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The Role of Informal Conversations in Generating Data, and the Ethical and Methodological Issues They Raise

Jon Swain & Zachery Spire

Key words: conversations; informal interviews; unstructured interviews; conversations with a purpose; ethical issues; ethics committee, ethical guidelines, methodological issues; fieldwork

Abstract: Arguing that the role of informal conversations in qualitative social and educational research methodologies is contested but also relatively neglected, in this article we set out how the method has influenced our research approaches and practice. We use an example of a conversation between one of us and a participant to highlight their nuanced and specific nature, and to raise and interrogate a number of ethical and methodological issues that emerge. We view informal conversations as opportunities to add "context" and "authenticity" to data and argue that they can unlock otherwise missed opportunities to expand and enrich data. We also consider the role of ethical boards and ethical guidelines, and the practical effects and consequences these have for researchers when they use informal conversations during their fieldwork.

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1. The Story of the Corporal

A few years ago, I was involved in carrying out research with the British army about the relationship between basic skills in literacy and numeracy and soldiers' operational effectiveness. One day I visited an army base where I had pre-arranged to formally interview four or five young trainees. The usual ethical procedures were observed: the interviews were conducted in a private room; I explained the purpose of the research to the trainees; they signed consent forms; were told they could withdraw from the process at any time; that their names would be changed in any data I used and so on. The interviews appeared to go well and afterwards the officer, who was my point of contact, said that he would arrange for me to have a lift back to the train station from a corporal who was free at that time. The journey by car took about 30 minutes and the two of us struck up an easy conversation. She had recently returned from an active tour of duty in Afghanistan. She asked me what my research was about and I began to ask a number of subtle but probing questions on how much she had needed to use her literacy and/or numeracy skills in her time there, and how important she thought they were in making an "efficient" soldier. She was very friendly and forthcoming, and I began to feel that I was learning more from her than I had from the earlier formal interviews. When we got to the station I thanked her for the lift, and when I got on the train I began to write up our conversation as part of my field notes. No consent form was given and the corporal was unaware that she had become part of my data. [1]

2. Introduction

The scenario above took place with one of us (Jon) a few years ago. In this article we use it as a hypothetical vehicle to illustrate a particular method we both employ to generate data during our fieldwork, that of the informal conversation or unstructured interview, and we argue that their role in qualitative research methodologies is both contested and neglected. The main purpose of the article is twofold: firstly, to discuss the role informal conversations have in social and educational research, including highlighting some of the benefits of using them, and, secondly, to draw out and interrogate some of the ethical and methodological issues they can raise. Conducting qualitative research means making selections and decisions, and also involves negotiating a complex moral and ethical territory, and we particularly want to discuss the concept of informed consent, the practicalities involved in fieldwork when carrying out particular research approaches, and the place ethical boards and ethical guidelines have in the research process. [2]

We begin by acknowledging, and making reference to, the ongoing debate about ethical concerns that has taken place in this journal since around 2005 and, particularly, in a special issue on ethics in 2018 (Section 2.1). After this, we look at the more general use of informal conversations in qualitative research (Section 2.2), after which we outline how we both use this method in our own research (Section 2.3). We then discuss a range of ethical issues (Section 3) and methodological issues (Section 4) that the narrative of the corporal raises. The

penultimate section interrogates the role and use of ethical review boards and ethical guidelines in qualitative research (Section 5) before leading to the conclusion (Section 6). [3]

2.1 Previous discussions about ethical issues in *FQS*

Some of the areas around ethics that these debates have interrogated have included research *about* and *with* families displaced by war (AKESSON, HOFFMAN, EL JOUEIDI & BADAWI, 2018); participants who have experienced vulnerability and suffering as a result of disasters (DITTMER & LORENZ, 2018); children living in refugee centers (FICHTNER & TRẦN, 2018); vulnerable groups held in police detention centers (MIKO-SCHEFZIG & REITER, 2018); people with dementia (REITINGER et al., 2018); people labeled with intellectual disabilities (SANTINELE MARTINO & FUDGE SCHORMANS, 2018) and vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations (homeless and incarcerated men (UMAMAHESWAR, 2018). Ethical issues have also been raised by academics researching, for example, the pharmaceutical industry (MEIER ZU BIESEN, 2018); online platforms and videos (LEGEWIE & NASSAUER, 2018); and the Holocaust (KNOTHE, 2018), while others have questioned the roles of ethics/ethical review boards (SANTINELE MARTINO & FUDGE SCHORMANS, 2018) and ethical guidelines (WEBBER & BRUNGER, 2018). Other social scientists have considered some of the issues that arise when researchers use particular methodologies to carry out their research, such as transparency and trustworthiness in ethnography (LESTER & ANDERS, 2018); tensions between researchers and participants in narrative inquiry (PARK, CAINE, McCONNELL & MINAKER, 2016); and informed consent, anonymization of data, and the reporting of biographical data during research in the field of political participation (SIOUTI, 2018). [4]

