Sometimes it can take two - paired interviews

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers often use one-on-one interviews or focus groups to gather data. This reflective paper examines the little discussed alternative of paired interviews and makes the claim that they are a viable and potentially valuable option. In my research into young adults’ perceptions of their national identities offering the option for friends to be interviewed together provided an alternative to one-on-one interviews; an option that was embraced by many. While not without drawbacks, paired interviews worked to reduce the discomfort felt by some in the interview situation, provided more space for thinking, allowed respondents to build more comprehensive responses through their discussions and enabled respondents to augment each other’s stories.
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One-on-one interviews and focus groups are well recognised information gathering strategies used in qualitative research. Both are used to illicit detailed responses which provide insights into people’s life experiences. Neither strategy perfectly meets the needs of all projects thus researchers must determine which best meets their particular requirements. In this reflective paper I propose that ‘paired interviews’, where two respondents are interviewed at the same time can be a practical and rewarding alternative. Paired interviews can assist respondents to feel relaxed and comfortable in the interview, provide a vibrant environment that encourages respondents to build on each other’s ideas and when the respondents are friends enables them to enhance each other’s stories. Interviewing respondents in pairs cannot be regarded as a panacea to all researchers’ concerns, there are many instances where they would not be suitable however, they are an option that is rarely examined in literature. My respondents appreciated having a choice; some still chose one-on-one interviews but others were enthusiastic about sharing the experience.

Background

My current research involves examining young adults’ understandings of their national identities. I planned to interview 18 to 25 year olds with an Anglo, Southern European or South East Asian background about their notions of Australianness, their feelings of national attachment and how they had developed their ideas. Often young people are not heard or have had others speak for them so I aimed to gain ‘access to people’s ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher’ (Reinharz, 1992: 19) by creating a ‘caring research environment that (is) [was] non-hierarchical’ (Liamputtong, 2004: 450). Much has been written about the virtues of both one-on-one interviews and focus groups. After considering these options I chose to use one-on-one interviews. Considerable attention was given to planning these interviews so that respondents would feel relaxed (Bouma & Ling, 2004: 177; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, Alexander, 1995: 79; Ruane, 2006: 147) and ‘safe enough to talk freely’ (Kvale, 1996: 125). My intention was to minimise the ‘asymmetry of power’ which Kvale (1996: 20) suggests is inherent in interview situations; an asymmetry that is heightened when respondents are young people and
the interviewer is older (Leyshon, 2002: 2). Despite these efforts some of the respondents appeared uncomfortable in the interviews. After her interview one respondent remarked that the interview was ‘hard’ and she had felt uncomfortable as she was unable to quickly formulate answers to all the questions. I was concerned that any respondent should feel ill at ease, especially in this case as she was particularly articulate, well informed and outgoing. If she had felt uncomfortable then I guessed that others may have felt similarly. A solution to this problem came in the form of paired interviews. The first such interview was not planned and I had not contemplated it in any depth as an answer to respondents’ unease. Two respondents who were to be interviewed one after the other arrived at the same time for their interviews. They were friends and so had come together. We discussed the option of interviewing them together rather than one at a time and they quickly embraced the idea. This interview was a success and I have since offered this option to subsequent respondents. Some have been keen to bring along a friend to be interviewed with them while others have been content to be interviewed on their own.

**Literature Review**

Much has been written about interview techniques. Many texts differentiate between individual interviews and focus groups, they note the different outcomes of each strategy, yet do not explore the dynamics of a paired interview, especially if the pair is friends (Baker, 1999, Blanche & Durrheim (eds) 2004, Bouma & Ling: 2004, Leedy & Ormrod: 2005, Lichtman, M:2006, May: 2001, Punch: 2001, Robson: 2002, Ruane: 2005). While paired interviews offer many of the characteristics of focus groups there can be significant differences and pairs of friends can be different again. Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 66 – 70) briefly note the possibility of ‘multivocal’ interviews emphasising that the ‘narrative force of multivocality may be more poignant and visible’ when more than one person is interviewed. Liamputtong (2007) also explains that ‘conjoint’ interviews are ‘more accepted by the participants as (it) [they] provide(s) a more comfortable situation for them’. Attempts to locate more discussions about paired interviews in data bases and texts proved fruitless. It is

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1 Multivocal is the term used by Holstein and Gubrium to refer to interviews with more than one respondent.
2 Liamputtong uses the term conjoint to refer to paired interviews.
highly probable that discussion of this strategy exists, but may be embedded in analysis of research outcomes (Dunne, 2000; Morris, 2001; Song, 1998) and not presented as an investigation of a strategy. However even in these instances the discussions located were not about friends being interviewed together; rather they were about interviewing partners or siblings at the same time.

