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Interviewing

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Interviewing

Qualitative researchers of sport, exercise and health prefer interviewing methods to any other interpretivist technique of data collection. Without question, interviewing is the methodological *lingua franca* for researchers who are qualitatively oriented. Today, there are many different interviewing techniques, styles and approaches. Thus, there is no standard definition of, or set of procedural templates guiding, the interviewing process. Further still, while methodologists often describe how a proto-typical interviewing process should unfold, the lived practice of research instructs differently. Researchers spend their entire careers becoming experts in specific styles of interviewing, and use the techniques fluidly and creatively to answer a full range of research into socio-cultural or social psychological questions about sport, physical activity and health. There is an old adage in research methods classes that interviewing is more of an art than a science, and this is certainly true.

What Is This Concept?

Interviewing is a method predicated on a few important beliefs and perspectives. First, interviewers feel that knowledge about the world is gained by asking people about how they view, experience and see the world. Quite simply, how could we ever believe people experience pain and injury in sport in precisely the same ways? Interviewing is a technique informed by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey and German sociologist Max Weber's notion of *verstehen* (roughly translated from German as 'meaningful or sympathetic understanding'), and the social science tradition of interpretivism. Basically, these schools of thought argue that to understand others' behaviours, researchers need to see the world from people's varied points of view. This idea has been recently discovered by psychologists of sport who have developed a method of interviewing called 'interpretive phenomenological analysis' (Smith, 2007). The reality of pain and injury in sport is, for example, not fixed or immutable, as it is subject to situated personal and group interpretation. To know how to encourage safe play among athletes, I first need to know how people in an athletic culture interpret pain and injury differently and commonly. Interviewers, then, do not understand human behaviour in a standard way, structured by biological, psychological or

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social forces, but rather argue that it unfolds and is understood relatively by people. This is a huge assumption and it underpins the logic of all interviewing-based studies!

Second, and based on the above, interviews are most appropriately used as a technique of data collection when researchers require knowledge of how human beings assign meaning to their thoughts and actions within cultural contexts. If I wanted to know the best

mechanisms for treating a broken femur, I would not interview athletes. If I wanted to know about the role of neuropeptides in the healing processes, interviewing is out of the question. But if I want to know what it is like to be pressured by a coach to play through pain and how particular sports cultures might demand athletes to 'suck it up' and take risks, I would want to talk to many athletes. Why? Because they could teach me (provide first-hand knowledge) about the lived experiences of injury, how it is defined by people in their sports culture, the norms of play dictating how pain is to be defined, and what social influences help shape an athlete's mindset when they play through pain and injury. In brief, I need to see injury and pain in all the ways athletes do; would programmes and policies designed to improve conditions of safe play start out from any better point of departure?

Third, and finally, students often ask how and why interviewing is more appropriate in a given study than face-to-face surveys. One simple word will suffice: standardisation. Consider the research topic, 'Athletes with low self-efficacy will play through injury more than athletes with high self-efficacy scores.' By contrast, consider the following question: 'Does one's sense of self as an athlete play a role in the sports injury process?' In the first instance, I would survey: we need to measure efficacy levels in athletes and their 'playing through injury' behaviours. In the second case, I would interview athletes. I need to explore, or discover, what playing through injury means to them as athletes with different identities and perspectives on who they are as athletes. Surveys, in practically all of their manifestations, are built upon the principles of respondent similarity rather than difference. Questions are by and large standardised through surveying (that is, everyone is asked the same question in the same manner) to generate comparable, quantifiable data across the participant sample in the effort of testing tightly defined hypotheses. The interviewing process is, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), oriented towards maximising potential difference and variability in respondents' answers. Stated in another way, survey

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researchers normally speak *to* respondents, asking them to provide answers within narrowly defined parameters. Interviews seek to speak *with* subjects in order to generate a wide and deep knowledge base about their topic.

Why Is This Relevant to Me?

Interviewing is by design an open method of data collection. We routinely call interviews 'guided conversations', directed by an ostensible research topic at hand but flexible like a run of the mill conversation between two people – yet with a slight twist. Most of our interviews take the form of a conversation, ranging from 30 minutes to several hours, about a series of topics germane to a research question. An interview-based research project is best employed when a researcher wishes to gather a large amount of biographical, experiential or attitudinal information on a relatively small group of respondents. Respondents are identified from a non-probability sampling pool, usually because they have been identified as having special, typical, or particularly relevant knowledge about the subject at hand. Snowball sampling, convenience sampling and theoretical/purposive sampling are regularly employed.

Defining the type of and approaches to interviewing is a bit of a challenge, but methodologists tend to assign interviewing approaches to one of seven categories:

- **Structured, face-to-face interview:** A structured interview is one in which the researcher asks respondents to answer a series of standardised questions. In truth, I am always a bit puzzled as to why we include structured interviews in discussions of the technique, because these are essentially mock-surveys.
- **Semi-structured, face-to-face interview:** The semi-structured interview is the gold standard. Essentially, the researcher comes to the interview with a list of 10–30 questions to be covered (called an 'interview schedule') in one manner or another during the conversation. I tell students that the interview schedule is like a prop or a prompting sheet, reminding us what we would like to ask the respondent in general, but it is not a script! The interviewer and respondent dialogue back and forth, with the researcher picking up on and asking for elaboration regarding new, exciting, important, ambiguous or conceptually intriguing information that emerges during the conversation.