The general consensus arrived from the many scholars that have taken part in these discussions is that ethics should not be viewed as concept or set of rules that is somehow added from the outside onto previously anticipated behavior, or a specific act, but rather as an ongoing dialogical social practice (CANELLA & LINCOLN, 2011; ROTH, 2005) to be continuously and reflexively achieved "in the mundane conduct of everyday life" (ROTH, 2018, §33). In other words, ethics is present throughout the research process and a "quality inherent in person-acting-in-the-world-and-toward-others (i.e., in transacting)" (§1). [5]

This article both adds to some of these debates by arguing for the benefits of using informal and unstructured conversations in qualitative research, reiterating the critical feature of reflexivity in the research process, and using a specific example as a vehicle to raise questions about informed consent, participants' rights, the need to protect participants (including ensuring their anonymity), and the role of ethical research boards and ethical guidelines in social research methodologies. In addition, it introduces new arguments into the discussion, which have both an ethical and methodological dimension: i.e., how much is a researcher obliged to, or should, inform participants about the aims and nature of the research, what are the power relations involved during informal exchanges,

what is the status of data generated through conversations, and when does a person become a research participant? [6]

2.2 The role of informal conversations in qualitative research

Talking to people is a constituent element of qualitative research and, for example, informal conversations formed the basis of many early "classic" ethnographies from anthropologists such as Frank Hamilton CUSHING, Margaret MEAD and Bronislaw MALINOWSKI. Robert BURGESS (1988) points out that conversations were regarded as a key element of social investigation in some of the early "methods" textbooks in the 1920s and 1930s, while in America, Vivien PALMER (1928), and in Britain, Sydney and Beatrice WEBB (1932) maintained that the conversation not only produced valuable data but should be regarded as an important research technique in its own right. Conversations became an integral source of data production in a number of studies by sociologists from the Chicago School. [7]

Researchers such as BERNARD (2011) KAWULICH (2005) and MERRIAM (1998) have written about their use, as part of participant observation, and a sweep of the contemporary qualitative research literature shows that informal conversations are still being used by researchers today (e.g., see recent work from FISETTE, 2013; KOROBOV, 2018; PARK et al., 2016; SIMPSON, SLUTSKAYA, HUGHES & SIMPSON, 2014; THOMSON, 2015; THOMSON &TRIGWELL, 2018; VIGO ARRAZOLA & SORIANO BOZALONGO, 2014). Despite this, we contend that informal conversations are nevertheless a relatively underused method of generating data in social and educational qualitative research, and although they are widely used as part of participant observation in ethnography, the great majority of qualitative researchers tend to rely on more standard, or formal, interviews in their fieldwork, whether they be in a structured or semi-structured format. [8]

The term "informal conversations" has a number of other synonyms and BERNARD (2011), for example, refers to them as "informal interviewing" (p.156) “unstructured interviewing” (p.157) and “ethnographic interviewing" (p.157). As part of his methods for producing data in an ethnographic study of a secondary school in the early 1970s, BURGESS used the expression "conversations with a purpose" (1988, p.153), although the term was actually invented by Sydney and Beatrice WEBB in "Methods of Social Study" (1932). During BURGESS's fieldwork these conversations ranged from,

> "A chance encounter with a teacher on the corridor in the administrative block; a brief word with a new member of staff on the stairs to the common room; a short conversation with a teacher in the school grounds during a 'free' lesson; a long discussion with a deputy head in the school car park after a difficult meeting …" (BURGESS, 1988, p.140). [9]

These social interactions are a constituent part of participant observation, which is the main method of data generation employed by ethnographers. The aim of

the ethnographer is to gain greater in-depth understanding about a particular phenomenon, or ascertain how things work in a particular cultural context. It is therefore important for the researcher to begin to use informal conversations in order to gain trust, establish a rapport, and form an empathetic, non-hierarchical, set of relationships, where he/she puts him or herself in the role of the participant and attempts to see the situation from their perspective. They will then continue to use conversations as an ongoing means of creating data that answers their research questions, where the aim is to hear people "tell it as it is" in an everyday context in a more natural and less artificial way (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007). We argue that these conversations often produce more authentic data, where less performativity is involved, both from the interviewer and interviewee, and they reduce the "me" and "you" to "we," so creating a greater ease of communication. Moreover, during these conversations, participants do not generally have the distraction of the researcher switching a recording device on and off, which serves to ceremoniously denote the beginning and the end of a formal interview. [10]

