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Researching Defended Subjects with the Free Association Narrative Interview Method

Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson

Introduction: Beyond the Rational Unitary Research Subject

In this paper, we illustrate several key differences between our approach to interpreting accounts of research subjects and those of other qualitative researchers. In particular, we work with a theoretical premise of a defended, rather than unitary, rational subject. The methodological implications that we discuss here are twofold: this subject can best be interpreted holistically; and central to this interpretative process are the free associations that interviewees make.¹

First, however, we want to start one stage further back, and look at the problems with survey approaches because these dominate within the fear of crime debate that framed our research.² In broad terms, we wanted to explore the apparent irrationality within findings about fear of crime from crime surveys. It may seem remarkable now that without defining what fear of crime was, early researchers in the field, like those conducting the first British Crime Survey,³ felt able to measure it. They found that women, especially elderly women, are more fearful of crime than men. As a result of this finding being “discovered with monotonous regularity”,⁴ the fearful old lady, afraid to venture out after

¹ Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method* (London: Sage, 2000), ch. 3.

² Our research was entitled “Gender Difference, Anxiety and the Fear of Crime” and was supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (award number L2102522018). The examples throughout this chapter refer to this research project.

³ M. Hough and P. Mayhew, *The British Crime Survey: First Report* (London: HMSO, 2003).

⁴ E. Gilchrist, J. Bannister, J. Ditton and S. Farrell, “Women and the ‘Fear of Crime’: Challenging the Accepted Stereotype”, *British Journal of Criminology* 38, 1998, 283–98.

dark, has become a common stereotype, as the authors of the 1996 British Crime Survey came to bemoan.⁵ Yet, when we remind ourselves of the original source of this knowledge, we find it stems from the answers by large national samples to the following question: “How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?” The answer was required to fit into one of four categories: ‘very safe’, ‘fairly safe’, ‘a bit unsafe’ or ‘very unsafe’.

Survey research interviews of this kind, where answers can be quantified on a Likert scale, are so prevalent as to be taken for granted in their capacity to produce evidence. E. G. Mishler’s extensive consideration of research interviewing concluded that the “standard approach to interviewing [the survey interview] is demonstrably inappropriate for and inadequate to the study of the central questions in the social and behavioural sciences”. The main reason for this is because the approach fails to address how respondents’ meanings are related to circumstances. Reliance on coding isolated responses strips them of any remaining context:

The problem raised by so radical a decontextualization of the interview at so many different levels . . . is that respondents’ answers are disconnected from essential socio-cultural grounds of meaning. Each answer is a fragment removed from both its setting in the organized discourse of the interview and from the life setting of the respondent.⁶

Of course these responses, duly coded, have to be reassembled so as to make sense of them. However, “when these [fragmented] responses are assembled into different subgroups by age, gender and the like, the results are artificial aggregates that have no direct representation in the real world”.⁷ These are the processes which have generated the findings about gender and age differences in fear of crime. As Ruthellen Josselson puts it, “when we aggregate people, treating diversity as error variable, in search of what is common to all, we often learn about what is true of no one in particular”.⁸

In response to these limitations of survey- and other questionnaire-research in addressing questions of meaning and causality, many researchers have looked to qualitative research. For example, researchers influenced by feminism who criticised the early work in fear of crime for not taking into account the routine sexual harassment of women or the particular vulnerability of women to rape,

⁵ C. Mirrlees-Black, P. Mayhew and A. Percy, *The 1996 British Crime Survey: England and Wales*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin, Issue 19/1996 (London: Research and Statistics Directorate, Home Office, 1996).

⁶ E. G. Mishler, *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 26.

⁷ Mishler, *Research Interviewing*, 26.

⁸ Ruthellen Josselson, “Imagining the Real: Empathy, Narrative and the Dialogic Self”, in *The Narrative Study of Lives, vol. 3*, ed. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (London: Sage, 1995), 32.

often used in-depth or semi-structured face-to-face interviews to ask women (and men in some cases) about their fears.⁹ One result of such feminist critiques of traditional 'scientific' methods was a situation where "it began to be assumed that only qualitative methods, especially the in-depth, face-to face interview, could really count in feminist terms and generate useful knowledge".¹⁰ More generally, face-to-face semi-structured interviewing has become the most common type of qualitative research method used in order to find out about people's experiences in context and the meanings these hold. Considerable effort has been directed to adapting the traditional interview format so that it is adequate to these purposes.¹¹ But, despite this effort, the idea that an interviewee can 'tell it like it is', that he or she is the incontrovertible expert on his or her own experiences, that respondents are transparent to themselves, still remains the unchallenged starting point for most of this qualitative, interview-based research.

This assumption suggests that qualitative researchers believed that the problem they identified in relation to survey-based research would disappear when the "meaning of events for respondents"¹² was taken into account. We cannot agree. Even if no theoretical assumptions are being made about fear of crime since this is left for respondents to define, and even if the question asked is no longer a closed one, at least one problematic methodological assumption of survey research still applies. This is that words mean the same thing to the interviewer and interviewees. In other words, the researchers, in taking this for granted, are still assuming that a shared meaning attaches to words: that the question asked will be the one that is understood.

