Realities
At the Morgan Centre

Realities Toolkit #16

Using Self-Interviews to Research Memory

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Introduction

In qualitative interviewing the aim is for two or possibly three people to participate in spoken discourse which is reciprocated and reasonably well balanced between speaking and listening. The expectation is that dialogue will flow continuously during the period of the interview. This is fine in itself but it does not allow for pauses or interruptions of any considerable duration. Pausing – to think, to reflect, to formulate an answer that is not straight off-the-cuff – can be important. It may also be important for the research participant to occupy a space away from the usual imperatives of a face-to-face interview. It is for reasons such as these that we have developed the self-interview.

The self-interview is a method which involves getting respondents to use an audio-recorder to record themselves responding to a particular topic and to related media, objects and/or spaces. We developed the method during our current research project 'Media of Remembering: Photography and Phonography in Everyday Remembering'. The method has been used as a way of enabling respondents to pause and take time to reflect on their practices of remembering using music and photo-images without the immediate imposition of the discursive expectations or demands of the conventional qualitative interview. We feel that this is an important element of conducting memory research because memories sometimes need careful or protracted recall, while the practices associated with them may need reflexive consideration.

This toolkit presents the self-interview as a method for use in memory studies. It may, also, have wider applications for social researchers. We highlight our reasons for developing the method, outline its specific benefits, and point to some key features of best practice for researchers wishing to adopt the method in their research.

Media of Remembering Project

Our project 'Media of Remembering' investigates remembering in everyday life and how recorded music and photographs are involved in these processes. It explores the similarities and differences in the two media's everyday mnemonic uses and their meaning and significance in different social and cultural contexts. It also considers the considerable variation in the ways people remember and the roles which memories perform in everyday life.
We are using five main methods to gather data:

- One-to-one interviews
- Group interviews
- Electronic journals
- Archival research
- Self-interviews

Using a combination of methods to gather data helps to ensure that our research focus is fully explored. Each method brings particular benefits to the research. While archival research can help us understand the historical dimensions of the use of recorded music and photographs, and one-to-one interviews, group interviews and journals can record information about uses of media for the purpose of remembering, the self-interview's main strengths lie in enhancing informants' reflections on remembering practices and in capturing remembering as it is performed in everyday life.

What Does the Self-Interview Involve?

The self-interview is a qualitative research method which involves getting people to record themselves talking about the topic of research and related media, objects or spaces.

In our research the self-interview involves participants being given an audio recorder and asked to take some time to look at their photographs and think about music in their collections. Having done this, they record their thoughts about the kinds of memories these two media are associated with and what it feels like to remember using photographs and music. Participants are given a guidance sheet which provides details on how to conduct a self-interview and some questions that they might want to think about. Once participants have recorded their responses, recordings are returned to a member of the research team.

Our self-interview guidance sheet asks the participant to consider memories associated with music and photographs, to comment on materials at hand, and encourages movement around the home with commentary on photographs and items of music being made as they do so. The guidance sheet gives some suggested questions for the participant to focus on, but emphasises that the respondent can choose whether or not to follow our suggestions. Without this guide, participants might feel overwhelmed or confused by the task. They may forget the rationale and what we wanted them to cover in the self-interview.

Why Develop a Self-Interview Method?

In researching the use of photography and recorded music in everyday remembering, we wanted to gather data concerned with personal and social memory as a cultural process involving mediated texts, representational conventions and routines and practices of use. The self-interview was developed to gain such data and overcome some of the practical limitations of one-to-one interviews.

Our research at first concentrated entirely on one-to-one qualitative interviews with people associated with different social categories, we then widened this out to include family- and community-based focus groups. Our experience of the practical use of interviews in particular, and the quality of the data that emerged made us consider developing a different approach to the investigation of media in everyday remembering.

There are several reasons why a self-interview might be chosen over a one-to-one interview. These are primarily based on the importance of pausing and reflection for memory research. One of the problems we found in face-to-face qualitative interviews is that pausing is tacitly prohibited. Interviews require flow and any intervals of silence are met with discomfort. In our early interviews we were aware that informants wanted more time to think about what they could say when responding to certain questions. They needed time to consider how to speak about their experience, or how best to illustrate their point.

Pauses and disruptions are crucial features of the process of everyday remembering which we are investigating. Sometimes certain memories do not come back to mind all at once and they do not necessarily occur when someone wants them to. Some memories associated with photographs or music may be distressing. As a result, it might not be possible to launch into talk about them straight away. An interview would, therefore, benefit from giving the respondent time and space to come to terms with their feelings. By getting respondents to interview themselves, the self-interview offers a way in which to achieve pausing and reflection that as a result can extend the interview schedule and enhance the disclosure of memory.