Although there is generally no attempt by the researcher to get into a "real" or "everyday" conversation where, for example, the interviewer might proffer their own opinions, we cannot see anything intrinsically wrong with this if this helps the conversation flow more freely and prompt further insights. However, we posit that these conversations are different from "everyday" exchanges. Although these dialogues are closer to everyday conversations than formal interviews are in, say, survey research, it is important to remember BURGESS's phrase of "conversations with a purpose," or perhaps they can be called "conversations with a motive," which hints at asymmetrical power relations with the researcher having an underlying agenda and ulterior intention. We agree with HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON (2007), who maintain that these conversations are still a type of interview, albeit an informal one, and although we see them being different from unstructured interviews (which, however loosely organized, are often pre-arranged by both parties), they should not be mistaken for the ordinary, everyday exchanges between people as the researcher will try and maintain some control of the proceedings (BURGESS, 1988; HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007). [11]

It is also important to remember that ethnographers and other types of qualitative researchers are social actors who often engage in GOFFMAN's "impression management" (1959, p.203); that is they attempt to influence the perceptions of other people by regulating and controlling information during social interaction (FINE, 1993), and sometimes employing techniques of deception (BERNARD, 2011). During these conversations the line between participant, or confidante, and researcher becomes blurred; and while people might disclose information about their daily lives that they do not recognize as being particularly special, or out of the ordinary, the researcher considers it to be so when he makes a contribution to answering the particular research questions (MURPHY & DINGWALL, 2007). [12]

Although Jon's one-off encounter with the corporal involved an informal conversation, and occurred in a natural setting—inside a car—this was more of a

one-off opportunity, or an "opportunistic moment," and he was only participating in the corporal's world very briefly. It was ephemeral and peripheral, and we would not claim that Jon was using participant observation in the strictest sense. He was not carrying out ethnographic research and, as it turned out, the informal conversation was not the primary means of data creation used in the project—which was the formal interview; he only used this method spontaneously, as the opportunity arose, which was only on a few occasions during his fieldwork through the whole project. Nevertheless, he felt at the time that the conversation was an interesting addition of data, against which other and more formal types of data created in the study could be triangulated against. [13]

Of course, informal conversations are not used exclusively in ethnography, but can be applied to many other forms of more general qualitative inquiry and analysis, which take place in natural, everyday settings and involve some form of talk, although, perhaps, on a less participatory basis—for example, in narrative methods, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, case studies and so on. Here the informal conversations might be used an additional source of data to supplement or enhance data produced by more structured, or formal, methods. [14]

2.3 How we use informal conversations in our own research

A lot of Jon's research time is spent in schools and colleges, where he goes to observe classes and, sometimes, interview teachers or tutors. Quite often, either before or after the class, he will engage the teacher/tutor in a conversation about what he is about to see or has just seen: these may take place in the staff room, classroom, canteen or corridor, and they are not regarded as formal interviews and not digitally recorded. (These interviews may well occur later, when the background to the research project and the ethical necessities are explained in more detail.) The conversations are generally information gathering exercises, perhaps to garner an opinion or to deepen understanding. [15]

Zachery uses informal conversations in his research about people living in student accommodation. They take place in kitchens, recreation areas or surrounding streets, and are employed to "get to know" people, to establish an understanding of what's important to them, and to make his research more natural, more relaxed and less dehumanizing. Sometimes people find it difficult to express their feelings with ease and flow, and he finds informal conversations to be generative, opening up possibilities to "be" and "meet" in a more present way, which leads to the creation of richer and often more informative data. [16]

Both researchers will usually record the conversations as short, factual, notes in their field diaries; however, there are also occasions when they feel that the conversation is sufficiently interesting to record it in their fieldnotes as accurately as possible. There is no effort to try and capture the words verbatim, and there is no attempt to represent them as such, and they are generally viewed in the spirit of representing "something 'along the lines' of what was said" (FINE, 1993, p.278). MAHARAJ (2016) also points out that the researcher also has the chance to add his/her own thoughts, impressions, insights and interpretations, as they

begin to examine the meaning of the participants' words, and perhaps their actions, in more analytical depth. There are a few other researchers who provide guidance on the construction and process of using fieldnotes in more participatory forms of research (e.g., DeMUNCK & SABO, 1998; DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002; EMERSON, FRETZ & SHAW, 1995; MERRIAM, 1998; PHILLIPPI & LAUDERDALE, 2018; WALFORD, 2009; WOLCOTT, 2001). [17]

3. Ethical Issues

The narrative about the corporal highlights a number of both ethical and methodological issues. Although some of these overlap at the interface between theory and practice, and are not always easy to untangle, we are going to discuss them under two discrete headings (ethical and methodological) for heuristic and organizational purposes. [18]