This assumption relies on a discredited theory of the transparency of language. Current theories of language and communication stress that any

⁹ See E. A. Stanko, *Everyday Violence: How Men and Women Experience Sexual and Physical Danger* (London: Pandora, 1990) and M. Junger, "Women's Experience of Sexual Harassment", *British Journal of Criminology* 27, 1987, 358–83, for critiques of the early fear of crime research for not taking into account the routine sexual harassment of women; and S. Riger, M. Gordon and R. Bailey, "Women's Fear of Crime: From Blaming to Restricting the Victim", *Victimology* 3, 1978, 274–84, on the particular vulnerability of women to rape; Stanko, *Everyday Violence*; E. A. Stanko and K. Hobdell, "Assault on Men: Masculinity and Male Victimization", *British Journal of Criminology* 33, no. 3, 1993, 400–15; Gilchrist, Bannister, Ditton and Farrell, "Women and the 'Fear of Crime'" used in-depth or semi-structured face-to-face interviews to ask either men, or women and men, about their fears.

¹⁰ M. Maynard and J. Purvis, ed., *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 12.

¹¹ Maynard and Purvis, *Researching Women's Lives*; D. N. Berg and K. K. Smith, ed., *The Self in Social Inquiry: Researching Methods* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1988); Mishler, *Research Interviewing*.

¹² S. Farrell, J. Bannister, J. Ditton and E. Gilchrist, "Questioning the Measurement of the 'Fear of Crime'", *British Journal of Criminology* 37, 1997, 662.

kind of account can only be a mediation of reality. Hence there can be no guarantees that different people will share the same meanings when it comes to making sense of an interviewee's account.¹³ The assumption in qualitative research of shared meanings between interviewer and interviewee relies on a taken-for-granted notion of the research subject, one which assumes not only transparency to the other but self-transparency. In essence, this is the same rational unitary subject as that assumed by survey researchers.

The Defended Subject

By contrast, the subject we presume in what follows is 'defended'. It is a fundamental proposition in psychoanalytic theory that anxiety is inherent in the human condition, specifically, that threats to the self create anxiety. Defences against such anxiety are mobilised at a largely unconscious level. This idea of a dynamic unconscious which defends against anxiety is seen as a significant influence on people's actions, lives and relations. It means that if memories of events are too anxiety-provoking, they will be either forgotten or recalled in a modified, more acceptable fashion. Defences will affect the meanings that are available in a particular context and how they are conveyed to the listener¹⁴ (who is also a defended subject).

In approaching our defended subject, we were assisted by two concepts: gestalt and free association. However, our understanding of the importance of

¹³ In taking into account the context of the interview, clearly the interviewer is a central mediating factor in the making of meaning. We analyse these dynamics, within other case-study examples from the same research, in Hollway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*.

¹⁴ In her notion of unconscious defences against anxiety, Melanie Klein departs radically from the assumption that the self is a single unit, with unproblematic boundaries separating it from the external world of objects (both people and things). See Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921–1945* (London: Virago, 1988); Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (London: Virago, 1988). Her proposition (based on clinical work) is that the most primitive defences against anxiety are intersubjective, that is, they come into play in relations between people. The unconscious processes of projection (putting out) and introjection (taking in) of mental objects results in splitting: the separation of good and bad. This splitting of objects into good and bad is the basis for what Klein terms the 'paranoid-schizoid' position; a position to which we may all resort in the face of self-threatening occurrences, because it permits us to believe in a good object, on which we can rely, uncontaminated by 'bad' threats which have been split off and located elsewhere. Given splitting behaviour, the problem of understanding the whole person is rendered even more complex. For case examples from our research illustrating the effects of splitting, see Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, "Gender, Generation, Anxiety and the Reproduction of Culture: A Family Case Study", in *Narrative Study of Lives, vol. 6*, ed. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (London: Sage, 1999); Hollway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*.

these concepts followed from our pilot attempts to produce a more sensitive interview schedule. This—we realised only with hindsight—did not break with the question-and-answer format of the semi-structured interview and its didactic consequences.

Mistaken Attempts

What follows is an extract from one disappointing pilot transcript (broken down into three parts to make following it easier) and our critical evaluation of it. Graphically and somewhat embarrassingly, this evaluation illustrates the problems with what we then took to be a focused, concrete and hard-won approach.

- Tony : What's the crime you most fear?
Ann : An offence against the person probably.
Tony : The person or your person?
Ann : Well, erm yes, I fear being hurt myself but I also fear for my children being hurt.
Tony : OK. Has, have you ever been hurt?
Ann : Yes.
Tony : And what did you do?
Ann : Can you be more specific, what do you mean?
Tony : Well, I mean, you choose any incident that you can recall.
Ann : Where I've been physically hurt?
Tony : Where you've been physically hurt.

Although the opening question is an attempt to tap concretely into Ann's fear of crime, it seems to come across as abstract because introduced abruptly, devoid of context, and prior to the build-up of any rapport. The uncertain answer (Probably) matches the unwitting abstractness of the question. The interviewer then has to work to focus the answer (The person or your person?), to make it less abstract, echoing her words where possible (Have you ever been hurt?). The result is a single word answer, Yes. The interviewer again tries to focus the respondent through a 'do' question (And what did you do?). This only succeeds in producing a request to the interviewer to be more specific. This is hardly surprising since no particular incident has yet been specified. In an attempt not to override her meaning-frame, the interviewer invites her to choose an incident, but this is still too general. Ann's subsequent request for clarification (Where I've been physically hurt?) might be seen as an attempt to ask after the interviewer's meaning-frame, what the interviewer is really after. She probably does this because that is the kind of relationship that the question-and-answer approach has established; that is, the interviewer defines the agenda.

