitative interview is far from neutral. Social scientific inquiry is particularly concerned with the nature and meaning of reality. According to Kvale [1996:268] there is an 'epistemological crisis in the representation of knowledge' through qualitative research instruments. The interpretation of reality poses challenges for the qualitative researcher in explaining the social world and phenomenon under investigation. Sociological research in particular is concerned with providing valid and robust insights about a given phenomenon [Guba and Lincoln, 1994]. It is less concerned with theoretical replication than with the methodology of knowledge interpretation according to the experiences of those who live the phenomenon [Shah and Corley, 2006]. Van Maanen [1988] illustrates how very diverse stories 'from the field' can stress alternative meanings. *Realistic* tales are factual interpretations in which the researcher often appears removed from events. *Personalised* narratives often take the form of story telling that add a deep richness to data collected. Finally, Van Maanen [1988] considers *impressionistic* tales; wherein researcher-respondent dialogue is fused in ways that integrates complex social interactions. It is not that any one approach is superior to another in terms of knowledge generation and dissemination. The point is the researcher may encounter variables such as voice, tone, body language and context that point to different interpretations of knowledge and stress diverse ways of explaining the social world [Kvale, 1996]. Using such an eclectic analytical approach, this paper argues there are

various avenues that can unpack the intimacy of social action and the power relations that exist which influence and mediate the development of rapport building during the qualitative interview. Moreover, how the researcher responds to different situations and factors suggests that the role of respondent rapport may be ad hoc and even reactive, yet crucial to the outcome of a qualitative research interview.

The interview is a complicated social process that involves the thrust and parry associated with human interaction. In many areas of sociological research the interview can be highly politicized and subject to manipulation by events and actors beyond the immediate research project, such as government agencies, employers and public opinion [see Cohen and Taylor, 1977]. Furthermore, interviews about employment and the commercial world can be sensitive and controversial. Such research is rarely objective or bias-free in the sense of natural science: it is shaped and influenced by prior assumptions, socialisation and socio-political events affecting the respondent and researcher [McAdam et al, 2008]. This paper adds to knowledge generation by showing the centrality and significance of respondent rapport as a social and political process that unfolds, turns and changes direction during the interview itself.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND ITS METHODOLOGY

The starting point for this project was the transition of European regulations for employee information and consultation [see Dundon et al, 2006]. The research was funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment [DETE] in Ireland. The overarching approach to the research project can best be described as 'social action' research which "attempts to come to grips with the meanings of a situation [for] those involved in it" [Silverman, 1970:224]. The research aimed to understand the meanings of employee information and consultation. A multi-case research strategy was employed so as to allow respondents to explain and reflect on the detail of information and consultation mechanisms in their own words. The approach was qualitative in nature and the interview schedule was designed around several conceptual and analytical themes derived from existing theory and research about the topic of regulating for employee voice. It is important to note that this multi-case study strategy did not search for broad generalizations across a defined population or sample, but rather to understand particular situations as encountered by the respondents themselves. With this approach the researcher is then allowed to place the data in a wider context of explicit and implicit influences surrounding the phenomena under investigation.

The project involved fifteen organizations in total, which were selected to reflect differences in terms of organizational size, ownership, union and non-union voice arrangements and different sectors of economic activity. The majority of organizations operated in the private sector with two in the public sector. Ten were foreign-owned multinational companies, including US and other European-owned organizations. Nine of the case studies were unionised, of which three operated a closed shop agreement for union membership and another four had a formal partnership agreement at local level. As a whole, the sample covered a range of sectors that employ a variety of occupational categories. The sectors included retail, hotels, financial services, manufacturing, distribution, hi-tech [medical instruments, computer hardware and software development], engineering consultancy and the health service. Within each of the sectors there also existed important developments. In manufacturing, for instance, market influences varied by product quality with significant pressures from international currency fluctuations; in the medical device sector pressures for innovative products and speed of market response were highly significant mediators on the scope of voice arrangements used; and in the public sector deregulation was a dominant industrial relations issue that impacted on the type and extent of employee information and consultation.

In this paper interviews with 53 respondents from a sub-set of five of the fifteen case studies are used to examine the process of respondent rapport. Interviews were conducted with key informants at each of the five organizations. These included senior HR and general managers, union representatives and employees. Semi-structured interview schedules were designed for each of the respondent groups [management, union/employee representative, and employees] around a number of themes concerned with information and consultation. First, general information was sought from both management and workers, such as the type and range of voice mechanisms in use, market sector and the nature of organizational change. Second, perceptions of impact and the effectiveness of different voice arrangements were obtained from interviewees. For example, union representatives and employees were

asked about the extent to which they felt able to influence managerial decisions. Third, each respondent group [employees, union representatives and managers] were asked how the practices differed in terms of information, consultation and bargaining, and what these terms meant at each organization. Finally, the awareness and understanding of the European Information and Consultation legislation was assessed from questions addressed to each of the respondent groups.