3.1 Ethical issues arising from the conversation with the corporal

Many commentators (e.g., DELAMONT & ATKINSON, 2018; DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002; MARSHALL & BATTEN, 2004) have pointed out the ethical concerns that emerge when researchers create data through participant observation and researchers often have to tread carefully. Although readers may see, or find, more in the narrative about the corporal, for us there are four main ethical issues, or at least these are the ones that we are particularly interested in and would like to identify for discussion in this article: 1. did the corporal know about the research project, and how much should she have been told?; 2. was the corporal a participant in the research; and, if she was, did she have the right to know?; 3. was it necessary for the corporal to give her consent, and does the subject material matter?; and 4. was she placed under any undue burden or come to any harm, and was she accorded respect and dignity? [19]

The first three issues are about the notion of informed consent, which is embedded in liberal assumptions about the virtue of individual autonomy (D'AGOSTINO, 1998), and is regarded by those who conduct social research as a core and fundamental constituent of research ethics, which is at heart an interpersonal process between researcher and participant. Consent also serves to protect a person's rights, and is a demonstrable signifier that the research has been conducted correctly and shows with whom. Although GUILLEMIN and GILLLAM (2004) maintain participants have the right to know what the research is about, and what their participation would involve, before making their own free and voluntary decision about whether they want to participate and, if they do, on what terms, this is not always possible in particular research paradigms, and we will expand this point in a later section about the practicalities of carrying out research. [20]

3.2 Did the corporal know about the research project, and how much should she have known?

It is important to remember that when the army officer introduced Jon to the corporal, and asked her to take him to the station, he explained to her that Jon had been interviewing trainee soldiers that afternoon; therefore, before they got into her car, she knew that Jon was a researcher and it was she who took the lead, opening the conversation in the car by asking him what his research was about. So she did know something about the study, which, we argue, was enough information at that particular time and in that particular context. Although we accept that this may appear presumptuous or patronizing, firstly we feel that there was not enough time or need to provide more background information: Brewster SMITH has also observed the practical difficulties in making explanations clear and simple enough that individuals can easily understand without distorting the often-complicated nature of the research, which can resemble "sending informants and cohabitants to graduate school" (1979, p.14). Secondly, we do not think the corporal would have been interested in hearing about the project in any great detail—for example, the length of the project, how many army units Jon was intending to visit, who he was interviewing, what were the research questions and so on. We feel it was sufficient to introduce her to the project by telling her, in simple terms, as Jon did, that he was interested in the relationship between the soldier's level of literacy and numeracy and their operational effectiveness, and we still believe that any additional information would have been burdensome and taken up an adverse amount of her time. [21]

These choices about ethical matters are often complex and difficult, and not only involve the researcher's disciplinary assumptions and methodological position, but also their personal world view, in other words their ontological and epistemological orientations, but also their personal values (DELAMONT & ATKINSON, 2018). They also show how skillful researchers have to be as they navigate these exchanges, and making decisions spontaneously, in the moment. We are not arguing that another researcher would have done something different given a similar situation, and provided the corporal with more information, but this does not make this right and Jon wrong. [22]

3.3 Was the corporal a participant in the research; and, if she was, did she have the right to know?

Although the corporal was almost certainly unaware she was participant in Jon's research, or was possibly about to become one, perhaps the real question seems to be a more methodological one: i.e., what do researchers mean by "participant," although it is difficult to separate the ethics from the methodology. Yes, in the strict sense, she became at least a *potential participant* by the end of the car journey but only in the most marginal sense. We believe researchers need to accept that there are degrees of participation along a spectrum from "central" participant to "peripheral" participant (DELAMONT & ATKINSON, 2018, p.126), and the corporal was in the latter category. Certainly, researchers need to be able to differentiate between the "key" informants, for whom the research is likely to be

consequential, and those who are "marginal" to the study; another way of saying this is, is to ask whether the corporal was passively or indirectly, rather than actively or directly, involved (BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION, 2018, p.6). It also needs to be pointed out that Jon was also unaware that she might be a participant, in any sense of the word, until he sat down on the train; and even then he did not know the extent of her involvement until much later on, when he came to write the final report. And so, if he was unsure himself it is difficult to argue that she had the right to know if she was a participant, certainly at the moment in the car. [23]

3.4 Was it necessary for the corporal to give her consent, and does the subject material matter?

A number of contributions in this journal have addressed the intricacies of gaining informed consent. SIOUTI (2018) and VON UNGER (2018) have pointed out that, in some cases, informed consent can be a burden and sometimes it may be more appropriate to gain verbal, rather than written, consent. Although neither Jon nor the corporal knew whether she was a participant at the time, we are arguing retrospectively that she wasn't—at least in the sense the word is used as part of the lexicon in ethical guidelines. But even if she was, at what point would, or should, Jon have asked for her consent, and would it have been orally or through a written form? [24]