- Ann : Erm, it erm. Well, I've been hurt by people I've been in relationships with. Is that the sort of crime you're referring to?

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- Tony : That's fine.
Ann : It's varied what I've done. It depends on
Tony : From what to what?
Ann : Yes, it depends on what the circumstances were and whether I think I contributed to it or not, how I responded ultimately.
Tony : So if you thought you contributed to it you did what?
Ann : My usual response actually, if I describe my response, my response pattern to any situation where I've feel threatened, it'll probably help to answer the question. If I am threatened physically and it's not happened a lot but if I am I notice now that I have a patterned response which is, that I immediately go into shock and that it takes me a couple of days to recover from that actual physical shock and I, I experience the shock as though it were an accident or you know, (Tony: Yes) my body closes down and I can't think about it and I just feel very numb and, erm, after a couple of days with not being able to think about it then my mind starts to process it and I start to analyse it. I've never ever called the police except on one occasion when my children were involved with my ex partner. So I've called the police on one occasion.
Tony : But as well as going into shock are there other things you do?

Even when the interviewer agrees that an incident where Ann had been physically hurt was appropriate, she is still uncertain that being hurt by "people I've been in relationships with" counts (for the interviewer). Reassurance on this score still leaves her unfocused since her responses have varied (It depends). Instead of getting her to focus on a particular incident, the interviewer picks up on this lead about her various responses. This effectively invites her to continue in a generalising mode (it depends on . . . the circumstances . . . and whether I think I contributed to it or not). Perhaps realising the error, the interviewer attempts to recoup by specifying a 'contributory' situation: "So if you thought you contributed to it you did what?" It is still too little; no actual incident has been specified so she plumps for her 'usual' (i.e., general) response, hoping this will help. The interviewer allows this and learns that usually she goes into shock, and on one occasion (and only one occasion) she called the police. This should have provided two openings: one toward her meaning-frame via a further exploration of the issue of 'shock'; the other (at last!) toward a specific incident: the time she called the police. In trying to stick to the schedule, the interviewer misses them both, clumsily cutting across her meaning-frame concerning shock in pursuit of an apparently concrete question: But . . . are there other things you do?

- Ann : Well, I feel, do or feel?
Tony : Do.
Ann : It depends. If I'm able to access the person who's done it to me then I usually want to talk to them about it. Erm, but that's not always possible. What I've found is that when people hurt you they run away themselves and you're not able to actually resolve it and so therefore I think that exacerbates the shock I feel.
Tony : Why?

Ann : Because you're dealing with a range of feelings then (Tony: Right) which are not just about the physical assault.

Tony : Can I just sort of be clear in my own mind what we're talking about here. You mentioned threat. Are we talking about threats of violence or actual violence?

At this point, Ann half reintroduces her meaning-frame ("Well I feel", a reference back to her feelings of shock), before remembering the question specified "things you do". So she asks, "do or feel?" Again in the interest of (an apparent) concreteness, the interviewer reiterates "do". Once again she vacillates (It depends), and then generalises (I usually want to talk to them about it . . . but that's not always possible . . . when people hurt you they run away). The interviewer responds with a 'why' question, thus inviting further speculative theorising as to why someone running away "exacerbates the shock" she feels. Ann's answer (Because you're dealing with a range of feelings then) makes sense but is still very general. In desperation the interviewer seeks clarification as to "what we're talking about here . . . Are we talking about threats of violence or actual violence?" Not only has any hint of a concrete incident disappeared, but the interviewer seems now to be completely adrift, not even knowing whether Ann is talking about "threats" or "actual violence".

Narrative Approaches

Our pilot approach remained within the framework of the traditional question-and-answer interview. All structured interviews and most aspects of semi-structured interviews come under the question-and-answer type, where the interviewer sets the agenda and in principle remains in control of what information is produced. In this mode, the interviewer is imposing on the information in three ways: "by selecting the theme and topics; by ordering the questions and by wording questions in his or her language".¹⁵ Outside of this framework stand narrative and clinical case-study approaches, in which the researcher's responsibility is to be a good listener and the interviewee is a storyteller, rather than a respondent.

In the narrative approach, the agenda is open to development and change, depending on the narrator's experiences. At the pilot stage, we remained stuck in the conventional assumption of social research that the researcher asks questions. We could understand the problems in our example in terms of Mishler's argument that the question-and-answer method of interviewing has a tendency to suppress respondents' stories.¹⁶ It is not just a matter of being open to stories within the responses: we asked Ann to participate in a pilot

¹⁵ Martin Bauer, "The Narrative Interview", LSE Methodology Institute Papers, Qualitative Series no. 1, 1996.

¹⁶ Mishler, *Research Interviewing*.

interview because we knew she could tell stories about her experiences in the informal context in which Wendy knew her. By trying hard to comply with the interviewer's agenda, Ann was not able to convey her own relevant experiences. S. E. Chase argues that "attending to another's story in the interview context . . . requires an altered conception of what interviews are and how we should conduct them",¹⁷ a point we return to below.