The literature that deals with information and consultation can be confusing. The meanings assigned to these and related terms can vary considerably, and it is often unclear in what sense a particular person or organization is using one of these terms. Some authors refer to involvement, participation and consultation without fully acknowledging the differences between these terms. In one company, the term 'involvement' may be used to identify certain practices that in another firm are regarded as consultative. Differences in meaning can be further complicated depending on the presence or absence of a trade union. Some non-union companies prefer the terms 'empowerment' or 'communications', even when they utilize representative forums for consultation, such as non-union works councils [Cully et al., 1999].

The complex meanings associated with information and consultation within the contentious arena of workplace relations meant that a deep understanding of respondents' perceptions and attitudes was critical to the success of the research project. To get at these deeper meanings and perceptions of subjective realities the researchers realized that they needed to develop a relationship atmosphere with respondents, which was open, engaged, and trusting. The next section of the paper explains how good relations were developed and managed to a level of rapport in the relationship that provided the basis for rich insight about factors that shaped the social dynamics of information and consultation at enterprise level.

DEVELOPING RAPPORT IN STAGES THROUGH THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The evidence from the multiple case studies is reported next, showing a five-stage qualitative research interview process. Four of these stages were found to assist in building empathy and rapport in the relationship between researcher and interviewee. The final stage shows the importance of post-interview sensitivity to further opportunities for data collection.

STAGE I: OPENING THE INTERVIEW

Interviewees are sometimes uncertain of their role and utility to a research project. They can be suspicious of the researchers' motives that may, at best, be an inconvenience or intrusion to their normal work activities. The researcher needs to clarify and sell the research project, the interviewees' roles, why their knowledge [often tacit] is important. Interest can be piqued by suggesting ways the research outcomes may be of use or interest to the interviewees and/or their organization. If the interviewer is not able gain interest at this earliest of stages time may be wisely spent on developing early relations. Off-topic agendas such as general news items, sporting events or any such happenstance that might be of mutual interest can be employed. Background information on the interviewees, their organization, business conditions or any recent events may be used to spark general non-agenda discourse. In essence, the authors found that being sensitive to any early opportunities for positive social interaction paved the way for more fluid dialogue, even when not always relevant directly to the research agenda. Time may be lost on research related topics but the gamble is that a warmer relationship develops that later leads to richer narrative and more elaborated replies.

STAGE II: SEARCHING FOR A COMMON GROUND

The second stage is particularly concerned with searching for a common ground between researcher and interviewee. The endeavor at this stage is to provide further rationale for the research topic and ensure the researchers' agenda is appreciated and understanding of the researchers' needs is improved. Actual benefits of the research for the respondent start to be realized during this stage. Amongst the respondents interviewed during this research project, many began to furnish factual data and the seeds of storytelling began to emerge. Time had to be spent on establishing credibility and this helped to create initial bonds of identity. One drawback is that, again, research-specific time had to be sacrificed in order to establish a common ground for the interviews to proceed more effectively.

STAGE III: ESTABLISHING EMPATHY

In this stage the researcher seeks to build on any developing bonds with interviewees. The endeavor is to develop commonality and empathy that is emerging between interviewer and interviewee. The objective is to get both parties to reconcile themselves to the research agenda. This resulted in an atmosphere that was much more relaxed and an awareness of the need for interviewee explanation became more obvious. The interviews now displayed a greater degree of confidence in the researchers' motives. Respondent's proffered relevant examples and their narratives were fleshed out, offering deeper insights into the construction and meaning of their social world. Conversation was more natural and fluid in this stage. Focusing on the research topic optimized time and the researchers began to delve deeper into meaningful areas of investigation.

STAGE IV: EMBEDDING RAPPORT

At stage IV the dynamics of the interview can change significantly. A level of trust was much more evident among the informants interviewed across the case studies. The extant rapport between interviewer and interviewee uncovered much deeper extrapolations of lived experiences from the informants being interviewed. The quality of the data was now evidently a primary concern to the interviewees, signaling the strengthening of researcher-respondent relationship. Interviewees trusted the researchers to a much greater extent and this showed a deeper appreciation of their role in the research outcomes. Significant in the embeddedness of rapport during this stage was listening skills among researchers. However, on several occasions conversation diverted to non-research agenda issues and the problem of over-rapport emerged. Over-familiarity in this context was noticeable as interviewees seemed to provide information that s/he thought the researchers wanted to hear. Therefore, sensitivity to the possibility of over-rapport is an important element for researchers to be aware of during this stage of an interview.

Nevertheless, with appropriate rapport in interviewer-interviewee relations came fully fleshed out narratives, often accompanied by amusing anecdotes. The interviews now uncovered much deeper interpretations of social meaning and illustrated the micro-politics associated with power relations between capital and labour through a more engaging narrative. From the cases reported here, conversations at this stage were now more fluid, and detailed data enabled meaningful knowledge generation about the dynamics of employee information and consultation across small and large cases, some of which were unionised and others that were non-unionised.