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- **Open, face-to-face interview:** The exciting, wild west of interviewing approaches. An interviewer has only a brief list of topics to be included in the discussion, and approaches the exchange like a brainstorming session rather than a led conversation. Here, the goal is to remove research bias from the interview (that is, interview schedules always tend to reflect what the researcher thinks about the subject already!). Unless you have a lot of experience in doing interviews and feel comfortable in the process, this approach should probably be avoided.
- **Life history interview:** The life history interview is a blend of semi-structured and open interviewing. These interviews are highly detailed explorations of people's biographies. In many cases, researchers might interview a subject on several occasions in order to draw on and further explore themes and events emerging from previous interviews.
- **Collaborative interviewing:** A rather recent development within the social sciences, collaborative interviewing grew in popularity quite rapidly following Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) call for more participatory forms of interviewing. A collaborative or 'active' interview is one in which the researcher encourages the interviewee to co-direct the interview, and in which the researcher's interpretations of emerging data are openly discussed in the interview context. The goal is to stimulate creative and open dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee in an effort to tease out the many ways a person might make sense of the subject at hand.

- **Focus groups:** Born out of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, focus group interviewing is a situation in which several participants (normally 6–12) are interviewed together, at one time. Focus groups are a strategic and efficient way of gathering a mass of data, and are especially relevant when a researcher wishes to witness how people speak about and culturally negotiate a subject of interest (just imagine getting a group of young men together to speak about sexism in sport – the answers you might hear from men in private could differ considerably from how they answer in public in front of their peers!). A specialist form of focus group interviewing is ‘collective memory work’ (Haug, 1999), wherein subjects co-operatively discuss past experiences (like pain and injury in sport as a youth) in order to make sense of them.
- **Computer mediated interviews:** Forms of instant communication online have partially changed the terrain of interviewing. For research participants who are difficult to reach spatially, or who have busy schedules, interviewing them over time through posted weblogs, instant messaging

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and other forms of virtual interface is common. Additionally, many young people are more comfortable communicating via the Internet (as it is so common for them within their peer groups), and people with either learning or communicative disabilities might be far more comfortable with online interviewing at their own pace.

In all the cases above (perhaps with the exception of structured interviewing), the aim of the interviewing process is to gain a preliminary empirical understanding of the topic you are researching, to potentially break new ground in a subject area or take a research topic in a new direction.

Show Me How It's Used!

At the beginning of this chapter I alluded to the difference between a textbook definition of interviewing and how interviews are engaged in practice. There is nothing like conducting your first set of interviews in your first qualitative research project. It is amazing how different and unpredictable the interview process is ‘in the flesh’ than as routinely described in textbooks. Anyone can ask a question; really, honestly, anyone can do it. The tricky part is asking questions as a researcher, and knowing how and why you will use the data you gather from respondents. It might be relatively straightforward to design an interview, but its application is another matter entirely. Trust my claim (or test it for yourself with a review of the literature) that there are three main applications of the interview method. One is the so-called ideal type, and the other two dominate in actual practice.

- **Concept development or grounded theory:** If I could exorcise one concept or idea from our interviewing canon, it would be grounded theory. As developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and elaborated by Charmaz (2006), grounded theory is like the Holy Grail of the interviewing process. This application of interviewing methodology is a classic analytic-inductive approach to knowledge gathering and theory development, where the data collected through interviewing are used to develop *sui generis* theories. In its traditional manifestation, the grounded analysis of interview data is a concept and theory-building process emerging from a programme of knowledge collection not fuelled or directed by preconceived theoretical ideas. Such emergent theoretical understandings are then to be used in developing general, testable propositions and hypotheses about human behaviour.

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An impossible practice, to say the least. Grounded theory is now, more or less, used as a conflated buzzword among sport, exercise and health researchers referring to a process of open coding or reflexive analysis. Translation: it is a lazy term for an interpretive reading of interview data. A review of literature claiming to be informed by a grounded theoretical approach will reveal few, if any, new theoretical or conceptual ideas emerging from the research process; or, for that matter, developed, testable hypotheses generated from an inductive approach to data analysis. Most people claiming a grounded theoretical approach to the interviewing process are actually practising concept elaboration.