According to K. Polanyi, the difference between a story and a report (of the kind that is often elicited in the traditional research interview) is that in telling a story, the narrator takes responsibility for "making the relevance of the telling clear".¹⁸ This approach therefore emphasises the meaning that is created within the research pair and the context within which the account makes sense. It also recognises that the story told is constructed (within the research and interview context) rather than a neutral account of a pre-existing reality. Stories have conventional structures which are arranged to provide coherence and causal sequence ('so then'); they have a beginning, middle and end.¹⁹ According to some, however, the narrative form has an even more central place in human life: "there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives";²⁰ narrative is "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful . . . it organises human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes";²¹ "thinking, perception, imagination and moral decision-making are based on narrative structure".²² More recently self identity has been seen as being achieved by narratives of the self.²³

Claims for the efficacy and appropriateness of a narrative method for studying experiences and meaning in context²⁴ have been subject to the basic problems of any other hermeneutic approach. What is the relation of a story to the events it refers to? How is truth compromised by the storyteller's motivations and

¹⁷ S. E. Chase, "Taking Narrative Seriously: Consequences for Method and Theory in Interview Studies", in *The Narrative Study of Lives*, vol. 3, ed. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (London: Sage, 1995), 1–26.

¹⁸ Chase, "Taking Narrative Seriously", 9.

¹⁹ Alternatively, stories are seen as having a "setting, problem, plan of action and outcome". A more complex model of the structure of stories comes from William Labov: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Result or Resolution and Coda. See Mishler, *Research Interviewing*.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, cited in D. E. Polkingthorne, *Narrative Knowing on the Human Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

²¹ Polkingthorne, *Narrative Knowing*.

²² Theodore R. Sarbin, cited in Ruthellen Josselson, *The Space Between Us: Exploring the Dimensions of Human Relationships* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1992).

²³ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1993).

²⁴ Mishler, *Research Interviewing*; Josselson, *The Space Between Us*; C. K. Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).

memory? Since one of the defining features of the narrative form is coherence,²⁵ how does this form affect our knowledge of the potential incoherence of life as it is lived? In the language of social science, these are questions about the reliability and validity of eliciting narratives as a research method.

Some narrative researchers, for example, Martin Bauer,²⁶ set aside these questions by taking the position that the object of narrative analysis is the narrative itself, as opposed to the events being narrated or the experiences or character of the narrator. This was not so for us when we turned to a narrative method. The focus of our analysis is the people who tell us stories about their lives: the stories themselves are a means to understand our interviewees better. While stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truths, storytelling stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanations. According to Bauer “narrations are rich in indexical statements” (by “indexical” he means that reference is made to concrete events in place and time).²⁷

Clinical Case Study Approaches

One response to the perception that survey-type research was losing sight of an understanding of whole people in real-life contexts was to look outside research to practitioners for models of social knowledge. S. Kvale has commented on the neglect of the psychoanalytic interview in research and explored the basic epistemological differences between the two domains of knowledge, psychoanalysis and social science, that may account for this. He concludes that each could learn from the other.²⁸ Clinicians work primarily with case studies and psychoanalysts have a model of knowledge which places primary responsibility on their own involvement in understanding a patient. According to D. N. Berg and K. K. Smith, “the complex emotional and intellectual forces that influence the conduct of our inquiry . . . are at once the source of our insight and our folly”.²⁹ As researchers, therefore, we cannot be detached but must examine our subjective involvement because it will help to shape the way that we interpret the interview data. This approach is consistent with the emphasis on reflexivity in the interview, but it understands the subjectivity

²⁵ C. Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); G. Rosenthal, “Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews”, in *The Narrative Study of Lives, vol. 1*, ed. R. Josselson, Ruthellen and Amia Lieblich (London: Sage, 1993), 59–91.

²⁶ Bauer, “The Narrative Interview”.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ S. Kvale, “The Psychoanalytic Interview as Qualitative Research”, *Qualitative Inquiry* 5, 1999, 87–113.

²⁹ Berg and Smith, *The Self in Social Inquiry*, 11.

of the interviewer through a model which includes unconscious, conflictual forces rather than simply conscious ones:

the process of self-scrutiny is central to our definition of clinical research because it can yield information about the intellectual and emotional factors that inevitably influence the researcher's involvement and activity, and at the same time provide information about the dynamics of the individual or social system being studied. The self-scrutiny process is difficult and complex precisely because both researcher and the "researched" are simultaneously influencing each other. Since this is occurring in ways that initially are out of the awareness of the parties involved, scrutiny is an absolutely necessary part of social science research.³⁰

In recognising the importance of unconscious dynamics in the research interview, this approach also notices the defences against anxiety. Part of the problem in our earlier example could be the anxiety of the interviewer. This probably had to do with a combination of the unfamiliarity of the (first time) situation and developing worries about the success of the interview after high expectations of it. More tellingly, what the interviewer had stumbled upon was the hornets' nest of Ann's painful experiences of partner violence. Positing a defended subject enabled us to see that part of Ann's vacillation was probably a largely unconscious sounding out of the interviewer, staying safe through comfortable, well-rehearsed generalisations. Utilising the concept of the defended subject enabled us also to interpret Ann's responses as established defences working to protect her from her own painful experiences of domestic violence (which we knew about prior to the interview). According to this approach, her well-rehearsed generalisations about what she does in this situation and what she does in that, intelligent and articulate though they are, are part of a defensive strategy; a strategy of intellectualising, of 'managing' painfully confusing emotional experiences through words which offer (apparently) the comfort of comprehension and the prospect of control. Although we only have evidence of Ann's defensive strategy in this particular, relational, setting of the research interview, it was enough to convince us of the need to find an approach which took account of such defences.