**Reduced Awkwardness**

A key feature of the paired interviews was their more relaxed nature, as noted by Liamputtong (2007). Respondents immediately appeared more at ease, they had an ally, which may have altered the power dynamics of the interview (Kvale, 1996: 20). Rather than me being the one to ask questions and wait for replies discussion often took place between the two respondents. For example when asking about occasions celebrated by their families a discussion took place between two respondents as they explored the different emphasis their families placed on certain celebrations. For one Easter meant ‘chocolate and camping’ whereas for the other it was a ‘massive occasion’ because she was Catholic. These discussions between respondents reduced my role, instead of being an interrogator I was merely an observer. Certainly this is also a feature of focus groups where respondents have the support of others and are able to engage in discussion, however a pair offered more opportunity for each to speak. As my respondents were friends who had chosen to be interviewed together they came with an established relationship and had decided that they were happy to discuss the topic with each other present. With a focus group of friends the interplay of relationships could be far more complex, they may not all feel so at ease with each other. My respondents spoke with confidence, each respected the ideas of their friend and allowed them space to speak. Of course this may not always be the case, friendships are not necessarily equal relationships and there is always the possibility that one may overshadow the other. Peer pressure may skew the responses given. This is a factor that a researcher considering paired interviews would need to recognise and develop strategies to minimise its impact.

My topic was well suited to paired interviews. Few young adults have given much consideration to their national affiliations. Most respondents commented on this at the end of their interview; saying that they had not previously thought about their sense of national identity and what it meant to them. Many one-on-one interviews were
punctuated with long pauses as respondents considered their replies. At these times respondents appeared uneasy, as if they felt they should be able to produce an immediate response. Many even apologised after the interviews expressing their concern that they had not had a lot to contribute due to their lack of prior reflection on the topic\(^3\). After the one-on-one interviews many noted that they felt they would have more to contribute if they had more time to think. The paired interviews provided the forum for respondents to work together to forge their replies. They also had space to think and formulate their views while the other spoke. In the one-on-one interviews such thinking time was silent, not filled with the noise of another speaking. Ruane (2005: 153) notes that silences are not ‘accepted’ in our conversations and there is a pressure to ‘keep awkward silences to a minimum’ so the respondents in the one-on-one interviews were eager to move on to the next question rather than have time to think in uncomfortable silence. In one instance two respondents were asked about Australian values. Listening to each other’s responses provided space for them to consider their own ideas more fully and so they were able to provide more substantial answers to the questions.

J – Freedom …

N – Yeah I think that freedom thing like individualism, capitalism.

J – Capitalism like no one wants to work but there is the idea …

N – You can be from a different background and in theory have the same possibilities …

This exchange resulted in the pair developing a comprehensive response and neither having to feel unprepared or poorly informed for not having an immediate answer at hand.

Had my topic had more immediate resonance with the every day lives of young adults they may have had ready formulated perspectives and been equipped to more quickly offer insightful view ideas. As few had previously contemplated the meaning and

\(^3\) The fact that respondents had not previously considered these issues was in itself informative, however my aim was to illicit as much insight into the respondents’ thinking as possible so I was eager for them to talk as much as possible.
importance of their national identity having a friend enabled them to discuss ideas and clarify their thinking. This topic would not have been appropriate to examine with a pair of respondents that was not self selected as they may have been reluctant to expose particular perspectives or experiences in front of someone with whom they did not feel so at ease. At times respondents spoke about how they had been teased due to their background and such information may not have been as forthcoming in the presence of an unknown other. Similarly some may have been reticent to share experiences in a larger group where they may have been less confident of the reactions of all group members. As my pairs knew the topic beforehand and chose to come together there tended to be a sense of ease and confidence about participating in the discussion together. Not all topics would be appropriate for paired interviews, having a friend, or just another person present when exploring very sensitive or personal subjects could very likely stifle open disclosure. There could be many private topics that a person would be reluctant to share in the presence of others.

