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Generating Group Accounts with Parents & Children in Qualitative Longitudinal Research: A Practical & Ethical Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Qualitative longitudinal research aims to investigate and interpret change over time, exploring the processes involved while taking account of the social context. Research which follows and explores aspects of family life over time often takes a multiple perspectives approach, whereby repeat individual interviews are conducted with two or more 'related' participants. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly common for family sociologists to conduct research which generates and compares parents' and children's perspectives. This approach is often taken as a way of ensuring that children's voices are heard and building an understanding of family practices or cultures around a particular research topic (Ribbens McCarthy *et al*, 2003). It is less common, however, to generate group accounts with parents and children because of concerns about silencing children in the context of generational power dynamics (Harden *et al*, 2010).

However, qualitative longitudinal research could be seen as offering an opportunity to diminish such concerns about incorporating both individual and family group interviews because it involves the development of research relationships over time. Furthermore, generating group accounts with parents and children adds another analytical dimension to explorations and understandings of family practices over time. Based on our experiences of conducting family group interviews as the second wave of a qualitative longitudinal project, involving parents and children who gave individual accounts at waves one and three, we have drawn together the practical and ethical lessons we learnt so as to guide future researchers adopting a similar research design.

KEY POINTS

- Although a multiple perspectives approach is not uncommon amongst family sociologists, it is rare for parents and children to be interviewed in a group context.
- Qualitative longitudinal research, with its potential for building strong research relationships over time, represents a good opportunity to incorporate the use of both individual and family interviews with parents and children.
- Conducting family interviews with related participants who have already been interviewed individually requires careful attention to a number of ethical issues, such as preservation of confidentiality and careful handling of any tensions which arise during discussions.
- When designing methods for family interviews consideration needs to be given to the discussion topics and elicitation techniques which will engage adults and children alike, stimulate group interaction and are 'safe' to talk about in a group context.
- Analyses of family interview data should explore the ways in which children's and parents' accounts were controlled, inhibited and/or facilitated by one another's presence and utterances, as well as those of the researcher.
- While remaining sensitive to the potential impact of generational power relationships when interviewing families as a group, we should avoid making assumptions as to how these will play out within the research process.

BACKGROUND

Various ethical concerns underlie the dearth of research with parents and children in a group context. In particular it is feared that, given generational power relations, if interviewed together parents talk for children, resulting in a silencing of children's voices while parents' voices dominate. Also of concern is the potential impact of family group interviews on individual participants and their relationships with one another. In group interviews, it can be harder for the researcher to control or contain the dynamics than in individual interviews. Given that it is rare for researchers to receive training in relation to family interviews, and there are few guides available in the literature, if any points of tension were to arise between partners or a parent and child, considerable skill may be required of the researcher to deal with this (Harden *et al*, 2010).

The context in which family interviews are most commonly conducted is nursing research and there is a growing literature reflecting on their successful use in this context. For example, Eggenberger and Nelms (2007) reported that adolescents engaged in the family interviews they conducted in a number of ways, ranging from non-verbal actions to contributing verbally to discussions. They also suggest that family interviews, through the interaction they stimulate, can reveal the 'tone and personality of a family [...] in a way that interviewing individual family members cannot' (290). Astedt-Kurki *et al* (2001: 291) advocate the use of family interviews 'if the researcher needs to capture interactional data or shared meanings'. In another study which involved conducting two group interviews with each participating family, Astedt-Kurki and colleagues (1999) found more in-depth and detailed accounts were generated during the second interviews, suggesting that a longer period of contact between researchers and families serves to reduce tension and uncertainty and improves data quality.

These reflections suggest that the presence of their parents in a research context does not necessarily silence children and adolescents. Indeed, in the context of the home, children (particularly younger children) may be used to the presence of their parents and may take comfort and feel supported in a joint interview situation, allowing them to express their views in ways that might not be possible in an individual interview (Harden *et al*, 2010; Irwin &Johnson, 2005). The above reflections on the use of family interviews also suggest that the data generated through this method may be enhanced if it is incorporated into a longitudinal design.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

In the 'Work and Family Lives' (WFL) study, family interviews were conducted as the second of three data collection waves, in between rounds of individual interviews. It was hoped that the research relationships built during the first wave of research would facilitate the group discussions. In particular, the aim was for children to feel empowered by having been listened to in their first interview and, consequently, better able to voice their opinions in the presence of their parents and siblings. Family interviews were conducted with the aim of bringing group dynamics into focus and to allow observation of the interplay of personalities and relationships.

