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The e-interview in qualitative research

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# Advancing Research Methods with New Technologies

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# Chapter 19

## The E-Interview in Qualitative Research

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter the authors consider using email as a method for carrying out in-depth, qualitative research interviews. Prompted by an experience of conducting e-interviews, they set out some of their key characteristics, embedding their discussion in the methodological and conceptual literature on qualitative interview and on-line research. The authors then offer a methodological consideration of e-interviewing, focusing on three broad areas: the practical, the interpersonal, and the ethical, highlighting the ways in which e-interviewing transforms aspects of each. They end by offering a view of the future of e-interviewing in the broader landscape of on-line qualitative research methods in general and interviewing in particular.*

### INTRODUCTION

The following discussion about email interviewing, henceforward referred to as the ‘e-interview’ or ‘e-interviewing’ for the sake of convenience, is prompted by the experience of two of the authors (Bampton & Cowton, 2002a; and see also Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, pp. 240-242).

E-interviews were used in a project about teaching ethics in management accounting courses in higher education in the British Isles (Bampton & Cowton, 2002b, 2002c), part of a larger programme of work concerned with accounting ethics. The main data collection method was a postal questionnaire survey of management accounting lecturers. Respondents to the questionnaire were also asked

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whether they would be willing to be interviewed about some of the issues which might emerge from the survey. It was originally envisaged that all the interviews would be conducted face-to-face or, when impractical, perhaps by telephone, both well established methods of interviewing. However, one potential interviewee suggested using email. The researchers conducted only three actual e-interviews and reference to their account of it is not intended to be definitive. Instead, it serves as a springboard for a re-consideration of the issues that it raised for them at the time and for the issues that have emerged in the context of technological developments in the decade that has passed since then. It therefore animates, illustrates and instantiates the methodological reflections on and the practical issues of using this online research and interviewing method. It also supplements a still relatively small body of 'tales from the field' in social and business research (*inter alia* Burke & Miller, 2001; Burns, 2010, Gibson, 2010; James & Busher, 2006, 2007; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

In its broadest sense this chapter considers how new media technologies can advance and transform established social and business research methods (Williams, 1966), although it in no way advocates that these technologies are necessarily 'better' than or should supplant traditional methods. Instead, we see the e-interview as, potentially and in certain circumstances, extending and enriching the repertoire of those who use interviews in research or who are thinking of doing so. In other words we hope we awaken interest in this method of interviewing and inspire confidence in its use.

We begin by setting out some of the key characteristics of the e-interview, drawing on extant writings about it, emphasizing that these are neither comprehensive nor definitive and outlining some of the reasons for these limitations. We then turn to a methodological consideration of e-interviewing, framing this as a transformation of the face-to-face interview. We focus on three

broad areas of transformation: practical, interpersonal and ethical, although these headings are used heuristically rather than categorically. In other words, we approach the subject through a focus on methodology and do not signpost the way to a greater theoretical treatment of e-interviewing, although this would be a welcome addition to the literature. We end by synthesizing our arguments and making some observations about the future of e-interviewing.

## **BACKGROUND**

A consideration of in-depth email interviews in qualitative research potentially ranges over a vast and diverse terrain. It is embedded in the methodological and conceptual literature on qualitative research, interview research and on-line research. It is also situated in the context of debates about all of these and with the caveat that different ideas about the nature of qualitative research will impact on methodologies and on the methods that support them. Cresswell (2007) for example relates how, in the midst of discussing qualitative data analysis, he was interrupted and introduced to other approaches that arose out of different methodological traditions, leading him to research how different approaches to qualitative inquiry shape the design and procedures of a study. Delamont (2004, p. 90) is also sceptical about interviewing as a valid method for social science research at all because 'people lie. People delude themselves, they mislead others, and they are very inaccurate observers, recorders, and reporters of their own behaviour'. This view tends to de-stabilize notions that the acquisition of data entails a straightforward process of 'collection' (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009). On these terms, interviewing involves processes more akin to data generation, however that may be construed or interpreted.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, use of on-line methods is in a state of flux that defies the imposition of a progression narrative (Sade-Beck,

2004). Thus Poynter (2010, p. 151) states that use of email groups was once relatively common in on-line research and is now rare, but he predicts that it may re-emerge in future. Indeed, such is the contested nature of understandings that Burns (2010) initially wondered whether e-interviewing could even be ‘counted’ as interviewing at all.

