

One & Other Project

Interviewing the Interviewers Survey

Wellcome Trust would like to capture your perceptions and reflections on the interviewing process as part of the overall Wellcome Trust oral history collection. It will allow you as one of the interviewers to document and reflect on their your own lived experiences (personal and emotional), provide an insider's perspective of the interviewing processes and develop a further set of reflective interviews that would go to enrich the existing oral history collection. Please answer the following questions and write as long or as little as you would like and feel free to add anything else you feel was important.

1- General

1. *Your name, age and where you come from.*

Simon Cox, 22, Bickley in Kent

2. *How many interviews did you conduct (roughly)?*

72

3. *How did you get involved in the project?*

I was interviewed for a position on the project after having previously met Helen Marriage (of Artichoke) who passed my name on to the people recruiting for Artichoke.

4. *Any previous experience of interviewing? If so describe.*

No

2- Technical/Practical: rapport building, silences, listening

1. *Did you know about Oral History before you got involved in this project?*

No

2. *What did you think about oral history as a methodology after receiving the training?*

I thought it to be a very useful tool through which personal recollections can be recorded, giving valuable insight into not only historical events but more so personal encounters, thoughts and beliefs.

3. *How comfortable did you feel with the recording equipment (including the MIC)?*

Very comfortable, though I found that the interviewee was often far too aware of it and thus inhibited their answers. Often at the end of the interview they commented on how 'present' the microphone was in their mind.

4. *How much did the interviewees know, understand about the project aims/the interview style before the interviews?*

Most were very well informed through the various forms and instructions that had been given to them. I think perhaps the word interview had different implications to what was actually performed. The word 'interview'

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has connotations, most notably connected with jobs and infers some sort of test. Whereas in reality the interview was far different from what many had previously had.

5. Building Rapport and Trust: strategies you employed before and during the interview.

This was talked about between myself and the other interviewers. Some said that really building a rapport with them outside of the interview had a positive effect once the interview took place. I always introduced myself, tried to be as light-hearted as possible outside the interview room. I never actively engaged them in in-depth conversation before as I found that inevitably, unless on a rare occasion, the talk was very similar to that of the interview, i.e. what're you doing, how did you get here etc as these were and are effective ice-breakers. I didn't want the interviewee to have to repeat themselves time after time. Also I had found that just because a person had been chatty outside, this did not automatically mean they would be so inside the interview room. The effect of an 'official' recording device and a more intimate and possibly claustrophobic environment did alter their behaviour. Once inside and just before the interview began, I explained what would happen. I would often make a joke about the interview that they wouldn't get a job at the end but instead an hour on the plinth. I wanted them to be as relaxed as possible and informed as possible and took time to explain how it would work.

6. Strategies employed in getting the narrator to talk, open up.

I can say that I had no definitive strategy and it changed to person to person. I would always start by picking up on where they said they came from, as this often led to family, jobs and other influences in their lives. I would never start asking about the plinth straight away as by getting to know them on a personal level gave me greater opportunity later to expand on other areas. Silence was a great tool. Often most were understandably nervous and they felt as if the silence had to be filled which led to little insights. Younger people were the hardest interviews, as their experience was limited to controlled environments such as school. I would therefore have to pick up on small details in order to try to get more in-depth conversation. Ultimately it did depend on the person as you could never effectively pre-empt their reaction to be interviewed and so having a fluid approach to each individual allowed, successfully in some cases and not so much in others, them to open up.

7. How did you find managing your own agendas as interviewers (covering the main required topics) versus probing on what the interviewee was offering?

I have to admit that personal interest did often take over me and that sometimes led the interview rather than keeping more distant and rational. In all cases the standard questions were asked yet I found that the personal history of the individual took precedence. It was their interview and I wanted to give them the time to talk about what they wanted to in

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detail and through this they often led themselves to why they had applied for the plinth and what they were going to do as it was often interconnected with what they were saying.

8. Any anxieties when entering the interview relationship? Give specific examples.

No. In truth I did far less interviews than others and this meant that I did not meet any possibly dangerous or disturbed interviewees who might have caused me alarm or apprehension. In all cases I was happy to meet them and enjoyed a sometimes cathartic experience. In one case, a lady had warned me that I couldn't ask about her job for various reasons. Normally this could have been a major part of the interview and so I was very much aware of my questioning and felt almost inhibited by it.

9. Topics that you covered in the interviews and reactions to them by the interviewee (silences, the interviewee not answering a question, unexpected turns in the direction of the interview).

I have to say that I did not experience any problems in which the interviewee was uncomfortable or refused to answer a question. In one case I think a lady toyed with me (she was an author and seemingly enjoyed the opportunity to create fabrications) and possibly her answers were less than truthful, but this only became apparent after the interview had ended. One forthright lady attacked my interview style by saying the question was not very good (I think it was one of the ones on the sheet!). Ultimately most were happy to answer the questions, though some were very abrupt with their answers and this led me to the conclusion that it was not an area that I should expand on.