- **Concept elaboration:** This is the garden-variety application of the interviewing method, and partly represents what Anselm Strauss envisioned as the role of qualitative analysis through interviewing. All researchers have conceptual ideas in their heads when planning a research process, implementing a method of data collection and then analysing the data. Let's be honest, we have them! I have theoretical tastes and preferences like everyone else; certain theoretical ways of seeing the world make sense to me more than others and I explore their academic worth through interviewing processes. We frame research questions from these perspectives and import conceptual ideas into a plan of interview attack. As a fan of theories in cultural studies, for example, I am heavily influenced by particular post-structuralist and neo-Marxist concepts. My interview-based research efforts are essentially programmes designed to explore the boundaries of the concepts contained in the theories I utilise, and examinations of whether the concepts actually can help to explain the interview data I collect. So, I read my interview data through the lens of fancy sounding theoretical concepts like habitus, signification, articulation, implosion, heterotopia, simulation, and so on, during an interview – the very questions I ask are designed to facilitate this from the outset. The goal of using interview data to elaborate concepts is simple. The data are examined to see if our collective understanding of the concept seems to apply to a wide range of empirical situations and cases, and, if not, whether the concept could be modified or expanded/contracted. The concepts we bring to the research table are, then, what Blumer (1969) refers to as ‘sensitising concepts’. The concepts are used in a directive way, but we aim to show no outright loyalty to them or their current definition. For example, the concept of habitus has been well used in the socio-cultural study of sport for some

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time, but progressively debated and expanded over the last decade by a core set of researchers on both sides of the Atlantic.

- **Theory application:** Here is a test you can conduct at your leisure. Select a scholar in sport, exercise and health sciences who regularly conducts interviews with people. Select one of their published papers and develop a sense of their theoretical and conceptual preferences in that paper. From there, read other articles they have published. How many times do the same, unchanged theoretical ideas and concepts pop up across their writing – even across a potentially wide range of topics they have researched?

Researchers often develop special expertise in, or very loyal commitment to, a single theory, axioms or set of concepts. Interview data are collected in separate studies by the researcher to simply extend the validity or relevance of the concept or theory to new empirical terrain. The practice is, in methodological terms, a violation of the interpretive and inductive essence of the interviewing process. If the theoretical outcome is already known, interview data are required only to breathe a whisper of empiricism into the research process.

Problems, Pitfalls and Controversies

There are many problems to consider with interviewing; too many to list in a small chapter on the technique. A brief mention of three concerns is worthwhile.

Interviews are performed rather than straightforwardly conducted. A respondent reacts not only to the questions posed, but also to the person posing the questions. As a result, an interview is a complex form of social interchange wherein emerging data reflect how people respond to one another on an interpersonal level. It is a performative event where identities are expressed as a matter of ritual and social self-protection. Interviewees will give answers to questions when they have no real answer, stories might be embellished, memories imperfectly recounted, details selectively edited as part of looking good in front of an interviewer (all an offshoot of the social desirability effect). On the other side of the table, if an interviewer dresses inappropriately, phrases questions awkwardly or uses a lot of academic jargon, asks people to be interviewed in a socially uncomfortable setting, or seems uninterested in a person, then the interview is equally affected. The best skill a neophyte interviewer can practise in this regard is the art of listening. If a respondent feels as if an interviewer is not attending to responses, the communication flow will inevitably break down.

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The issue of sampling respondents always comes up for students as well. How many people do I need to interview? What sorts of people should I include? Most of these types of questions stem from an enduring feeling in sport, health and exercise science that 'good research' must have a massive sample and produce generalisable (externally valid) conclusions. But excellent empirical and theoretically informative interview studies might revolve around only one or two subjects interviewed several times. Or, a handful of interviews might produce a treasure-trove of empirical data. The sample size is also largely reflective of how much time one has to complete a project. I would not expect a student to interview dozens of people for a research paper assigned in an undergraduate methods class, but a doctoral thesis or granted research study has completely different quantity expectations. Moreover, depending on the application of the method discussed above, one may need more or fewer respondents: in theory, we interview people in a grounded approach until we reach a point of data saturation – a point when we are learning very little, if anything, new from each new respondent in the sample.

Questions about the reliability (consistency) of interview data constantly surround the method. If the interview context is beset with dramaturgy and interpersonal factors affecting data collection processes, it is indeed difficult to claim that further interviews with a respondent by other researchers would produce precisely similar results. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) accept the criticism and concur that no two interviews on the same topic with a respondent will produce identical data. Techniques used to check the reliability of interview data can include team interviewing of respondents, inter-coder reliability checks of interview data, and multiple interviews with a respondent. Richardson (1999), however, argues that reliability is a scientific criterion and concern, developed to assess quantitative or positivist methodology. To her, qualitative researchers should pursue other understandings of 'reliability' in their research: such as, whether or not the analysis of the data is socially, emotionally or psychologically compelling and trans-contextually relevant for audiences.

See also: [Grounded Theory](#); [Interpretivism](#); [Research Questions](#).

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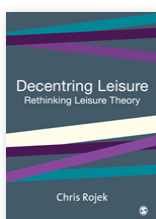
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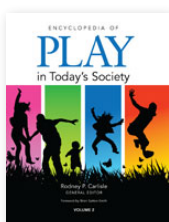
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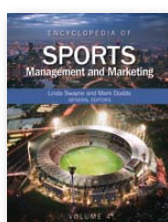


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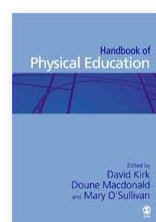


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