What is email interviewing?

Dr. Lucy Gibson
Sociology
University of Manchester

What is email interviewing?

- Various aliases: Email interviewing/online interviewing/e-interviewing/electronic interviewing

- Asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC)

- Put very simply, email interviewing refers to conducting interviews via email, asynchronously

- Affords time for participant: can answer at own pace and over a relatively long period of time; convenient for participant

Historical context

▸ Growth of information and communication technologies (ICT) in last decade

▸ New opportunities for researchers to examine how traditional research methods can be adopted for online research

▸ Mann and Stewart (2000) – internet technology can be used to adapt qualitative methods of data collection – obtain in-depth, descriptive data online and understand human experience

▸ Widespread use of email in academic community, however, discussion of such technology as academic research tool is relatively scarce (expanded in very recent years)

Email Interviews (CMC)

- My respondents offered choice of face-to-face or email interview – email was viewed favourably

- But, researcher must be aware that email may exclude certain social groups – e.g. who feels comfortable/has time to write lengthy descriptions?

- Does research topic lend itself to online research? Researcher and participant need to find method mutually acceptable

- Marked differences between written (email) and oral (face-to-face) accounts

- Email data is carefully crafted/polished, ability to scroll through answers/edit or delete

- Email interview as a mediated version/account

- A series of open-ended questions sent to respondent, and follow-up questions based on answers - email thread formed between researcher and respondent

- Main advantage - email interviews can produce highly rich and fairly extensive data
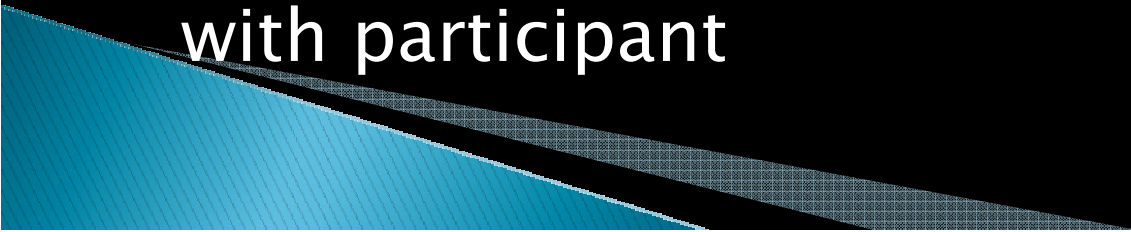
Example of rich nature of data

"I had time out of the scene from about 1970 to about 1995 – I know it sounds a long time but in 1970 I was getting worn out from the all nighters and the pills – I happened to start playing rugby union and also got married and bought a house which meant I couldn't pursue the 'scene'. . . Music and events that I have been involved in with in my youth have certainly stuck with me through the years, but interestingly most of us whether it be northern soul or the Ibiza sound or punk or whatever, seem to take some sort of break from it at some point. Whether or not this is to recover as we have feasted on it and need a break or maybe other things appear like buying houses, getting married, having children, getting more responsibility in the jobs I don't know. Although we go along the path of different relationships, different social scenes and different music I don't think anybody forgets their 'roots' and as I have found, once the children are grown up (and you have paid for the little sods to go through university – sorry Lucy) and the mortgage is small or paid for and you retire or control your job easily you find you have a little more time to do what you want..."

Advantages of using CMC (see Bampton and Cowton 2002)

▸ Reduction in expenditure

▸ Limited time, travel and space restrictions

▸ Increased flexibility

▸ Respondents able to answer at their own convenience, and their own pace – can result in very detailed data

▸ Reduction in researcher bias

▸ Increased opportunity to gain access to geographically-dispersed group

▸ Research participants have greater chance for reflection

- Pressure felt by respondents potentially reduced

- Less intrusive

- Ethically, participants protected from making injudicious comments

- High degree of anonymity, respondent may be more likely to admit to socially undesirable behaviour e.g. intoxication

- Ready-made transcript so more time for analysis

- Usual pitfalls of transcription e.g. ambiguity when listening back to interview avoided

- Respondents generally enjoyed process of 'authoring' life experiences

- Expressed gratitude for being given opportunity to document experiences/ opinions

- Many wrote eloquent prose

- Reciprocal/reflexive nature of data generation – researcher often encouraged to disclose personal experiences to help build rapport with participant

Limitations of Email Interviewing

- Loss of extra-linguistic clues, body language, eye contact, voice inflections, facial expressions, etc.

- But, 'emoticons' ☺ can inject tone/personality into written accounts (Bampton and Cowton 2002)

- Increased possibility of misunderstanding due to dis-location of interviewer/interviewee (Bampton and Cowton 2002)

- Diminished spontaneity – scroll/edit/delete accounts – can lead to carefully crafted data

More limitations...

▸ Ambiguity – use of non-standard language, 'typos'

▸ Informed consent/increased possibility of deception – no visible signs of respondent's social characteristics (but, also problem with other research methods e.g. postal questionnaires)

▸ Maintaining interest and engagement

▸ Disembodied nature of email interviewing – but this could be deemed a strength, weakens power relationships in f–f interviewing?

Comparing e-mail interview data

- Most literature focuses on comparison with face-to-face interviews

- I would suggest, however, that comparing the written and oral account is incompatible – very different kinds of data

- Would e-mail interview data be more comparable with diary accounts/mass observation directives?

Ethical issues: protecting privacy and establishing authenticity (James and Busher 2007)

- Issue of protecting participants' privacy – password protect files, secure email accounts, virtual and anonymous nature of internet

- Invisibility as problematic for participants?

- Authenticity: how identities are experienced and expressed online – participants take greater ownership of construction and direction of narratives; issue of verifying identity in online research

Example of research using email interviews

- James (2007) 'Email interviewing in educational research'
- Uses email as way of generating online narratives to understand how academics construct identities
- Considers nature of 'presentation' and 'performance' in email narratives
- Possibilities for increasing reflexivity – time and space to construct, reflect upon and learn from stories of experience

Example of research using email interviews

- Kazmer and Xie (2008) 'Qualitative interviewing in internet studies...'
  - Compares 4 types of data collection: face-to-face, telephone, email ,and instant messaging (IM)
  - Focus on functional effects and methodological effects of different types
  - Findings: participants should be given choice; over-reliance on technology with email/IM; Email self-transcribes but transcripts are non-standard; email requires planning for longitudinal participant retention; use of incomplete data.

Conclusions

▸ E-mail interviews have a number of distinct strengths

▸ Data can be very rich and internet allows access to geographically-dispersed group

▸ But, researchers must be aware of limitations and ethical issues

▸ Combining email interviews with traditional face-to-face techniques can be highly effective in obtaining a diverse sample of research participants

Where to find out more info…

▸ Email interviews 'toolkit':

Gibson (2010) `Using Email Interviews to Research Popular Music and the Life Course', `*Realties' Toolkit*, part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods; Available online at: http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits/email-interviews/index.html

Email me: Lucy.gibson@manchester.ac.uk ☺

References/further reading

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