10. Environment: the room, the shift organizations, which shifts worked best and why?

As I said earlier, I think the room and microphone were occasionally detrimental to the interview. By having such a clear and obvious microphone people were either defensive or maybe even played up to it. As I said a number of people visibly relaxed when the recording was turned off, their voices and physicality changed. Obviously there was the pressure and apprehension of going on the plinth that affected them but I think the environment was perhaps a bit too official and in some cases created restrictions. I think that my interviews were occasionally affected by me. On the night shifts I was often very tired as I was usually covering for someone and this meant I had been up somewhere in the region of 20+ hours. This meant my concentration was down and I think I lapsed into a comfort zone of questioning and wasn't as alert as I should have been. This perhaps had a direct effect on the interviewee themselves. However I found all interviewees, at any time of day, were in the same state of mind. Even in the early hours, people were awake due to the event about to take place and none seemed particularly affected by the adverse hours. The time had no direct influence on what they said in my view.

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3- Personal/Emotional:

1. Projections that you noticed (based on age, gender, class, identity of the interviewee).

As I said earlier, the younger the interviewee, the less in depth the conversation was. This might have been due to limited experience or more nerves. On the other side, the older participants were forthcoming, humorous and very insightful. In terms of gender, there seemed to be no uniformity in which sex was more forthcoming. It really depended on the individual. In some cases I found the older lady to be quite stern and forthright, which did inhibit a more relaxed interview and the questioning. Possibly it was a combination of my young age and the quite personal questions that arose. Some interviewees had a distinctive dress, or style of life that immediately meant that they were somewhat alternative and had different views to others. Identity was the ultimate key which determined where the narrative went.

2. What were the most emotional moments of these interviews?

In my case it was when the subject of death was brought up by a participant. Often they had recently lost someone and were still very much upset. My interviews never got too emotional, perhaps it was because the interviewees never let it get that far or perhaps I never pushed that hard. My hardest interview was with a man who suffered from severe bi-polar disorder and talked very frankly about his life and how he had tried to commit suicide 3 times in the past. He was honest and the honesty shone through. He was very calm about it, but the stories spoke for themselves on an emotional level and it was hard to separate them.

3. What were the hardest issues the interviewees raised? And why?

Death and isolation. Both were upsetting to hear and often you could see the impact on them but in that moment of time you could offer them no help.

4. Did you relate to any of their stories? If so describe.

In my case it was often with those people who had wandered through life without really settling down. My problem at the moment is deciding what career path to choose and so it was interesting to hear about what people had done and where it had left them. It gave me an insight into not rushing into things and enjoying life.

5. Any moments in which empathy was hard to achieve and why?

One particular lady, who was a writer and to be honest not very pleasant in terms of manners spoke how most people in Russia would be happy to accept a communist state again. I have no problem with anyone's politics, but I felt it was incredibly arrogant to speak on so many people's behalf. I think the problem wasn't what she said, I think it was more so that I did not like her as a person and this meant I felt distant from the whole interview. Often a person spoke about experiences that I had not yet gone through and although I could sympathise and be sorry there was no way in which I

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could honestly understand their dilemma.

6. Any moments in which empathy was easy to achieve and why?

It was when people spoke honestly and openly without any pretence. It was so enlightening to listen to them and to be drawn into what they were saying. They had no façade to them and this spoke volumes above anything else. Someone speaking laid bare was cathartic.

7. Any other feelings/thoughts that emerged during your interviews?

On my part I felt invigorated by people and their normally quite hopeful views. I have to say that my interviews never revealed any truths that the person did not know about. They never shocked themselves.

1. What were the experiences you remembered most easily about your own interviewing practice and why?

Normally laughing when I shouldn't have, as it was recorded and I should have been a consummate professional! I enjoyed listening to their lives and their anecdotes were touching.

2. Is there more you would like to say?

It was great fun and insightful.

3. What advice could you give to other interviewers about interviewing style etc?

Being relaxed and calm throughout the interview is paramount. By being almost neutral, there is no hint of emotion that can affect what the interviewee is saying and would say.

4- Reflecting on the experience as a whole: (through time)

1. What did this experience of interviewing the plinthers for the One and Other project bring to you?

It really just made me feel so much better about people. Most are very similar with parallel hopes and fears. As I am 22, it gives me an incredible insight into life from people who have lived it and are living it. To be honest it gives me a bit of hope!

2. Did you make new friends?

Yes, but only with the people I worked with, not the participants.

3. Did this experience change you as a person: if yes, how? If not, then what have you learned? Specifically, what did talking to someone about their lives, feelings and motivations for going on the plinth make you feel/think? What are you taking with you from this experience?

Yes, I feel much more open about myself and that it is much easier to talk to strangers than you can imagine.

4. Finally, would you do it again?

Yes.

5. If yes, what would you change in the interview structure or the project as a whole?

Simply get rid of the formality of the microphone and room (if that is at all possible!). I think it might open up people better.



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6. If not, why?

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