The Biographical-Interpretative Method and the Importance of Gestalt

At this point, somewhat fortuitously, we came across the biographical-interpretative method, first developed by German sociologists producing accounts of the lives of holocaust survivors and Nazi soldiers.³¹

³⁰ Ibid, 31.

³¹ Rosenthal, "Reconstruction of Life Stories"; G. Rosenthal and D. Bar-On, "A Biographical Case Study of a Victimizer's Daughter", *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 2, 1992, 105-27; F. Schutze, "Pressure and Guilt: The Experience of a Young German Soldier in World War Two and its Biographical Implications", *International Sociology* 7, nos.2 and 3, 1992, 187-208 and 347-67.

The biographical-interpretative method is part of the narrative tradition in social science research, a tradition which has been most developed in life story research.³²

Given our understanding of the way that unconscious defences affect the information that is produced in the research relationship and the way that it is interpreted, we wanted to incorporate this idea of the defended subject in our use of a narrative method. F. Schutze's article, an example of the biographical-interpretative tradition, revealed that elicited accounts such as those of Nazi soldiers would be highly defensive ones, given the painful subject matter, which needed a methodological strategy to uncover what he calls "faded-out memories and delayed recollections of emotionally or morally disturbing war experiences".³³ Although Schutze sees "some intersections between Freud's impressive theory on repression"³⁴ and his own method, this insight is not developed. The main theoretical principle is not the defended subject, but the idea that there is a 'gestalt' informing each person's life which it is the job of biographers to elicit intact, and not destroy through following their own concerns.³⁵

The principle of gestalt is based on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of parts. Max Wertheimer, the founder of gestalt psychology, objected to the way that, in his view, modern science proceeded from below to above. He believed that it was impossible to "achieve an understanding of structured totals by starting with the ingredient parts which enter into them. On the contrary we shall need to understand the structure; we shall need to have insight into it. There is then some possibility that the components themselves will be understood".³⁶

This is the principle which we try to apply to our understanding of the 'whole' text. Max Wertheimer's primary law, that of 'place in context' (that significance was a function of the position in a wider framework), addressed exactly the problem of decontextualisation of text which is inherent in the many qualitative methods which break up the text through coding segments according to theme and then analyse these segments as part of thematic categories (the 'code and retrieve' method which is characteristic of all computer-assisted qualitative data analysis). Wertheimer emphasised that "parts are defined by their relation to the

³² K. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³³ Schutze, "Pressure and Guilt", 347.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 359.

³⁵ G. Rosenthal, "The Structure and 'Gestalt' of Autobiographies and its Methodological Consequences" (paper presented at the Twelfth World Congress of Sociology, Madrid, 1990).

³⁶ G. Murphy and J. K. Kovach, *Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 258–59.

system as a whole in which they are functioning”.³⁷ Similarly the structuralist movement which started in social anthropology and linguistics emphasised that meanings could only be understood in relation to a larger whole, whether it be the culture, the sentence or the narrative.

The ‘whole’ that was the unit of analysis in our research was not the ‘whole’ person (as if that is ever knowable). Rather it was all we managed to accumulate relating to a particular person who took part in the research. As well as the transcripts from both interviews,³⁸ we have our memories of meetings with that person; the notes we took after the first meeting and subsequent interviews and also, where more than one family member was interviewed, what was said about our participant by others. But this definition refers only to an external reality. Maybe the gestalt principle is best understood also as the internal capacity for holding those data together in the mind.

The German biographers’ strategy for eliciting narratives—which we adopted and adapted—can be summarised in terms of four principles, each designed to facilitate the production of the interviewee’s meaning frame, or gestalt:

Use open-ended not closed questions; the more open the better

“How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?” with respondents expected to tick one of four categories on a Likert scale, is a closed question. Our opening question to Ann, “What’s the crime you most fear?” is open, but in a narrow way, which may help account for its failure to elicit much from her. In linking fear with crime, it reveals what sort of fear interests the interviewer; but, in so doing, it may work to suppress the meaning of fear to Ann, which may have no apparent connection to crime. To learn about the meaning of fear to Ann, a more open question, such as “What do you most fear?” would be necessary. The presumption of the biographical method is that it is only in this way, by tracking Ann’s fears through her meaning frames, that we are likely to discover the ‘real’ meaning of fear of crime to her; how it relates to her life.

Elicit stories

Eliciting stories has the virtue of indexicality, of anchoring people’s accounts to events that have actually happened. To that extent, such accounts have to engage with reality, even while compromising it in the service of self-protection. Eliciting stories from people is not always a simple matter, especially from those who feel their lives lack sufficient interest or worth to justify ‘a story’.

³⁷ Murphy and Kovach, *Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology*, 258.