Building on each other’s ideas

In the paired interviews when one person spoke he/she often sparked ideas in his/her friend. They became ‘self-reflexive’ as they had a space to ‘air, review and reason their views aloud’ (Cerulo cited in Ruane, 2005: 159). For example one respondent described Australians as ‘laid back’. This initiated a discussion about the work ethic of Australians, providing far more comprehensive data than the initial comment. At times the role of the interviewer receded as the pair debated and interrogated ideas. Rather than the interviewer always initiating questions they asked the probing questions themselves, they wanted to illicit more information. At one point a respondent noted, ‘now that you’ve brought that up, I’ve never actually thought about it’ reflecting how the discussion prompted him to more comprehensively investigate the question without the interviewer having to intervene. In another case a friend said, ‘but if you …’, also encouraging the friend to consider other perspectives. The friends ‘activated, stimulated and cultivated’ each other’s ‘interpretive capabilities’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 17). Discussion often led to the telling of stories to illustrate points. When discussing Australian mateship and how Australians tend to ‘look after’ each other a respondent told the story of how her neighbours all cut each other’s lawns when someone is away on holiday. Even banter between friends resulted in
significant insights. Initial joking about immigration restrictions led one pair to recognise the complexity of the issue and then explore it far more seriously. The respondents were not merely ‘passive vessels of answers’ (italics in original) (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003: 30) but ‘productive sources of knowledge’ (italics in original) (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003: 74). They worked together to give meaning to their experiences. It could be suggested that the views of the respondents were swayed by this discussion and not a true reflection of the respondents’ feelings. However any response is merely a reflection of a respondent’s opinion at that moment in time. In a world of ongoing change people are forced to always be reflexive (Giddens, 1981) so their understandings can never be viewed as fixed and final. People’s minds change as they gain new information and experience new situations, their ideas are not static. Holstein and Gubrium (2003: 71) note that ‘you cannot expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production.’ The respondents engaged each other in debate about the questions which enhanced the depth of thought given to responses; the responses that were given reflected their thinking at that time.

Focus groups can certainly create this same energy and dynamism through discussion (Baker, 1999: 225; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 70, 71; Lichtman, 2006: 129; Punch, 2001: 177; Ruane, 2005: 157), however in a larger group some may be intimidated to speak thus losing their contribution or the views of the more outspoken may dominate and effectively silence any alternative perspectives. In a one-on-one interview the interviewer can ask probing questions to illicit more information, however too many of these could make the interview feel like an interrogation and alienate the respondent. The pairs supported each other to develop and share their stories.

**Enriching stories**

A feature of the pairs being friends was their familiarity with each other’s experiences and ideas. Each was able to reinforce and support what the other said. Part of my research explored how respondents’ understandings of their national identities developed. In one case a respondent talked about his friend’s Greek family: ‘I go over there and your Mama will go, hey have food.’ He saw this as being an aspect of his friend’s Greek-ness and very different to his own family and used the story to emphasise how family can impact upon identity development. In another case one
respondent commented on how her friend had been teased at school because of her facial hair and how this had been used by fellow students to differentiate her. This resulted in a discussion about peer influence and the significance of appearance. The two discussed how peers made distinctions based upon physical attributes and how this emphasised difference which reinforced the idea that not all Australians were the same.

At times the respondents compared their experiences and discussed why they may have been similar or different. For example one pair discussed why they felt an attachment to one part of their heritage more than another.

N - Yes I definitely associate more with the Italian side than I do with the Scottish…

G – I feel more of a pull to Germany than I do to England. I think my family is more recently from there…

N – I think the same as well. I had more contact with the Italian side.

It might be suggested that paired interviews lack the detailed personal information obtained in a one-on-one interview; that more shallow and diluted information is gained as the interview focus was not on just one. Given the interaction that took place between the respondents and the augmentation of each other’s stories I would argue that the data may have in fact been richer, particularly if the respondents were shy and unsure.

**Not strategy is always right**

As respondents were recruited they were invited to attend an interview alone or to come with a friend for a paired interview. Those who brought a friend reduced the researcher’s task of locating suitable respondents, as they undertook some of this responsibility when finding a friend that met the criteria. Not all respondents chose to be interviewed with their friends. One respondent recruited several friends to also be interviewed. She stated that she preferred not to be interviewed with some of them as she was not very close to them and felt that her responses might have been compromised. She however, was keen to be interviewed together with a more longstanding friend. Others simply preferred to be interviewed alone. In some cases
this decision was just based upon logistics; it was more convenient to find a suitable
time and location if only one person was to be interviewed. This highlighted the
importance of involving the participants in the decision; it gave them a sense of
involvement and participation in the process hence more ownership of the interview.
Having the choice provided the respondents with options; they were able to select
their preferred interview situation which appeared to decrease their unease at the time
of the interview.

Conclusion

Providing respondents with the choice of whether to be interviewed alone or with a
friend enhanced the quality of data obtained from my interviews. The paired
interviews offered a safer and more comfortable environment for some of the
respondents. With the security of having a supportive friend at hand many were more
relaxed about sharing their thoughts, they felt at ease discussing ideas which resulted
in more reflective and enriched replies. Their familiarity with each other gave them
increased confidence to speak and also enabled them to supplement each other’s
stories. One-on-one interviews and focus groups are much examined data gathering
strategies; paired interviews offer an alternative. This alternative is neither superior
nor inferior to the other more usual options. Like all strategies paired interviews have
strengths and flaws, yet they are an option that can be considered; an option that can
be very appropriate for some research tasks.

Key words

Interviews, pairs, friends, young adults
Bibliography


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