Say that by the end of the car journey Jon had decided that he was going to use her data and include her as a participant in the research, albeit a very minor one? Should he have asked her to give her consent verbally, or requested that she sign a form as he was getting out the car? This would have involved a fairly length explanation of what the project was about, and would have aroused her curiosity as to why she was being asked for her consent, and how it was going to be used (which Jon did not know at that point), and so the notion seems, and seemed at the time, impracticable and, as SIOUTI (2018) and VON UNGER (2018) argue, would have added an unnecessary encumbrance. And what would have been gained by her consent anyway? Any verbal agreement would have been Jon's word against hers; any written consent might have seemed more official, but as GUILLEMIN and GILLLAM maintain: Signed consent forms do not constitute informed consent, they merely provide evidence (perhaps of questionable value) that consent has been given, and insofar as procedural ethics requires that consent not only be given but also documented (2004, p.272). [25]

Even though Jon did not know her full name, he could have probably tracked her down through the officer (the point of contact) and emailed her a consent form, but this seemed to be over complicating matters and wholly unnecessary. There were no data, as such, for Jon to send her to check. The fact is that she could never have known how her words were going to be used, and even if she had read the final report all she would have been able to ascertain was that her views appeared to concur with the majority of other NCOs (non-commissioned officers) in the project. [26]

So it seems to be that even though the concept of informed consent is meant to be a sacrosanct part of research, it depends on the level of participation, how data are going to be used, and where. A further uncertainty concerns the application of the requirement for informed consent to public as opposed to private settings (MURPHY & DINGWALL, 2007). Some research is conducted in settings which are open to the public and where there is no expectation that presence or participation requires prior negotiation. In certain social situations there is no requirement to gain participants' consent, and where it is neither feasible nor necessary. For instance, it would be odd and impracticable for a researcher carrying out participant observation in a market place to try and gain the consent of everyone who they spoke to, and might even create unwarranted suspicion. [27]

One of Jon's other justifications for not asking the corporal to provide consent was that the subject of their conversation could not be construed as being either controversial or sensitive, which begs the question, what would he have done if it had been? Say he had asked her about her views on misogyny or bullying in the army? Would he have felt more obliged to ask for her consent and should the nature of data make a difference? We think the answer is "Yes" but only if the participant can be identified. In this case, our argument is that, while we feel this is an interesting question to consider (perhaps for a future discussion paper?), as we confer with AKESSON et al. (2018) that researchers have the power and an obligation to preserve confidentiality outside of the community, she was, like all the participants in the study, anonymized and could not be identified, and so therefore the issue is irrelevant. [28]

As it turned out, Jon was working as part of a research team on the army project and the agreed collective method of data creation was the semi-structured interview. If he had been working on his own he almost certainly would have incorporated more data into the findings derived from informal conversations but this was not the case here and he didn't; none of the corporal's actual words were replicated and it was her general thoughts and views that were integrated into a couple of lines in the final project report; she was an unidentified representative or a wider collective view and, as we have written above, included within the sentiments of other NCOs who were interviewed more formally. [29]

3.5 Was the corporal placed under any undue burden or come to any harm, and was she accorded respect and dignity?

We argue that the answer to the first part of this question is "No" and that this is also connected to consent because when the risk of a participant coming to any kind of harm in a particular situation is so negligible it is not clear whose interests obtaining consent actually serves (MURPHY & DINGWALL, 2007) beyond satisfying the statutory regulations of institution or funder. Indeed, as we have alluded to above, taking up her time by explaining the project in more detail, and asking her to complete a written consent form, may have placed her under an undue strain. The corporal was not deemed to be vulnerable. She did not have dementia (REITINGER et al., 2018); she was not classified as "disabled" as in

REITINGER et al.'s (2018) and SANTINELE MARTINO and FUDGE SCHORMANS' (2018) research; she was not being exploited or coerced, and nor did she need to be protected like the Syrian refugees in (AKESSON et al.'s (2018) research. In fact, she was quite the opposite: she was confident, articulate, exceptionally physically fit, and also, importantly, willing to proffer her opinions on a subject which she knew a great deal, and could talk easily, about. Thus, we contend that she did not come to any physical, psychological or emotional harm—which is perhaps the most important ethical principle of all (DELAMONT & ATKINSON, 2018). Moreover, her dignity and privacy remained unaffected; we do not feel that by asking about her views she was being exploited, and we believe that she was treated with politeness and respect, which she reciprocated to Jon. In this sense, the corporal was seen as an equal (VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018). [30]