Memory needs to be narrated and consequently is suited to a narrative method that can incorporate elicitation techniques. The self-interview uses cues, such as images and sound, to elicit participant talk beyond the guidance sheet. Elicitation usually involves researchers using media, texts and/or objects in the interview or focus group to provide a focus for questioning and discussion and to open up the research interaction. In our adoption of the self-interview the materials discussed are ones that make up the self-interviewees' everyday mnemonic environment. Encouraging participants to look at their photographs and listen to music during the self-interview, creates a research space in which they can reflect on their memories and cross-temporal associations as they happen, *in situ.* The self-interview, therefore, offers rich data about everyday remembering practices with individually used media, as they happen, while at the same time avoiding intrusion by the researcher.

Benefits of the Method

The self-interview has many benefits to offer the social researcher. These have been demonstrated during our use of the method to research media and remembering:

- Respondents can make use of the ability to stop and pause. They can press the 'pause' button on the audio-recorder supplied to them whenever they desire. This creates the opportunity to stop, think or reflect, take time out to go over certain memories, connect memories, and think about the relations between experiences, occasions or stages in their lives.

- The audio-recorder's portability means that the everyday practicalities of remembering, such as the sharing of domestic space can be managed in the research space. The participant can pause, relocate and resume the interview.

- The self-interview allows participants to absorb themselves in their own photographs and music and explore their own remembering practices without the intrusion of interviewer talk or having to be mindful of an interviewer's discursive expectations. This provides extensive opportunities for memories and reflections to be recorded at length.

- The self-interview records memory in process, permitting acts of remembering themselves to be performed and recorded as they would in everyday life. It can capture the everyday practices of remembering that routinely include the use of material objects, specific spaces and places.

- Moving around their mnemonic environment participants can give an account of experiences and memories *in situ* as they look through photograph albums and music collections, as they walk around the domestic space looking at photos on display, or as they listen to recorded music.

- The self-interview allows retrospective reflection on remembering practices in ways that are relatively unimpeded by the researcher. In our research, self-interviewees were not only remembering but also engaging in reflection on what the practice of remembering involved and how they perceived the different media relating to their remembering practices.

- Guiding respondents to talk about their music and photo collections and to reflect on them can capture a wealth of data about the social dimensions of individual remembering and media use, such as personal and family relationships and gender roles.

- The method does not fit neatly into any well-known genres of remembering such as diary keeping. Freeing participants from conventional genre expectations, the self-interview incorporates and represents practices of remembering as they occur alongside a reflection on them.

- The method gives the respondent some flexibility and freedom in the research process. The participant can choose when to talk, in the way that they want and for how long, and they can ignore the guidance sheet if they want to. Despite this, the researcher does have an invisible presence. We have found that the self-interviewer often speaks directly to an imagined other person. So, rather than the complete freedom to speak as one wishes, the self-interview offers a freedom to use a range of discursive forms to express memories and reflections on remembering.

A Sample of Self-Interview data

Here is a sample of data from Sarah's self-interview to illustrate the kind of data that the method produces:

"[...] Whereas, er, recently we've bought, er, Faure's "The Dolly Suite", er, because my husband, my second husband, bought it as – er, for a specific reason of playing it as his mother's funeral, er, because for him he had very strong associations with "Listen with Mother". Now we're of the same age and we come from fairly similar backgrounds and it too has an enormous association with me and I listen to it and I am back there but not in this instant snapshot photographic way. It is a more general way, a sort of feeling of childhood, of after lunch sitting down with mum listening to "Listen with Mother", er, before the two o'clock, erm, erm, "Woman's Hour" as it used to be then. And it – it summons up a raft of feelings rather than, as I say, a very specific image. So I can see that there are differences in those sort of triggers and it – the business of some trigger being exactly like a photograph, er, almost seems to be a sort of good link between what this – this whole project is about which is what photographs do you for you and memory and what music does and, erm, I'm now going to stop recording for a bit and go and look at one or two photographs. But just to say that I have a house full of photographs. [Recorder stops/starts]. Now when I was a child, (art) photography wasn't as common and I look at, erm, the photograph album that we have of my siblings and my childhood and there were four of us, it really is quite sparse, erm, compared to today's ubiquitousness of photography and photographs. Erm, it really has very little in there and I look at them and of course so many of them are from a time before you actively remember. So I look at myself as a baby and I look at myself as a toddler with my brothers and then as slightly older with my younger sister. And I sort of feel that the memories are what I've been told or, er, are gathered from all sorts of other things rather than looking at the photograph and feeling yes I know that was there. But having said that as I get a little older in the photographs, I have a photograph on my hall wall here and I've found others associated in the album. They were a set of photographs that were done by a photographer who came to the house and that I remember as being something quite unusual and I remember wanting to dress up for it. And when I look at what I chose to dress up I – I can't think why I did. But what I can remember about it apart from this thing of, er, choosing to dress up is that I can remember the fabrics and so it becomes not just a visual memory it becomes a tactile memory. And so the white shirt, blouse that I put on I can feel exactly what it was like and that I noticed

