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A Waste of Time? The Value and Promise of Researcher Completed Qualitative Data Transcribing

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Abstract

In this paper, a former teacher of the year turned doctoral candidate shares insights gained from a review of research and the transcription of more than forty individual and small group interviews with public school children of color aged 8 to 12. The author argues that transcription is a powerful qualitative research tool, one that should not be perceived of as mundane, tedious, or a waste of researchers' time.

Introduction

Viewed from the street, skyscrapers are impressive structures. Beams, girders, and miles of rebar disappear behind a dizzying array of sharp angles and plate glass windows. No matter how high a skyscraper might climb, however, it is what remains underground that matters most. Skyscrapers are only as secure as their foundations. A firm foundation provides the crucial support structure that the rest of the skyscraper is built upon. In a qualitative interview-based research study, transcripts serve as the foundation for analysis and interpretation, and yet, they too receive surprisingly little attention.

In this paper, I present insights gleaned from the literature on transcription work and experiences as the sole transcriber of more than forty individual and small group interviews completed for my dissertation research. I put forward three main arguments: 1) transcription should be regarded as central to qualitative research despite the scant attention typically given to this work; 2) transcription is inherently interpretive, theoretical, and subjective work rather than a mechanistic, objective enterprise; and 3) researchers who opt to complete transcription themselves are make a decision that is potentially both more ethical and more prudent in terms of time saved and opportunities gained. In this final argument I also address the question of using outsiders to transcribe interviews. I begin with a discussion of the importance of transcription work to qualitative, interview-based research.

Transcription Matters

Scholars argue that as important as transcripts are to interview studies, descriptions of transcription practices are glossed over in published reports of research, and transcription as a subject, has been largely ignored in broader methodological discussions (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005; Tilley & Powick, 2002). Ross (2010) notes, for instance, that even one of the most widely cited books on qualitative research (a text by Denzin and Lincoln published in 2005), "barely mentions transcription, and only one chapter (peripherally) discusses it as a potential site of interest" (Ross, 2010, para. 8).

From an empirical standpoint, Wellard and McKenna (2001) analyzed qualitative nursing research published in journals over a one-year period. Of the 42 articles reviewed by the authors, 66% contained no detail on transcription processes beyond mention that interview data were "transcribed". Of the remaining articles, 21% claimed "verbatim" transcription was completed, and 12% reported using a process of "full" transcription. According to Wellard and McKenna, explanations of what constituted full or verbatim transcription work were unclear.

Wellard and McKenna's (2001) study supported Ross's assertion (2010) that qualitative methodological texts offer few suggestions for managing interview transcription, something that the researchers' graduate students found particularly frustrating. Based on their own review of oft-cited methods texts, the researchers concluded that, "the transformation of spoken conversation into text is largely taken for granted" (Wellard & McKenna, 2001, p. 182). Since many, if not all of the interpretations

drawn in an interview study come as a result of analyzing transcripts, treating

transcription as a taken-for-granted process is unfortunate. Kvale, in fact, gives a sharp

waring that, "by neglecting issues of transcription, the interview researcher's road to hell

becomes paved with transcripts" (Kvale, 1996, p. 166). Although Kvale's (1996)

perception of the importance of transcription work is noteworthy, many researchers

opinions about transcription echo Agar's (1996) description of transcribing being "a

chore" (p. 153). Agar's sentiment mirrors the belief that transcription work is an obstacle

to, rather than an integral feature of data analysis. Other scholars contrast this

perspective, however, and argue instead that transcription is central to both qualitative

data collection and analysis (Kvale, 1996; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Oliver, et al., 2005).

I address this point of view in greater detail in the section that follows.

Transcription is Interpretation

Researchers suggest that one reason transcription work receives little attention is

due to the enduring myth that transcribing is objective, neutral, and largely mechanical

work (Green, Franquiz, & Dixon, 1997; Ochs, 1979; Tilley & Powick, 2002). More than

three decades ago, a seminal piece by Ochs' (1979) challenged this myth. She argued

that "transcripts are the researcher's data," and that the process of transcription is both

"selective," and reflective of the "theoretical goals and definitions" of a particular study

(p. 44). Scholars have reaffirmed Ochs' claim that the process of transcribing interviews

is not neutral (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1998). Poland (2003), for example, offers a keen

demonstration of the subjective nature of transcribing. He explains how the same words

can be given very different meanings based on how the transcriber chooses to punctuate

the sentences in which the words appear. In the first case, Poland's sentence reads, "I hate
it, you know. I do." In the second example, the order of the words remains the same, but
the meaning of the sentence changes: "I hate it. You know I do." Others argue that such
errors and inconsistencies be viewed as forms of variation in transcription (Bucholtz,
2007; Mondava, 2007) examining transcription as a "socioculturally embedded linguistic
and metalinguistic practice….of representing discourse" (Bucholtz, 2007, p. 785). It is
easy to see that over the course of an entire study, researchers are likely to encounter
many occasions in which they must decide how utterances heard on tape are to be
translated into a transcript. These decisions are not automatic, nor are they objective.
Each decision represents a choice to include or exclude particular meanings (Ross, 2010).