4. Methodological Issues

The five methodological issues that we want to discuss are: 1. what are the power relations involved, if any, in the informal conversation?; 2. what is the status of these data that the conversation produced, and how does it differ from data created by a more formal interview?; 3. does the length of a conversation, size/amount of data matter, in respect of the need to gain consent?; 4. are there "key" moments that occur during fieldwork that cannot be anticipated beforehand, where the researcher has to make a judgment in-the-moment whether or not to take advantage of the opportunity?; and 5. what are the practical issues involved in carrying out inductive approaches to qualitative research, including making participants informed about the research? [31]

4.1 What are the power relations involved, if any, in the informal conversation?

We think we have already partially answered this question earlier by arguing that we do not pretend that the conversation was like an everyday exchange that might have taken place in, say, a coffee shop. Although, of course, people also have ulterior motives when they converse together, mostly they do not have a particular purpose, nor do they do not generally ask a series of directive questions and persist until they feel they are getting specific answers. This is why we agree with BURGESS (1988) and HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON (2007) and acknowledge that Jon's conversation was not as natural, or innocent, as it might appear: it was both a conversation that had a particular purpose, and it was a form of interview, and even though he might or might not have given his own views, he was still trying to find out particular information about a specific topic, and he was the one in control (or at least he felt he was). [32]

However, we also maintain that, in their general use, informal conversations are often a means of reducing the imbalance of authority (or perhaps reflecting a truer balance of authority?) between the investigator and those being studied. They can be a means of relinquishing authority and "influence," and by doing so

they perhaps get closer to the reality of individuals' experiences, perceptions, values and beliefs. [33]

4.2 What is the status of these data that the conversation produced, and how does it differ from data gathered by a more formal interview?

We contend that the status of these data gathered, or generated, through this informal conversation is as valid as data obtained through more formal interviews, and although the latter is often privileged as the exclusive source of knowledge in qualitative research (PINSKY, 2015), the conversation, although different, should have an equal status. After all, they suffer from the same limitations as more structured interviews in that people can be evasive, mis-remember, mis-leading and lie (DOUGLAS, 1976). The academic community has to accept the honesty and the integrity of the researcher, and that the text they write in their field notes is meant to capture, at the very least, the gist of what the conversation is/was about. It helps if the conversation is written up as close to the event as possible, but of course memories play tricks, and no one would pretend that any researcher would be able to write down a reasonably lengthy (or even a short) exchange verbatim; the general intention is usually to record a point of view or a particular line of argument, rather than the exact wording. Sometimes we both do use conversational data from field notes but when we present it we point out that the text has not come from recorded data, but rather from memory after either listening into, overhearing, or having been part of a conversation. [34]

4.3 Does the length of a conversation, size/amount of data matter, in respect of the need to gain consent?

Although it is possible to argue that talking to someone for around 30 minutes is a relatively long time, as we have written above, in the end, the corporal's data were only used very sparingly. But does, or should this, affect the need to gain consent? Although the answer would appear to be "No"—a single word of data can turn out to be of enormous significance—in some ways this also depends on what the researcher decides to do with their data. If he/she gives it a high priority and makes it a main focus in the findings, then, we believe, the corporal would have had every right to be told she has been a participant in the research, meaning that Jon should have attempted to track her down to gain her consent, but this was not the case here; she was very peripheral and was not even given a name. [35]

4.4 Are there "key" moments that occur during fieldwork that cannot be anticipated beforehand?

Although the answer is "Yes," it also largely depends on the research paradigm being used. Whereas deductive approaches have a prior specification of a hypothesis/hypotheses, and the design and research methods are set out before the study begins, inductive approaches are an active enterprise of knowledge construction, which are "bottom up" and characterized by the flexibility of the research strategy. This means there are likely to be more unpredictable

moments, and the researcher needs to have the ability to respond, not only to insights emerging from the process of conducting the ongoing empirical exploration, but also to be able to react to, manage, and make judgments about everyday encounters and situations on whether or not to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. FUJII (2015) has written about "accidental ethnography" (p.525), which are unplanned opportunities and take place outside the boundaries of "formal fieldwork," where researchers need to be alert to, what she calls, "accidental moments" (p.526) or "revelatory moments" (p.527) from daily life, while PINSKY (2015) calls them "incidental ethnographic encounters" (p.281). [36]

Many of these decisions cannot be foreseen; they have to be made in-the-moment and *in situ*, and invariably involve ethics, in what GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (2004, p.265) call the "micro-ethics" of research. GUILLEMIN and GILLAM discuss the concept of "ethically important moments," which they define as "the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research" (p.262). TRUSSELL writes about "ethically heightened moments" (2010, p.380), while we call these events or encounters, which "pop up" and often also involve ethical decisions, "golden" or "key" moments, where researchers are presented with sudden opportunities, and Jon felt this encounter with the corporal was one that was too good to pass up: it was his judgement, his split decision, taken instinctively, to pursue a line of questioning with an participant who had a wealth of information that she was happy to share with him, and if he had been offered this opportunity in advance he would have leapt at it. Moreover, as they started to talk, he began to realize that he was getting richer and more informative data from someone who had actually been active in the military field, and had needed to actually use basic skills, rather than the views of the trainee recruits whom he had just formally interviewed, but who were still inevitably speculating about their future use. [37]