³⁸ We conducted a second interview approximately one week after the first. In between, we both listened to the audiotapes and devised a second set of questions, based on the principles of the Free Association Narrative Interview method.

And, no doubt for a variety of different reasons, people's storytelling ability varies enormously. However, given the importance of the narrative form to all social communication, a story is often chosen to answer even direct questions, especially when interviewees are uncertain what is required. It is a 'well, this is the story of my relationship to your chosen topic, you decide whether it's what you're after' sort of reply. The particular story told, the manner and detail of its telling, the points emphasised, the morals drawn, all represent choices made by the storyteller. Such choices are revealing, often more so than the teller suspects. This characteristic of storytelling, to contain significances beyond the teller's intentions, is what it shares with the psychoanalytic method of free associations. The implications of this for the traditional interview method are a recommendation to 'narrativise topics', that is, to turn questions about given topics into storytelling invitations. In this light, the open-ended 'What do you most fear?', which could elicit a one-word answer rather than a story, would be modified to read "tell me about your experiences of fear" or, better, because more specific, "tell me about a time when you were fearful".

Avoid 'why' questions

With Ann, we saw that a 'why' question elicited an intellectualisation. While this was appropriate to the question, it was uninformative in terms of the research questions.

At first glance, this is the most surprising principle since it is counter-intuitive: surely people's own explanations of their actions or feelings are useful routes to understanding them? Indeed, researchers sometimes assume that they can simply translate their research question into the question for interviewees. K. B. Sacks for example, found that because she asked sociological questions, her women interviewees offered sociological responses, but "the abstraction of such talk—its disconnection from their actual lives, made it hollow".³⁹ She concluded that it was a mistake to ask those kinds of question. However people can only be their own best explainers if they conform to the model of the rational, information-processing subject of psychology. This, we are arguing, leaves a lot out and distorts researchers' views of subjectivity.

Follow up using respondents' ordering and phrasing

This involves attentive listening and possibly some note taking during the initial narration, in order to be able to follow up themes in their narrated order. It preserves the form of the whole response. In doing this, the respondent's own words and phrases should be used in order to respect and retain the interviewee's meaning frames. As always, the follow-up questions constructed should be as open as possible and framed so as to elicit further narratives.

³⁹ Cited in Chase, "Taking Narrative Seriously", 4.

For the German biographers, the method entails a single, open, initial question which is also an invitation: “Please, tell me your life story”.⁴⁰ [This is not always the question. G. Rosenthal asked what were, in effect, psychological questions in her research on coming to terms with the interviewees’ National Socialist past.⁴¹] We are not biographers or life story researchers and have adapted the questions in this light. Our interest in specific events has been labelled as “focused interviews” by Mishler.⁴² In both cases, the art and the skill of the exercise is to assist narrators to say more about their lives (to assist the emergence of gestalts) without at the same time offering interpretations, judgements, or otherwise imposing one’s own relevancies as interviewers, which would thus destroy the interviewee’s gestalt. Apparently simple, it required discipline and practice to transform ourselves from the highly visible asker of our questions to the almost invisible, facilitating catalyst to their stories. Being ‘almost invisible’ does not imply a belief in an objective interviewer who has no effects on the production of accounts; it means not imposing a structure on the narrative.

The Importance of Free Association

This is not the place to explore fully the interesting question of the relationship between the German sociologist-biographers’ understanding of gestalt and our psychoanalytically derived understanding of anxiety. What we would like to draw attention to are the similarities between the principle of respecting the narrator’s gestalt and the psychoanalytic method of free association. By asking the patient to say whatever comes to mind, the psychoanalyst is eliciting the kind of narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic; that is, the associations follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions. According to psychoanalysis, unconscious dynamics are a product of attempts to avoid or master anxiety.

Freud allowed the patient to “choose the subject of the day’s work” in order that he could “start out from whatever surface [the patient’s] unconscious happens to be presenting to his notice at the moment”. As Kerr points out, by allowing the patient to set the agenda, “this was the method of truly free associations”.⁴³ In our case, we invited interviewees to tell us about their experiences of crime, risk, safety and anxiety (our core theoretical concerns) and then followed their associations wherever these happened to take the interview, on the grounds that these would be more unconsciously revealing than the meanings we might introduce.

⁴⁰ Rosenthal, “Structure and Gestalt”.

⁴¹ Rosenthal, “Reconstruction of Life Stories”, 71.

⁴² Mishler, *Research Interviewing*, 99.

⁴³ John Kerr, *A Most Dangerous Method* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

This suggests that anxieties and attempts to defend against them, including the identity investments these give rise to, provide the key to a person's gestalt. By eliciting a narrative structured according to the principles of free association, therefore, we secure access to a person's concerns which would probably not be visible using a more traditional method. While a common concern of both approaches is to elicit detail, narrative analysis has a preoccupation with coherence which we do not share. Free associations defy narrative conventions and enable the analyst to pick up on incoherences (for example, contradictions, elisions, avoidances) and accord them due significance.