staring at the photograph that I put on a wide elastic belt that I think my cousin had given me, my older cousin, so she was very sophisticated to me. And I can again remember exactly the feel of this belt and how you stretched it and how you put it on and how satisfying it was to wear. [...]"

How Should the Self-Interview Be Used?

The self-interview has been a method particularly suited to our research project because we wanted to explore practices and meanings of everyday remembering in relation to two media. However, the self-interview's suitability may extend to the exploration of people's memories of particular events or issues, or to the use of other vehicles of memory. It may even have a use in research beyond memory studies to explore other aspects of everyday life. It would be particularly helpful for researchers wanting to gather data on mundane or habitual acts and their significance, such as how people use material objects in the home, or use the domestic space itself. It would be a valuable method in researching topics which people may find embarrassing or awkward, such as sex and sexualities, or death and mourning.

The self-interview is particularly useful:
- Where you want respondents to respond to, think about and reflect on their use of media (i.e. photos, pictures, music), objects, spaces (domestic or public), the associations these have, and the practices they entail.
- Wherever data is required that combines a record of everyday practice along with an account of their meanings and values for those involved.

Considerations if using Self-Interviews

If you decide to use self-interviews, there are several key considerations to bear in mind in order to get the most out of them:
- Researchers should be aware that the method can make the interviewee feel self-conscious. The method is not suited to all respondents because of issues of confidence involved in speaking when alone into a recorder. We have found it common for less confident interviewees to query the adequacy of their answers. The evidence of self-consciousness suggests that participants then formulate their talk as much around their perceptions of the researcher's requirements as they do around their own experience.
- A clear guidance sheet needs to be given to participants to explain what they need to do and what to focus on. This can provide a structure that helps people organise what they want to say. It can also be revisited to remind them of areas they have forgotten to mention or consider.
- It is important for researchers to communicate fully with the interviewee prior to their undertaking of the self-interview. We discussed the self-interview in advance with participants, explaining the rationale and what we would like them to cover.

Technical Considerations

Linked to the above considerations there are also some technical and practical considerations when using self-interviews:

- Participants need clear instructions relating to how to use audio recording equipment. The audio-recorder should be supplied with full power and/or extra batteries.
- Researchers need to make arrangements with the respondent with regard to the timeframe and collection of the self-interview.
- Researchers also need to ensure that they have enough audio-recorders to lend out to participants and to keep track of who has them at a given time.
- It could be helpful to ask respondents to supply you with the images they discuss, photographs of the domestic space and/or important media and objects in it, or information about the music played and discussed (artist/song title) to supplement the self-interview data.

Summary

The self-interview is a valuable method for investigating everyday remembering. It overcomes some of the practical limitations of one-to-one interviews but retains many of their advantages. The self-interview incorporates interruptions and pauses as part of everyday remembering, rather than treating them as disruptions to the interview dialogue. It enhances the process of reflection by removing the researcher and the formal parameters of the interview. The method can also deal with the practical mnemonic use of media *in situ*.

We see the self-interview as part of a toolbox of methods to explore everyday memory. The self-interview, as we have used it in our research, is an individual exercise. Although the social frameworks of remembering are observable in the data produced by self-interviews, group interviews would be necessary to investigate collective practices of remembering. In addition, the self-interview is not suitable for every interviewee. Some participants have felt uncomfortable talking alone and have requested conventional one-to-one interviews. Others have struggled with the practicalities of using a voice recorder and so again, the physical presence of the interviewer was required. Those who have conducted self-interviews have found them highly rewarding.

The self-interview is especially well suited to the exploration of everyday remembering as it is able to accommodate pauses and discursive disruptions, record both practices of remembering and reflections on them without imposing restrictive genre conventions on responses, and retain a focus on the dynamic relations between the individual and social dimensions of remembering. Nonetheless, the self-interview could readily be adopted for research outside memory studies. The method would be a beneficial one for social researchers wishing to explore mundane practices and everyday life because of its strength in gathering data on both practice and the meaning of actions.

For further information about the 'media of remembering' research project visit our website: http://www.mediaofremembering.co.uk

Feedback welcome! If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at realities@manchester.ac.uk and let us know.

Realities is part of the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester.

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