And yet, in comparison with the volume of writings on ‘how to do’ *interviewing*, there is relatively little on which to draw in terms of *e-interviewing*, either methodologically and/or theoretically (James & Busher, 2009), although this does depend on what one construes as a reasonable body of work (Meho, 2006). James and Busher (2009) do focus explicitly on ‘on-line interviewing’ and also present a critical consideration of the issues involved in doing so, but more often than not, online interviewing in general and one-to-one email interviewing specifically is contained within the broader context of ‘research methods’ (Bryman, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009) or interview research (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). The reasons for this are not clear. It is likely to be a combination of the fact that e-mail is a relatively recent phenomenon (<http://www.history-timelines.org.uk/events-timelines/11-Internet-history-timeline.htm>), that digital technologies present a rapidly changing landscape in which to situate research methods and that face-to-face interviewing is still considered the ‘gold standard’ of research interviewing (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). The tendency is therefore to position e-interviewing in relation to face-to-face interviewing rather than to see it as having an entirely different bloodline, or indeed as being an entirely different species (Sade-Beck, 2004). There are indeed some commonalities, which we acknowledge, but we want to foreground what is unique or different about e-interviewing. We therefore restrict ourselves to outlining that which distinguishes e-interviewing from other forms of computer mediated methods and interview formats.

We are also omitting comparisons between e-interviewing and other forms of non-virtual, asynchronous, textual communication, such as letters (Milne, 2010). We re-iterate that there is still work to be done here.

## **TRANSFORMING THE INTERVIEW**

What then differentiates the e-interview from other forms of interview? The e-interview, firstly, uses technology as the means of communication between interviewer and interviewee. This is different from “computer-assisted” interviewing, which is sometimes used in structured face-to-face or telephone interviewing (Bryman, 2012; Couper & Hansen; 2001; Fielding & Lee, 1991). Here the computer is used as a tool to prompt the interviewer and to record the answer in a form convenient for further processing. However, in addition to email appealing to the respondent, the technical difficulties involved in using technology for this purpose prompted Bampton and Cowton to reject the telephone interview. In contrast, the technology involved in using email is relatively straightforward. Secondly, email interviewing is asynchronous which differentiates it from interviews that take place in ‘real time’, including online interviews using instant messaging (Opdenakker, 2006) or Voice Over Internet Protocols (VOIPs) – of which Skype is possibly the best known example. Thirdly, it is a one-to-one transaction unlike a focus group run in a chat room for example. Fourthly, it involves a displacement in terms of space because interviewer and interviewee do not meet face-to-face. It is ‘interaction via keyboards’ (Mann & Stewart, 2001, p. 603). And last but not least, it is text-based with none of the usual visual and/or verbal elements of face-to-face and telephone interviewing and interviews using VOIPs (Mann & Stewart, 2001). However, this point is perhaps less straightforward than might be assumed. The text created via email exchanges can be said to

contain elements of both visual and verbal communication (James & Busher, 2006, 2009). The use of emoticons can encapsulate both these elements and punctuation can also be used thus (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). And interestingly Egan, Chenoweth, and McAuliffe (2006) found in their research with people with traumatic brain injury that using email produced data that demonstrated that the latter are capable of expressing greater insight, reflection and humour than indicated by previous research using other methods. Thus it seems premature at best to construe the absence of the visual and the verbal as a lack rather than as a simple difference.

In summarizing the differences, Bampton and Cowton (2002a, para 6) make the following observation:

*When compared with the face-to-face interview, the e-interview (as we have defined it) entails two types of displacement, relating to two fundamental dimensions of human experience. In relation to time, the interactions between interviewer and interviewee are likely to be asynchronous, with pauses of varying lengths between bursts of communication or “episodes”; while in terms of space, the relationship takes place “at a distance” through the medium of electronic, screen-based text.*

Therefore we will now go on to discuss how these two displacements can transform the interview, situating the discussion in three broad areas, the practical, the interpersonal and the ethical, although the boundaries between each are fluid rather than set in stone. At the same time we are propelled by the insight that ‘where technology offers new possibilities, it also tends to bring with it new problems and challenges’ (Bampton & Cowton, 2002a, para 21). How one construes the transformations and whether one sees them as a positive or a problem will depend on one’s

beliefs and values as a researcher and on what one is hoping to achieve in the research. Here we set out the issues. Readers and researchers will interpret them in ways appropriate to their own specific contexts.