The Initial Narrative Questions

Following our attendance at a biographical-interpretative method workshop, we set about revising our interview schedule. We considered asking one single question (as the German biographers do), but our three-part theoretical structure—crime/victimisation; risk/safety; anxiety/worry—which evolved from the fact that we were researching specifically into fear of crime, seemed to provide an important frame for eliciting what we wanted to know. Life stories can be structured by an infinite number of themes, but our research provided a particular frame that we could not ignore. We decided, therefore, upon six questions deriving from our theoretical structure and a seventh about moving into the area.

Interview One Questions

- 1a. Can you tell me about how crime has impacted on your life since you've been living here?
- 1b. [follow up in terms of detail and time periods, following order of narrative]
- 2a. Can you tell me about unsafe situations in your life since you've been living here?
- 2b. [as in 1b]
- 3a. Can you think of something that you've read, seen or heard about recently that makes you fearful? Anything [not necessarily about crime].
- 3b. [as in 1b]
- 4a. Can you tell me about risky situations in your life since you've been living here?
- 4b. [as in 1b]
- 5a. Can you tell me about times in your life recently when you've been anxious?
- 5b. [as in 1b]
- 6a. Can you tell me about earlier times in your life when you've been anxious?

6b. [as in 1b]

7a. Can you tell me what it was like moving to this area?

7b. [as in 1b]

It can be argued that by asking the questions we ask, notably by asking about anxiety, we produce the anxiety that we are seeking to establish empirically. Of course, all research in a sense produces its answers by the very frame through which the questions are set. No frame is ever neutral, and neither was ours. However, as the responses of our interviewees made clear, the diversity of the stories elicited demonstrated that their accounts were not constructed by our questions. This, we feel, is related to our central idea that people's lives have a biographically unique 'reality' which our open narrative questions were designed to elicit. Only if this were not the case could it be argued that the answers given by respondents are merely 'produced' by the discursive frame of the questions.

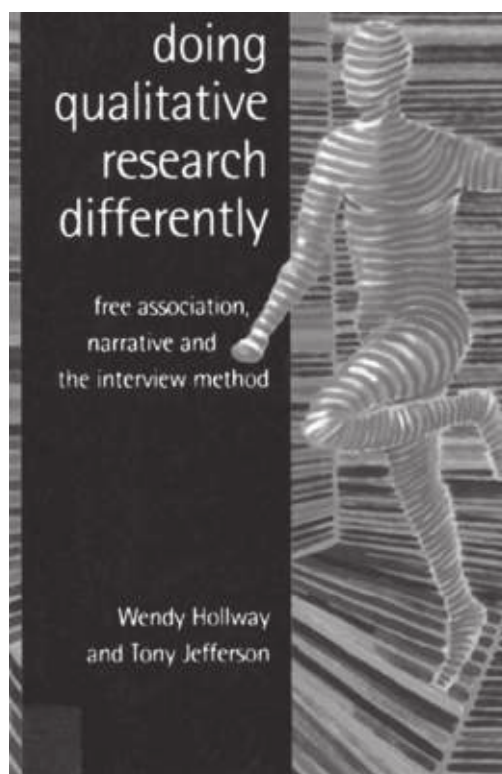
Question (1) aims to elicit any associations to crime. We worded it this way so that it did not assume victimisation, and indeed it elicited stories about criminal involvement from several young men. Usually it provided an account of criminal victimisations directly to the respondent and of crimes happening locally. Though it did often elicit stories as it was intended to, we now consider this question to be insufficiently narrativised since it invites respondents to talk about the general 'impact of crime' on their life over, in some cases, a very long period "since you've been living here". The best questions require the interviewee to be specific about times and situations: thus, a better question would have been, "Can you tell me about times when crime has impacted on your life since you've been living here?" The (b) questions follow the principle of respecting the respondents' meaning-frames: remaining faithful to the order and wording in which they presented their associations (a detailed example follows later). Questions (2) and (4) elicited stories relating to safety and risk respectively, providing us with two routes to the same theoretical point. Safety is the same concept that is used in the British Crime Survey question (how safe do you feel . . .), but in the way we framed this question, we did not assume fear. While the notion of being 'at risk' is similar, we wanted to broaden the question so as not to talk specifically about risk of criminal victimisation. We also wished to leave open whether a respondent associated with being at risk or to being a risk-taker. Question (3) was designed to explore some links between fear of crime and discourses available in the media. Questions (5) and (6) were both about anxiety. These were separated into recent and past anxiety in recognition of the importance, according to psychoanalytic theory, of childhood trauma in producing adult fears and chronic anxiety. Question (7) was added in order to take into account the fact that a person's perception of a neighbourhood will be influenced by comparing it with where they lived previously. This question asked for stories about moving in order to elicit such comparisons. It was also likely to be a neutral question with which to end.

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The questions did not always elicit different stories. However, the different frames of the questions meant that people could elaborate different associations to the same memory. After the first question, we were not asking specifically about crime, although the overall frame in which the research interview was presented defined crime as a key theme. In question (3), we widened the frame specifically by asking about any media stimulus that had made people fearful, giving respondents explicit permission to broaden out. This was informed by our hypothesis that generalised anxiety might become invested in, and be expressed by, fear of crime, or it might be expressed in other concerns, for example, environmental pollution. Any associations to the question were therefore encouraged and legitimately within our interests.

Developing Our Free Association Narrative Interview

How did our new, story-based approach fare when put to the test? In this section we show how free associations in the narrative revealed significant personal meanings which were not necessarily obvious at the time.