It is standard in most social research to promise anonymity and confidentiality in public reporting of the study, but network confidentiality is another important aspect. This refers to keeping interview contents private from respondents' family or friends (Hill, 2005). This is particularly pertinent to research with children and parents, given that members of a family may wish to know what the others have said, when interviewed separately. When conducting a family interview with participants who have already given individual accounts, extra care needs to be taken by the researcher not to breach confidentiality by unintentionally revealing information which was disclosed by one participant to the whole family group. The WFL project team found it important to write a detailed summary of wave 1 interviews which could then be read prior to the family interviews to re-familiarize the researcher with the data from each family member.

In order to engage both children and parents, and to generate discussion, consideration needs to be given to

the topics discussed and methods used in family interviews. We ensured that all participants would be able to talk about the main topic, which was leisure time and holidays, and tried to pitch questions so as to engage children and adults. For example, we asked families how they had spent the previous weekend and followed up by asking; What were the best and worst things about last weekend? and how do you make up your minds about what to do at weekends? We aimed to make the topics accessible whilst facilitating participants in reflecting on themselves as families as well as the negotiations involved in how to spend time. An important part of designing the topic guide is deciding which topics are too sensitive to raise in a group context and working out the least intrusive ways of framing potentially sensitive topics. We decided not to ask families about aspects of their finances, such as debt, but asked about shopping, as a leisure activity, as a way of bringing in issues around money and consumption. We also used the media coverage of the recession as a way of asking about families' experiences of changes in the economy.

To stimulate interaction alongside tracking change over time, we designed a chart activity which was used at the start of each interview. Each family member had a row on the A0-sized chart: columns along the top represented the school terms and holidays which had passed since they had last been interviewed. After reminding family members of what had been happening for each of them when they were last interviewed (taking great care not to reveal any information to which all family members were not privy), participants added to the chart (using post-its) any changes that had taken place and things they had done since their first interviews. Keywords were placed around the chart to remind participants of the areas of their lives that we wished to cover (e.g. school, work, family, time). Both parents and children then added smiley/emoticon stickers to indicate how they felt about any changes they had documented on the chart.

Analysis of family interview data needs to pay specific attention to the ways in which the group context and interaction between family members has influenced the accounts generated. We explored the ways in which what children and parents said may have been controlled, inhibited or facilitated by one another's presence and utterances, as well as those of the researcher. We were careful not to view the family interviews data as representing a straightforward reflection of family dynamics and power relationships as they may exist on a day-to-day basis, but interpreted them as co-constructed performances shaped by context and participants' awareness of "the public that is being addressed" (Morris, 2001:556), whether this was their family, the researcher, or the wider public audience who may come into contact with the data. If incorporating family interviews into a longitudinal design, it is also important to reflect on differences in the accounts generated over time and depending on research method.

Researchers conducting family interviews as part of a longitudinal design should be aware of the ways in which the passing of time and occurrence of events between waves can have an impact on families' reactions to topics. Depending on what has been going on for families since their last contact with the researcher, raising and probing around even seemingly innocuous topics can prove difficult. In one of the WFL family interviews, a request to hear more about their summer holiday upset the dynamics as the children seemed to panic at the prospect of talking about this. Their mum quickly curtailed the discussion, saying that because the holiday had involved her ex-partner (from whom she had only recently separated), they did not want to talk about it. This shows the potential impact of changes over time on the type of data that can be generated in family interviews and the way that 'mundane' topics can become sensitive depending on intervening events.

CONCLUSION

Our experiences of conducting family interviews as part of a qualitative longitudinal study have taught us to be wary of making methodological assumptions about how best to conduct research with parents and children. We witnessed few examples of parents talking for, or instead of, children in the family interviews we conducted. As would be expected in any group research context, however, parents and children influenced one another's accounts in various ways. Parents, for example, facilitated children's contributions by asking additional questions or reminding children of significant issues. They modified their accounts by disagreeing or presenting an alternative point of view and exerted an element of control by quietening dominant children in order to give others a say. There was also evidence of parents modifying and policing one another's accounts as well as of children questioning and contradicting parents' and siblings' accounts. Therefore, although we should remain sensitive to the potential impact of generational power relationships when interviewing families as a group, we also need to be aware that it is by no means clear how these will play out within the research process.

In single occasion interview projects, we would suggest there is insufficient time to build the research relationships required to conduct successful family interviews and believe it would be extremely difficult to make sense of the data generated. In addition, the in-depth understanding of the views and experiences of individual family members may be lost. Nevertheless, this method can bring an added, interactive dimension to the exploration of family life. Qualitative longitudinal research offers the opportunity to include family interviews in a research study, and is both a useful and challenging method for researching family life over time.

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RESEARCH TEAM CONTACT DETAILS