## **Practical Transformations**

In this section we consider some of the practical issues that arise out of the asynchronicity of the e-interview. To begin, we want to address the notion that face-to-face interviewing is an entirely synchronous activity because it too will involve pauses and disjunctures. Indeed, transcription protocols allow for this (Poland, 2001). The difference in the e-interview is that this delay in communication can be a matter of seconds and mirror ‘real time’ delay or it may last hours, days or longer. The salient point here is that the interviewee has a greater degree of control as they do not have to reply on the spot. Of course the researcher can also take their time over a response but they are likely to respond more speedily in order to keep up the momentum of the research and out of respect for the interviewee, but neither party is committed to holding the interview at a pre-arranged, mutually convenient time or to finding a block of time that will allow them to complete the whole interview. Not only can the interview be conducted as a series of ‘episodes’ but doing so introduces an iterative element which characterizes conversation. If several interviews are being conducted at the same time, issues that emerge from one e-interview can also be fed into the others.

Delays between communications also have other ramifications. On the one hand they give the interviewee time to think about their response to a particular question. On the other they may also provide the time and space for interviewees to construct particular responses, such as one which they think the interviewer wants to hear or one that presents them in a particular light. They can

of course do this in the face-to-face interview but they will have less time to think it through and are less able to 'hide' the way in which they are doing this.

Time delays also provide the opportunity for interviewees to find information which might be required, albeit this might leave the researcher unsure about the resources on which the interviewee is drawing. Although helping nervous interviewees to feel less under pressure, the ability to delay a response might also strip spontaneity from the interview and perhaps richness from the data. The researcher will never know how often an interviewee has drafted a response. Equally, however, where transcripts of face-to-face interviews are passed to interviewees it is not unknown for them to challenge what has been said and to ask for changes to be made (Downs, 2010). Furthermore, loss of spontaneity is not inevitable. Some replies do come back quickly and often contain the kinds of spelling and grammatical errors which are typical of much e-mail communication (Crystal, 2001), suggesting that they have not been carefully reviewed and re-drafted. And in any case, a carefully considered, well-articulated, reflective reply is not necessarily less valid than a spontaneous one and, importantly, an ethical case can be made in some situations for allowing interviewees the opportunity to protect themselves from saying things they may later have cause to regret. This applies equally to researchers who may in face-to-face interviews speak or act in ways which, with hindsight, they rather wish they had not done. The possibilities that e-interviews offer, in terms of time to reflect, can therefore be particularly useful when working with vulnerable groups or researching sensitive topics (Ison, 2009; Lee, 1993; McAuliffe, 2003; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

Another practical issue which arises from the point about awaiting a response from an interviewee is uncertainty about what lies behind the delay. It might be that the interviewee is busy or has not yet thought of an appropriate response and

intends to reply in due course. On the other hand, it might be that the interviewee is unhappy about some aspect of the message received or is not going to respond at all. Of course, an interviewee may explicitly decline to answer a particular question, but on some occasions it might be the case that he or she has not made a conscious decision and the e-mail is in limbo, much like a neglected memo in a traditional in-tray. Flexibility in the speed of response permitted by an e-interview can be a worrying and frustrating experience for the researcher, who in turn might feel reluctant to send a reminder lest it be perceived as putting unreasonable pressure on the interviewee. The problem is that physical remoteness makes the situation very difficult to read (see below). However, there are a number of ways of addressing this, depending on the research context and the nature of the relationship between researcher and interviewee. For example the researcher might want to send a slightly re-phrased or amplified question and apologize at the same time for not wording the original as clearly as they might have. In fact this might well be the issue anyway. Or the protocol for 'chasing up' responses could be agreed in advance, or posted on a Website. Whatever the method chosen, striking a balance between the time given to respond and maintaining the momentum of the dialogue is key and this may only be achievable with practice and experience.