Cover Image of W Hollway and T. Jefferson, *Doing qualitative research differently. A free association, narrative and the interview method* (London: Sage, 2000). Courtesy: Sage Publications

Eight elements or an emergent gestalt

In what follows, we use the transcript of the beginning of the first interview with Jane, a nineteen year-old white woman, single mother of two children, aged two and three, living on a high-crime council housing estate. (The interviewer's question was a version of question 1a, above, so this excerpt was at the very beginning of the taped interview.)

Wendy : Tell me first of all, how crime has had any effects on you since you moved here.

Jane : Em, it's just you know, like, we got broken into once. But they didn't seem to take owt. They just took stuff outside there, and that were it. They must er, I must 'ave come 'ome and they were 'ere [1]. And just—I see police, y'know, bringing cars up from fields at back [2]. There's always motor bikes. Kids on motorbikes [3]. They just don't seem to do nowt [4]. They just see 'em go past and – it's just like – you know things like – there's a 'ouse up there and some kids 'ave broken into it. It were like in daylight. Kicking door down and smashing window – nobody were doing nowt [5]. There was somebody living next door, people across road, nobody seemed to do owt [6]. And they're all their kids. And it's like – they just let the kids do what they want. They don't bother [7]. (Wendy: Right). There're like, there's like one and two year-olds just playing out on the street and it's all that kind of thing [8].

At first sight, the interview looks far from promising. It is not always clear what Jane is referring to and she dries up quite quickly. This excerpt does not have the coherence or conventional structure of a story. The interviewer's technique involves not intervening until the interchange is handed back and identifying the themes which are apparent, so as to return to them in the order of their appearance to elicit further detail. Eight themes were identifiable in this short extract. Jane mentions the break-in, summed up in four short sentences [1]. Her next association [2] is to the police, in the context of a different crime: police retrieving stolen cars from where they have been dumped. This leads her [3] to think of another instance of local joy riding: kids on motorbikes. Her theme is still the police [4] (though she does not specify this here, the interviewer does not intervene to clarify): the police go past, but “don't seem to do owt”. In mid-sentence Jane shifts to a different example of inactivity [5], in this instance where “nobody were doing nowt”, even though kids had broken into a house and were vandalising it. She elaborates on the “nobody” [6], instancing neighbours' inactivity in the face of kids breaking the law. Her train of association is then [7] to parents who do not stop these activities and finally [8] to parents' more general negligence as instanced by very young children playing out unsupervised.

Because this pathway of associations is produced out of Jane's concerns, the hypothesis is that the whole will signify more than the sum of the parts (this is definitional of a gestalt). A quick-witted interviewer, who has already taken biographical details, may have realised the significance of where this young

woman ended her first contribution. Certainly as the interview developed, there were numerous pointers to the fact that Jane's relation to the council estate where she had lived for twelve months was informed more than anything else by her concern for how she was going to bring up her two young boys in this context of precocious delinquency. Her disapproval of the negligence of some parents on the estate was an expression of her difference in this respect ("I couldn't believe it, me", "Mum couldn't believe it"), on which were pinned, presumably, her hopes that her children would not go the same way. This was all the more important given that she and her family represented one of the stereotypes of the negligent mother: a young, single, white parent, with mixed-race children. This key to her gestalt manifested itself at the first opportunity, that is, at the end of her first unimpeded response to a question framed for maximum openness.⁴⁴ It had actually entailed her going 'off' the question, in the sense that she started by listing some crimes and then moved on to other, non-criminal issues which for her were intimately associated, but of greater concern. It is her emotional concerns which produce this pathway of associations. She eventually mentioned this core concern, namely, the difficulty of bringing up children in such a delinquency-prone environment, later in the first interview: "It's just with these [her children] getting older. It's like everybody round 'ere, I mean they're . . . dunno . . . it's attitudes and that". To have confined the interview to crime would have been to rule out this, her central preoccupation. In so doing, it would have risked misunderstanding the meaning of crime and fear of crime in her life.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed the development of a method which we believe is adequate to addressing some of the central issues in the behavioural and social sciences. By these we mean questions which involve the understanding of people's subjectivities in the context of events which they bring to mind and convey, in the intersubjective context of the interview, using their own expressions.

The turn to language in the social sciences has opened up research to qualitative methods, which emphasise the importance of meaning and context. However, most of the new qualitative methods such as discourse analysis and narrative analysis still assume rational, unitary subjects, if not explicitly, then by default. The free association narrative interview (FANI) method assumes, in contrast, defended subjects. When people are assumed not necessarily to be able to tell it like it is, because their own remembered actions may not be

⁴⁴ We found this often to be the case, but it was usually not until we had familiarised ourselves with the whole two interviews that we recognised it. It is an example of the whole giving extra meaning to a part.

Free Association Narrative Interview

transparent to them on account of defences against anxiety, a different approach is required. For this approach we borrowed the psychoanalytic principle of free association, which assumes that unconscious connections will be revealed through the links that people make if they are free to structure their own narratives. This adds a further dimension to the principle of preserving the whole of the account, rather than breaking it down into parts. The 'form' or gestalt reveals the unconscious dynamics which structure memory and hence a person's subjective investment in their past actions and experiences.