4.5 What are the practical issues involved in carrying out inductive approaches to qualitative research

In ethnographic research, the formulation of the research question is an organic process that must be situationally adapted, and those that are deemed to be, or will become, relevant actors are generally not known until the researcher begins work in the field (VON UNGER, 2018, VON UNGER, DILGER & SCHONHUTH, 2016). Using an inductive process not only requires researchers' attention, reflection and interrogation of the data being created but also of her/himself, the participants, and the contexts they inhabit. This therefore means that researchers need to be continually reflexive, which is not a single or universal entity but a core, active, ongoing process that saturates every stage of the research (VON UNGER et al., 2016), where the researcher continually takes "stock of their actions and their role in the research process" (MASON, 1996, p.6). For GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (2004), being reflexive about, and within, research practice means firstly, acknowledging the micro-ethics of ordinary, everyday research practice; secondly, having the sensitivity to realize and grasp "ethically

important moments," and thirdly, being able to respond to, and address ethical concerns if, and when, they appear. [38]

This perspective on ethical practice closely resembles an *embedded approach* to research, which has been outlined by WHITEMAN (2012), and is where the researcher makes his or her decisions according to immediate, and sometimes unpredictable, contexts and arising issues, rather than strictly abiding by a set of pre-determined ethical principles. Understood in this way, research is a dynamic, interactional, process, subject to continual moderation and critique, whereby the researcher assumes a *situational relativist* approach, and is reflexive and ready to respond appropriately (ROBSON, 2011; VON UNGER et al., 2016). Two of the repercussions of carrying out research in this way is that it complicates the process of obtaining prior informed consent, and, in the case of the corporal, as we have argued, it would have been impracticable. It also muddies the line of "where" and "how" and "with what" defines fieldwork, and the consequent issues of blurring/breaking through/breaching that sense of "there" and "not there" where fieldwork occurs. [39]

5. The Role of Ethical Review Boards and Ethical Guidelines

In this final section we want to take the opportunity to look briefly at the role of institutional review boards (IRBs) (US), or research ethics committees (RECs) (UK), and ethical guidelines in carrying out qualitative research. Over the last 30 years or so there has been an ever-increasing interest in, and attention paid to, the ethics of educational and social science research. This has coincided with an increasing amount of bureaucratization, which has seen the growth of RECs and the publication of various sets of ethical guidelines and frameworks. HAGGERTY has referred to these new intensifying systems for regulating the ethical conduct of scholarly research as "ethics creep" (2004, p.392), where the responsibilities that researchers have to their participants, fellow members of the research community, and to the institution where they work /or study in, have been made increasingly clear. Many of the arising issues have been captured and critiqued in a book called "The Ethics Rupture: Exploring Alternatives to Formal Research Ethics Review," edited by VAN DEN HOONAARD and HAMILTON (2016), who argue that it is impossible to have a "one-size-fits-all" approach in qualitative research, and that some of the policies, decisions and structures of RECs are onerous, constrained and, at times, out of touch with the realities of social research. There has also been a substantial critique in this journal highlighting the hazards of researchers being reliant on institutional ethics reviews, and the limitations, and at times, even inappropriate application of external, codified, ethical guidelines to qualitative research paradigms (e.g., ISRAEL, 2014; KUNTZ, 2010; LESTER & ANDERS, 2018; ROTH & VON UNGER, 2018; SANTINELE MARTINO & FUDGE SCHORMANS, 2018; VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018; VON UNGER et al., 2016; WEBBER & BRUNGER, 2018). For further critiques see, also, BROOKS, TE RIELE and MAGUIRE (2014); DELAMONT and ATKINSON (2018); DENZIN, 2010; GUILLEMIN, GILLAM, ROSENTHAL and BOLITHO, 2012); HAMMERSLEY (2009); LINCOLN and TIERNEY (2004); MURPHY and DINGWALL (2007); and WHITEMAN (2012). [40]