It is perhaps an obvious point to make, but the easiest way to prevent the interview stalling is to make it easy for the interviewee to respond. In face-to-face interviewing it is generally poor practice to ask more than one question at a time, unless it is a very small number of questions closely related to one overall theme. Because an e-interview is text based, several questions can be posed at once but there is still the risk of sending too many questions, and/or too many unrelated questions, at once. These might then appear daunting and discourage the interviewee from replying. If the interviewee finds even one question difficult to answer, moreover, they might fail



to respond altogether, even though they might be willing to answer all the other questions. Another reason for limiting the number of questions is that e-mails tend to be short. It is email etiquette for the body of the message to be entirely visible within a single screen view, without any need for scrolling (Crystal, 2001). Exceeding these limits tends to make email communication more formal and more akin to a letter. It does not matter if the interviewee sends a long reply but one of the features of the e-interview is that it should be closer to conversation than to written communication. The way to tackle this is to see the exchange in terms of interview 'episodes', although the researcher must guard against putting too much into each episode (which could delay response time further) and having too many episodes (which might lead to interview 'fatigue' and to the researcher being considered a nuisance).

When does the interviewer know when the interview is getting to the end? The clues and the intuitive sense of when time is running out that are present in face-to-face interviews are either absent or less easy to identify in the e-interview. However, there are some possible signs to read. For example, waning interest might be accompanied by slower responses. A decline in the length and quality of responses could, in the absence of other explanations, be a sign of interviewee fatigue. A solution might be for the researcher to establish some ground rules in advance, covering such things as the length of the interview, as well as other issues such as confidentiality and reminders. This would parallel the common practice of agreeing the length of a face-to-face interview as part of the process of negotiating access. It might also be helpful to send the interviewee a list of the matters to be addressed so they have at least some indication of when the interview is nearing its conclusion (i.e. when these have all been covered).

## Interpersonal Transformations

We move on now to highlight some of the features of spatial displacement and its effects on the interview process, highlighting in particular issues that relate to the interpersonal aspects of research interviewing.

Interviewing is not a purely practical or technical enterprise. The danger of forgetting this obvious point is compounded, however, when technology is the mediating force in the interview and when there are complex and divergent views about the nature of the mediation. Thus Gubrium & Holstein (2001, p. 30) argue on the one hand that 'technology is only the procedural scaffolding of what is a broad culturally productive enterprise', but they also state that this makes attention to the technical aspects of interviewing *more* important because 'they produce the detailed subject as much as they gather information about him or her' (2001, p. 12). On the other hand Mann & Stewart (2001) play down the importance of the technical aspects of e-interviewing, arguing that they do not present much of a challenge to the researcher. It is also worth remembering that familiarity with the technology is likely to have increased in the decade or so since they wrote this. That said, the physical separation of interviewer and interviewee and the absence of the visual and verbal elements involved in the 'presentation of the self' (Goffman, 1959) do need to be considered. Mann & Stewart (2001, p. 613), call for the development of 'relational expertise' of which the ability to build rapport is a cornerstone and they also add that 'it seems likely that the relationships formed will vary as much as they do in "real life"' (p. 617). In other words, interviewing requires as many interpersonal skills in the virtual environment as it does outside it, albeit those skills may be of a different order. It seems equally likely that we will have more success with some interviewees than with others.

The absence of a physical presence, rather than inhibiting rapport building, and the trust that engenders, may be experienced as liberating, with the interviewee feeling able to be more open with their responses. This in its turn entails both costs and benefits. On the one hand the interviewee might be protected from embarrassment by the physical absence of the interviewer, which could be of particular benefit when sensitive issues are being discussed (Lee, 1993). On the other, the lack of direct contact means that Internet methodologies generally permit a degree of anonymity, which has been associated with respondents being more likely to admit to socially undesirable behaviour. Whatever the ramifications, the researcher must plan in advance for these eventualities. Mann & Stewart (2001) remind us that trust is essential to building rapport and it behooves the researcher to ensure protocols that inspire trust are discussed with interviewees in advance of the interviews. For example, it would seem part of an ethics of 'respect for the individual' that the interviewee has the right to demand deletion of responses if they have a change of heart. But this should not be unfamiliar territory for the qualitative researcher. In particular, researchers working with 'human participants' have always been, or at least should have been, required to reflect on and address concerns such as these as part of their response to the ethical issues involved in this work.

