BOOK REVIEWS

INTERVIEWING IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH


DAVID HARTLEY

Interviewing in Educational Research is a welcome, thorough and well-written account of a much-used and abused research instrument: the interview. The account begins with a typology of interviews. In effect, the typology offers two ideal types of interview: first, respondent interviews which are typified by highly structured questions which reflect the interests of the interviewer, not the interviewee; and second, informant interviews whereby the purpose is to generate the issues which are relevant to the interviewee, not the researcher. Matters of technology, ethics, and stimulus are all considered, as is the use of interviews as a complement to other data-gathering procedures. Chapter 3 provides a most sensitive treatment of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, attending particularly to the possible effects on the interviewee and the ethical issues which attach to them. All this is followed by six case studies in which interviewers reflect on their procedures. The six studies are meant to exemplify the typology referred to earlier, though they are a bit thin on examples of ethnographic ‘interviews’, or conversations. Among the studies, there is Julia Field on survey interviewing; Jill Keegan interviewing parents on their information needs about schools; Norman Evans evaluating an in-service BEd degree; Di Bentley’s fascinating study of how pupils ‘read’ their teachers’ non-verbal messages; and, in a similar vein, Steven Eales and his analysis of how pupils interpret the ritual of the school assembly. Each study illustrates a variation on the interview theme. Sadly, although we have the interviewer’s recollections, we do not have the interviewee’s. Chapters five and six offer ‘guidelines for practice’ and for the ‘transcription, logging and analysis of data’, the former offering wise counsel on the logistics of interviewing, the latter being careful to advocate caution if potential embarrassment to the interviewee is envisaged.

Such is the substance of the book. The form is a little unusual in that ‘Some theoretical issues’ are tagged on to constitute the last chapter. After having been reminded that the analysis of interview data turns considerably upon the researcher’s theoretical perspective (be it implicit or explicit), I was not a little surprised to have the ‘theory’ at the end, not the beginning. In their defence, the authors state:

We have a strong sense of not wanting the book to be too linear, so that the reader might start with our case study examples, the theoretical discussions or the more practical chapters (p. 1).

The interesting thing about interviews as a research instrument is that they straddle the quantitative-qualitative paradigms, as the authors’ respondent-informant typology suggests. Indeed, the qualitative data (generated using an interpretative framework) are often coded into so-called hard, robust, objective data which are allegedly amenable to the statistical
delight of SPSS and the empirical paradigm which underpins it. Nor are we referred to the philosophical issues to do with how we impute the meanings of others. In this respect, a short detour into Weber's concept of 

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or Schutz's concept of motivational understanding might have better helped in 'setting the scene', to quote the title of the first chapter.

That said, the authors have amassed and structured a useful and representative selection of interview-based research, and commentary on it. The form of the book does allow the reader to flick through it in search of a study which may match his or her own research endeavour. If this were to be the typical reading of it, it would be a pity, despite the authors' concern not to make the book a 'linear read'. Read chapter eight ('Some theoretical issues') first, regardless of whether you intend to 'shop around' in the book. On balance, the book offers an excellent practical guide to the skill of interviewing, and its case-studies would provide a most useful focus for ethnographic 'conversations'.

SO YOU WANT TO DO RESEARCH!


DAVID KIRK

This brief guide is intended to assist educators make a start to researching their own practice. The authors discuss such issues as the purpose of doing research, what a research question is, how research questions can be generated, and how a study can be planned to produce worthwhile results.

They suggest that the main reason for doing research is to produce 'systematic and reliable information that can be used as a basis for action'. At the heart of the guide are a set of procedures for practitioner research which Lewis and Munn present as a series of logical steps. First of all, the researcher begins with an 'initial area of concern'. The authors stress that 'worthwhile' results are only likely to come from a careful and thoughtful breaking down of these concerns into fairly precise 'research questions'. Next, they suggest that in order to guard against insularity the researcher should take other points of view into account, particularly those of colleagues who have done some practitioner research themselves or who understand the local context in which the research is to be conducted. They also recommend that the related literature be consulted (though they omit to supply a promised list, on p. 10, of 'British registers of research' that they say will simplify this process for the researcher). Lewis and Munn suggest that this process of consultation will cause the research questions to be modified, and will assist the researcher to produce a feasible and practical plan, one that connects with the 'normal range of professional work'. The methods for collecting information and for monitoring the progress of the study will also be derived from these more clearly delineated questions. Lewis and Munn expand this procedure with an example of how it might work in practice, and then show how it can be fitted into a time-scale.

The authors' style of writing is readable, concise and jargon-free. Their