The following excerpts from field note transcripts illustrate high quality data elicited once rapport was established with informants. For example, while managerial respondents among this group of case studies often praised the contribution of unions to organizational goals and change management strategies, it was clear that sponsoring a partnership approach also consolidated management control over decision-making. Two managerial interviewees similarly remarked:

Consultation means dialogue, but in reality dialogue is not seeking agreement.
HR Manager [HealthTec MNC]

We negotiate to an extent … [the] company tries to take on-board and reach a resolution if the workers are not happy, but the final decision rests with management.
HR Manager [[Manu MNC]

Beyond the specific notion of partnership there were also concerns about the degree of information and consultation generally. The majority of workers and shop stewards were critical about the extent to which they could 'have a say'. Almost all workers related the term 'information' to communication systems of one sort or another, principally the channels that existed to receive information from their employer. In the majority of cases this included newsletters, bulletin boards and email communications that essentially meant a one-way system of information. In contrast, consultation meant something very different and workers contextualized this not as partnership but as 'dialogue', 'an exchange of views', 'providing an

input to decisions' or 'having views listened to'. However for most employees and union respondents, such dialogue was rather shallow, as the following statements by employees indicate:

> *Employees don't have an input. They [management] might say something but they're not going to change anything in the company. No way!*
> Union Representative [Wholesale Inc]

> *Employees are informed rather than consulted. Depending on the type of decision, we may be told what has to be done and can decide how to do it.*
> Employee [Consult Eng Co]

> *We have consultation, but it's consultation after management decides.*
> Union Steward [Gas Co]

> *Consultation is not a term that the company would use, but two-way communication is considered very important.*
> Employee [Pharma MNC]

> On the other side of the workplace relations, there was a strong belief that management has the right to manage:

> *If decisions have to be taken then that will happen, with or without consultation*
> Manager [Consult Eng Co]

STAGE V: CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

The analysis of the 53 interviews reported here shows that rapport does not necessarily end with the closure of an interview. Post-interview opportunities for further data collection were evident in all of the five cases examined. Researcher-respondent discourse continued to furnish additional fruitful information and helped gain access to other potential informants for follow-up interviewing. This post-interview stage also allowed access to supplementary data, such as company reports and factory tours. The evidence shows here that gratitude for the data proffered further cemented the relationship. The researcher is therefore advised not to switch off as interviews come to an end but rather remain sensitive to leads and signals of further data opportunities.

CONCLUSION AND SOME GENERAL GUIDELINES

There are important lessons from the experiences of this multi-case research that show how rapport building, empathy and an appreciation of the changing dynamics of interview research can lead to deeper forms of information discourse and elicit higher quality data. Social science research involves making assumptions about the form and nature of a given reality or phenomenon. In research concerned with organizational analysis, these assumptions demonstrate that the social world is complex and uneven. The way researchers make sense of such complexity is an attempt to describe and evaluate the meanings and perceptions of a given phenomenon and reality. Case research can add to knowledge generation not by some broad or wide-sweeping generalisation, but rather by explaining the particular and the specific factors that shape a given social phenomenon: in these cases, that phenomenon is information and consultation.

There are several practical guidelines from this paper that can inform and add value to future research of a similarly qualitative nature. First, *be prepared.* Cues and signals for common bonds are more obvious when the researcher is attuned to them due to prior knowledge. From the authors' experience it can be argued that there is a strong need to be sensitive to non-agenda opportunities to expand interaction in order to develop dialogue between interviewee and researcher. This is by no means easy and often requires a degree of knowledge about the organization and respondent group prior to the commencement of the research interview. Therefore, preparation and background data about the interviewee, the organization and any pertinent issues can provide the scope and space to engage even

in non-research agenda issues where necessary. As Pasteur famously decreed, "in the fields of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind". Next, *be credible*. It is advantageous for a researcher to establish their independence and credentials in the research process from the outset. This is especially important in employment relations research. Third, *be patient*. The sequence and phraseology of the questions asked is important in terms of rapport building. As the authors discovered, diving into the interview schedule too soon on the assumption of time pressure can easily destabilize the interview and damage a level of rapport commensurate with a fluid flow of information. Use time available accordingly. Sacrificed time in relationship development must be turned into task-related time in the rapport stage. Fourth, *be engaged*. Possible prompts may include encouraging feedback, approving nods, assurances of data utility, expressions of gratitude, and even laughter, if appropriate. Next, *be aware*. Know where you are in the staged process. Opportunities to form bonds occur when common identities can be turned to advantage. Such commonalities may arise through good fortune or luck, yet it is the skill of the qualitative researcher to recognize these as opportunities when they arise. Direct the conversation to non-agenda areas of discourse that is likely to ignite respondent interest. Finally, *be sensitive.* The qualitative researcher concerned with knowledge generation and the objective of interpreting the complex respondent experiences of the social world ought to be tuned to the social dynamics that evolve during the case interview situation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has reported on the authors' experiences of rapport development during a series of qualitative interviews. These experiences showed how the development of genuine rapport could lead to the collection of superior data of a deeper and more meaningful form. The evidence was used to identify a number of important stages in the evolution and subsequent cementing of respondent rapport. From this, practical guidance has been proffered for future case researchers.

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