Reprising a point that arises from the temporal displacement discussed earlier, the difficulty of discerning when an e-interview might be stalling or coming to an end might also be seen as another outcome of spacial displacement, namely the lack of tacit signs due to the physical separation of interviewer and interviewee. Although interviewing is largely a verbal process and much of the textbook advice focuses on how to word questions and record answers, body language and other non-verbal means of communication are important, some may say more so because they mediate the words spoken. So, for example, an interviewee may respond positively to a question,

all the while shaking their head, or profess to be saddened while smiling. This is lost in the case of e-interviews. In addition to body language and facial expressions, voice inflexions are also lost. Although attempts can be made to overcome it, the dis-location of interviewer and interviewee in an e-interview thus reduces the richness of the messages that pass between them, opening up an increased possibility of both ignorance and real misunderstanding when compared with the face-to-face interview. Bampton and Cowton (2002a, para 16) point out that this is regrettable because it 'represents a diminution in the quality of the data gathering', although it might be argued that this is a criticism applicable to data acquisition in general.

The subject of 'voice' has been much debated in the qualitative research literature, not least in the context of 'empowering' those participating in research to 'find their own voice' and 'own' the narrative. This is not the place to engage with those debates but it is worth noting that using a medium in which 'voice' is ostensibly absent transforms understanding of the very terms of those debates. However, this cannot be taken to mean it also transforms relations of power between researcher and researched, not least because they are too complex to be easily unpicked. It is probably true that, no matter how much the researcher might wish to, or think they can, 'empower' participants or 'give voice' to them (which many have criticized as an aim for its overtones of condescension), the influences of the contexts of and reasons for the interview will militate against this enterprise. Moreover, Gubrium and Holstein (2001, p. 29) argue that participants are 'always and already "empowered" to engage fully in a vast range of discursive practices', although much will again depend on who is being interviewed and in what context. The salient point here is that, being in the same space as the interviewee quite literally brings the researcher face to face with the micro-politics and ethics of research, because it is an embodied engagement with them. In the

case of e-interviewing there is removal from this embodied engagement and this is perhaps where the researcher is required to do more thinking in advance. Devising protocols for the conduct of the relationship with interviewees may seem a somewhat clinical enterprise but it can serve as a reminder that one is dealing with a person and not simply the texts they deliver.

### **Ethical Transformations**

The above point has started to bring us into the realm of ethics and the time and space displacements of e-interviewing also have implications for the ethical issues raised by its use. The points made thus far indicate an overlap with the ethical issues attaching to the practicalities of doing e-interviews and to its interpersonal dimensions and these will not be repeated here. However, it is worth mentioning that these are rarely straightforward matters. Take for example the issue of the time and expense spared because neither researcher nor interviewee needs to travel to a pre-arranged meeting place. This is obviously a practical issue but also an ethical one because it has the possibility to transform access to research groups and indeed to research itself. Researchers in remote, small-scale or resource-poor environments might now access wider populations that might previously have been out of their reach (Lee, 2000, p. 117). Research students who are studying abroad might also conduct research on their home countries without the need for costly return visits. It simultaneously opens up new vistas for well resourced researchers, as physical distance and time zone differences, and potentially even language barriers become immaterial or at the very least surmountable (particularly with translation facilities widely available on the net, imperfect as they may be). And it provides opportunities for researchers who might otherwise have considered themselves excluded from interview research, for example if they felt too shy or inhibited through cultural differences to meet face-to-face. But

what are the ethical issues that arise for these new research constituencies, both researcher and researched? It may be a simple matter of applying the same ethical codes here that have been developed over the years. However, it may also be that approaches to the ethical conduct of research need to be re-thought.

Ethical matters in academic research are often addressed in the ethical codes of the particular institutions under whose aegis the research is conducted, or through the codes of particular research or funding bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx>). However, some researchers would argue that ethical codes do not always work in research with human participants in social science research, or at the very least work imperfectly, because the latter have the potential to behave unpredictably, as indeed do researchers (St. Pierre, 1997). Furthermore, recounting their 'tale from the field', James and Busher (2007, p. 102) warn us not to become complacent or overly reliant on codes as their application in online research may be different from their application in onsite research. James & Busher found that some of the precepts of ethical codes (anonymity, privacy, and authenticity) took on new aspects and meaning in the context of e-interviewing precisely because researcher and interviewee do not meet (although there is no reason that e-interviewing cannot be done with people the researcher may have met previously). These issues are important in their own right and in terms of the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