Research also highlights that the subjectivity of transcription work extends
beyond recorded words and phrases to the myriad non-verbal aspects of conversation.
These elements cannot be ignored, and decisions about how these issues will be handled
must be considered prior to beginning interviews. Oliver, Serovich, and Mason (2005)
describe an incident in which an interviewee, commenting on past relationships, was
overheard sniffing on the original tape recording. The interviewer asked whether the
participant needed "a moment," and followed this question by asking whether the
participant wanted a "tissue" (p. 1283). Oliver et al. point out that most individuals would
assume the interviewee was either overcome with emotion, or crying. The researcher's
question about whether the participant wanted a tissue would seem to confirm such an
interpretation. Reading a transcript of this exchange might increase the likelihood of this
assumption if that transcript offered no other contextualized information. In reality, the
interviewee described by the authors was sniffing loudly because he had a cold. In

commenting on their research, Oliver et al. acknowledged that "talk is peppered with verbal and non-verbal signals that can change the tenor of conversations and meaning" (2005, p. 1276). In other words, researchers are called to pay close attention not only to the talk they transcribe, but non-verbal features such as sighing, laughter, shrugged shoulders, and even facial expressions (Wellard & McKenna, 2001). Judging intents from a participant's recorded speech is challenging and assigning meaning to someone's observed non-verbal signals is also difficult (Poland, 1995). These issues are emblematic of the challenges associated with how to recast participants' spoken words into a typed transcript (Bucholtz, 2000).

It is clear then, that any transcript is a text which, "re-presents an event; it is not the event itself. Following this logic, what is re-presented is data constructed by a researcher for a particular purpose, not just talk written down" (Green, et al., 1997, p. 172). Transcription work is complicated business, and it is a fallacious to maintain a belief that transcripts are "truthful replications" (Tilley, 2003a, p. 751) of recorded conversations. Every time a person reads a transcript she or he is reading, at best, a translation of something heard on a recording to a textual rendering of that same recording (Dortins, 2002; Slembrouck, 2007). It is for this reason that Wellard and McKenna (2001) refer to transcription as a process of "re-writing" interviews (p. 181).

Transcription: Costs and Payoffs

The larger a research study is, the more likely it is that the principal investigator will choose to hire outsiders to complete all or most of the transcription work (Tilley, 2003a). It is argued to be a widely shared belief among researchers that any person,

whether employed as a temp for a secretarial company, graduate student, or full-time

administrative assistant, can be used to transcribe interview data, provided they are able

to type quickly enough (MacLean, Meyer, & Estable, 2004). In the case of my

dissertation research, I chose to complete all the transcription work myself. I believed

doing so would help me both critique and improve my skills as an interviewer, and from

a practical standpoint, I simply couldn't afford to pay someone to do the work for me. My

decision to transcribe was not without cost, however. When the work was finished I had

filed nearly five hundred single-spaced pages worth of transcripts. On average,

transcribing a thirty-minute interview took me between two to six hours depending on the

volume of the participants' voices, background noise, and the speed with which

participants spoke. Obviously, my status as a full time student provided me with an

opportunity to do this work with few distractions. Full-time faculty members might feel

transcription work is a luxury they cannot afford due to the increased demands on their

time. However, scholars suggest that when researchers transcribe their own data they may

actually save time (Bird, 2005; Poland, 2003), a point I take up below.

Although researchers working from qualitative traditions such as conversation

analysis might routinely eschew hiring outsiders to transcribe their interviews, the

practice is quite common (Poland, 2003; Tilley & Powick, 2002), and is most often done

as a means of saving time. While understandable from a logistical standpoint, the use of

outsiders as transcribers is problematic. First, research shows that the amount of time

saved by employing others to transcribe may be lost in the supervision of transcribers,

and the reviewing and editing of transcribers' "completed" transcripts. Second, and most

importantly, perhaps, the use of outsiders may not be responsive ethically (Patton, 1990;

Poland, 2003; Wellard & McKenna, 2001). I will now address each of these issues in turn.   Although hiring outsiders (individuals other than the principal investigators of a study) to complete transcription is routinely thought of as a time saver, this may not be true in all cases. Researchers must provide training to their transcriptionists, in order to teach them the conventions they want used in the creation of transcripts, member checking is often necessary, and most researchers feel compelled to check the accuracy of the transcripts they receive against the original interview recordings (Davidson, 2009; Poland, 2003; Tilley & Powick, 2002; Wellard & McKenna, 2001).

Technology tools such as voice recognition software may increase the speed with which a transcriptionist can complete a transcript, but there are challenges associated with the use of these tools as well. Voice recognition programs cannot be used as a means to transcribe interviews with multiple participants or interviewers (MacLean, et al., 2004, p. 115). Video recordings of interviews or interactions bring with them even more complicated challenges for transcribers (Mondava, 2007), and the increased use of digital audio has lead to increased concerns about how to preserve data stored digitally while ensuring confidentiality (Southall, 2009).

Hiring outsiders to complete interview transcription may bring with it a host of ethical concerns. First and foremost, the transcribers may find that the content of the interviews they transcribe are upsetting or disturbing, which may lead to feelings of discomfort (MacLean, et al., 2004; Poland, 1995) One of these concerns relates to the trustworthiness of the transcripts surrendered by outsiders for analysis. Lane (1996), for instance, discovered that the professionals she hired to transcribe interviews (detailing women's experiences with Pap tests) did not limit themselves to typing. Lane found that

her transcribers routinely edited the transcripts they prepared, in an effort to "tidy up" what they viewed as nonstandard speech (Lane, 1996, p. 161). In reviewing the completed transcripts, Lane also uncovered evidence of a troubling trend. She explained, "I found that my research 'data' included transcription 'errors' made up of inaudible conversation lost to transcription, missing words, and words typed that simply were not spoken. Such 'errors' seemed to occur especially when sexual or sensitive subject mater was discussed" (p. 161).

Poland (2003) acknowledges that transcribers who deliberately alter transcripts do so most frequently out of a desire to be helpful, or because their ideas about what completed transcript ought to look like differ from those held by the researchers they are working for (p. 271). In any case, good intentions and honest mistakes on the part of outside transcribers inevitably disadvantage busy researchers who are eager to continue their interview analyses.

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