That said, e-interviewing offers greater potential for interviewees to remain anonymous. It is often the case that interviewees are given pseudonyms when research is written up, but they will still be 'known' to the researcher, even recognized by them in different contexts. With the e-interview this is not the case. Even where the interviewee uses their name in their email address, their responses can be cut and pasted into a word

document and labelled differently for identification purposes. This degree of anonymity does raise the question of whether the person being interviewed is really who they are supposed to be. But this is also a familiar problem with postal questionnaires (was it really the chief executive who responded?) and it might be possible to set up a “gatekeeper”, for example a prison officer or chaplain if interviewing a prison inmate. Perhaps more radically, researchers can also adopt a pseudonym by opening an email account for the express purpose of conducting the e-interview. Providing it is not done for nefarious purposes this has some advantages. It offers a degree of protection for the researcher where being known or visible would render the researcher vulnerable in some way or where this might unfavourably impact on the dynamics of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. It is easy to imagine a young researcher feeling intimidated in a face-to-face interview with an older CEO of a multinational company for example. And this might be compounded if the researcher is a woman and the CEO a man. It might be prudent not to rely wholeheartedly on the notion that e-interviewing can ‘de-gender’ those involved, however, as it is not uncommon for attributions to be made (Mann & Stewart, 2000) or for gendering features to leech into communications (Arpiz, 1999; Spender, 1996).

Storage of the e-interviews must also be given some thought to protect the privacy of the interviewee, a point that is more usually framed as a matter of confidentiality but which also encompasses here the notion of an ethics of respect. McCoyd and Kerson (2006) outline their procedures for protecting the privacy of their respondents which involved checking emails daily, immediately ‘cleaning’ them of identifying information and printing a hard copy for ‘back-up’ (a wise precaution as Bampton and Cowton were caught out by problems with the email systems in their institution, which led to loss of some data). Hard copies were kept in a locked cabinet and emails

stored with an assigned code in computerized folders under password protection. They cut and pasted the text into word documents aligned to the electronic store with the same code but the original email was deleted and re-deleted from the recycle bin. Moreover, the researchers’ PC was not networked and was kept offline when not in use. Interviewees had been informed of these procedures as part of their giving informed consent. McCoyd and Kerson were researching a sensitive topic and it may not always be necessary for all these safeguards to be put in place to maintain privacy. Again, whilst over-reliance on codes may not be the solution, the guidance offered by funding bodies and research associations must at least provide a starting point for consideration of what to do here.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The e-interview may not be the most appropriate research method, or even a suitable one, in all circumstances, but it is fair to say e-mail has become familiar to many. In general we are of the view that the e-interview should add to the stock of interview methods rather than replace the face-to-face interview. Nor should we ignore other innovative means of communication – and what these will be in the future remains to be seen. When Bampton and Cowton reported on their experience of e-interviewing, the phenomenon that is ‘Facebook’ was yet to come on the scene and yet now it (and other social networking media) is both a subject of research and a research tool. Use of the e-interview will depend on the contexts of the research and of the interview (Oltman, 2011) and on the preferences and aptitudes of the interviewees themselves. Although we have also identified and discussed how e-interviewing might offer certain advantages and so stand alone as a research method on occasions, in future it might also be further developed to be used as a complementary method to the face-to-face interview.

Complementarity here can take two forms. First, some interviewees might be interviewed face-to-face (or via some other medium) while others might be interviewed electronically, which is what happened in the case of Bampton and Cowton's research. Second, the interviewee may be interviewed on more than one or even several occasions. For example, after a face to face interview in which a relationship is established, some or all of the supplementary communications could be by e-mail. Furthermore, there is the possibility that certain of the interview events in this series of interviews could be by telephone, or by some other method. In other words the e-interview can be just one of the forms of interview used, and interviews themselves may complement or be complemented by other research methods such as questionnaires or participant observation.

What we are envisaging is not a straightforward 'mixed methods' approach, however. The approach we have in mind is rather one of 'integrated methods' or 'blended methods' or even 'hybrid methods'. This will of course entail an engagement with the methodological and epistemological implications of conducting research in this way. There is also room for more research into the ramifications of bringing actual spaces, encapsulated in the term 'real world' research, into closer proximity with virtual spaces, encapsulated in the term 'cyberspace' (Downs, 2011).

## **CONCLUSION**

Like McCoyd and Kerson (2006), Bampton and Cowton (2002a) have explicitly referred to the serendipitous nature of their turn to the method. Whilst serendipity may be a welcome phenomenon in life, we would question the extent to which it should be welcomed in research. Here we would argue that it is a more problematic concept. Of course research is usually not a "straight march" from planning to execution (Sandelands, 1993,

p. 378). It is unrealistic to think problems and frustrations on the one hand and unexpected occurrences of good fortune on the other (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) can be completely eradicated. This applies particularly to data acquisition (Kulka, 1982). However, compromises also influence the quality and type of the information and 'knowledge' produced (Davie, 2008; Shuy, 2001, p. 538) and Clough and Nutbrown (2007, p. xii) maintain that methodology should not simply be appropriate but 'necessary'. This means that e-interviewing should be more than a port in a storm or a serendipitous event. It is desirable for both experienced and inexperienced researchers to understand when e-interviewing might offer the best way of achieving their research goals. Our aim has been to further this understanding.

To sum up, the principal advantages of the e-interview are that:

- It offers significant savings in terms of time and financial resources, particularly in relation to the elimination of the need to travel or to transcribe tapes.
- It has advantages in terms of convenience, eliminating the need for researcher and interviewee to be in the same pre-arranged place at the same pre-arranged time.
- It opens up possibilities for interviewing research subjects who would ordinarily lie beyond the geographical or social reach of the researcher.
- It brings the possibility of conducting research into the ambit of those who might otherwise be excluded.
- It facilitates an extended period of communication.
- In some circumstances it might be more successful in accessing certain types of research data.
- It removes visual clues and therefore, potentially, pressures and constraints that might otherwise inhibit (honest) communication.

Its principal disadvantages are that:

- It provides a limited register for communication, although there is some evidence to suggest that emotions and humour can nevertheless be inserted into it consciously via conventions such as emoticons or by creative use of punctuation, or unconsciously via language.
- It is dependent on willing and competent access to reliable technology on the part of both researcher and interviewee.
- It is vulnerable to technical problems.
- There may be issues with ‘authenticity’ in terms of identity (the interviewee hiding behind an invented persona or simply lying about who they are) and in terms of response (the interviewee hiding their true feelings or lying) as a result of the absence of visual clues.
- It may be more difficult to establish interpersonal relationships and hence to build trust.
- It requires thought about potential ethical issues, in particular with regard to anonymity and the protection of privacy.

Email is now firmly embedded in the wider processes of research and the social world and a common means of communication. We have therefore made an implicit case for it to be considered as a valuable interview method in its own right and for an end to judging its merits solely in relation to face-to-face interviewing. However, whilst the usual rules of research design and the conduct of research may need to be re-interpreted in the light of its use, the important point is that they do still apply and this will be the case regardless of future technological developments.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Computer Mediated Communication (CMC):** These are channels of communication that allow ‘remote’ communication using computer technology, as opposed to, say, telecommunications technology. Communication may be synchronous as in chat rooms, or asynchronous as in email correspondence. It may be verbal/oral (VOIP) or text-based (email).

**Computer Mediated Technology (CMT):** These are the technologies that support computer mediated communication and include those supporting email, live chat, instant messaging, Voice Over Internet Protocols (VOIP) and postings to social networking sites.

**E-Interviewing:** This is an asynchronous, text-based method of computer mediated communication using email. It obviates the requirement for face-to-face interaction.

**Social Research:** Whilst there is contestation about the ways in which to go about it depending on the traditions from which one draws, social research is the study of the social world that seeks to explore and understand the relationship between theory and data.

**Internet Research:** There are two broad meanings of this term. Firstly it refers to research that is conducted into virtual and/or digital technologies. The second meaning refers to research that uses the Internet as a research tool in conjunction with, or supplementary to, or instead of more traditional methods.

**Qualitative Research:** Qualitative research approaches are concerned with the interpretation of phenomena, focusing on meaning and sense-making and with the mechanisms whereby these are achieved.

**Research Ethics:** These are the norms, or rules, that underpin the conduct of research, usually with the aim of preventing harm being done to those involved. Arguably applicable to all research but most often associated with research involving ‘human participants’ it has more recently involved the formulation of and adherence to ethical codes seek to clarify the protocols and behaviours supportive of ethical conduct.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Kvale (1996) for use of the metaphors of the ‘traveler’ and the ‘miner’ as processes of data acquisition.