There has seen a general move away from the authority and status of the researcher, and an attenuation of their agency (their capacity, or competence, to understand, make choices and act). Where previously they were seen more as an expert who was able to make judgments, and sometimes in-the-moment decisions as they emerged in the field, some researchers have expressed concerns that ethical issues have moved toward becoming a list of predefined, fixed set of principles based on a list of familiar themes (e.g., covert research, informed consent, anonymity etc.) that can be checked against a list of "a priori methodological certainties" (BAYM & MARKHAM, 2009, p.viii) before the research begins, which reduces social research to a tick-box mentality (DELAMONT & ATKINSON, 2018). HAGGERTY calls this a "fetishization of rules" (2004, p.410) that can be regulated and assessed by fellow professionals working in their particular field. MURPHY and DINGWALL (2007) and VAN DEN HOONAARD (2018) maintain that this anticipatory model is based on assumptions derived from clinical trials, or biomedical experimentation, which, while can be applied to deductive paradigms, is highly problematic and not appropriate for inductive approaches. [41]

GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (2004) distinguish between two different dimensions of ethics in research, which they term "procedural ethics" (i.e., seeking approval from an ethics committee) and "ethics in practice" (i.e., everyday ethical issues that surface in the process of doing research, including the complex dynamics between researcher and participant, which requires an ethical sensitivity and situational judgment). There is actually a third dimension—research ethics as articulated in professional codes of ethics or conduct; however, in terms of their usefulness in addressing ethical issues that surface in practice, ethical codes are largely not practical or applicable and can, and are intended to, serve only as general guidelines. GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (2004) argue that procedural ethics have little or no impact on the actual ethical conduct of research, while researchers and scholars such as DENZIN (2010,) LINCOLN and TIERNEY (2004), MURPHY and DINGWALL (2007) and VAN DEN HOONAARD and HAMILTON (2016), point out the danger of them creating insuperable barriers, making some forms of inductive inquiry, such as ethnography, either impractical, much more difficult, and in some cases, impossible. VAN DEN HOONAARD (2018) suggests that qualitative researchers should move away from any adversarial relationship with ethical guidelines, and although they could maintain the institutionalized ethics codes for medical, and perhaps even for more structured and predictable deductive research paradigms, social science researchers could use their own well-established disciplinary codes for conducting ethical research. [42]

We are not arguing against the existence of RECs, or ethical codes, as they provide researchers with a helpful checklist of issues to cover that protect the basic rights and safety of research participants from obvious forms of abuse. Further, the researcher is also granted institutional credibility, and the institution is also, or feels, covered when the research is carried out. However, ethical research is a highly complex, and often contested, area and involves much more than research that has gained the approval of a REC (IPHOFEN & TOLICH,

2018). Ethics is a field where there is often no agreed answer or a single right answer, and so, although committees and codes play an important role in highlighting the core ethical principles, their role is necessarily and invariably limited. Although they provide general guidance (rather than rules), it would be naive and mistaken to believe that ethical issues in the practice of research can be entirely covered by the ethics committee process, and it is not much help once the researcher is out in the field and dealing with the realities of research practice. Many decisions require weighing up a range of ethical and methodological considerations against each other, and this often requires detailed knowledge of the research context, which is always situated, or contextualized, in each unique research setting. Ultimately, the responsibility for ethical issues falls back to the researchers themselves, their own ability to recognize ethical issues, to think them through reflexively and respond appropriately, often in-the-moment (GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004), and so researchers must be granted more than a degree of autonomy. The decisions not to ask the corporal for her consent was made by Jon on the spot, which required a certain amount of experience, knowledge of the research process, and awareness of ethical issues. [43]

6. Conclusion

This article began with a single short narrative based on an informal conversation between two people in a car. Even though this particular conversation turned out to be "marginal," in the sense that it only supported the study's findings that were generated from more formal data, we have used it both as a hypothetical example to highlight the role, and analytical benefits, of using informal conversations in qualitative research, and also as a means to raise a number of ethical and methodological issues that arise from using this research method. One of our main contentions has been that, although informal conversations are an underused method in contemporary qualitative research, they have the potential to produce rich and substantive data. Although we maintain that data produced through informal talk are different from that derived from more formal interviews, and may be less reliable, we believe that it is no less valid, not more nor less useful, and has the same status. The conversations can also contain less asymmetrical power relations than more structured interviews and are a way of surrendering greater control to the individual or group; they can be more naturalistic, where people are less inhibited and less prone to performativity, and so produce data which have a greater authenticity. Indeed, in some cases, informal conversations are not only the best but the *only* method of generating findings from participants. [44]

By speaking to the contingent and contextual nature of informal conversations we highlight these "opportunistic" moments as ones we feel "break" through a strict, black and white sense of what has defined the ethical and methodological nature of research (i.e., informed consent, and the need for a clear "start" and "end" to a researchers' work within defined research boundaries), and, in particular, the anchoring of the researcher and research to a "place" and "space." Although we feel that researchers should always be bound to a duty of care, and have a

responsibility to their participants and academic and wider communities, we also wish to amplify the contingent and contextual nature of research, and the decisions that have to be made as researchers carry out research "as it really is" in the real world. [45]

The main ethical concerns raised by the conversation were around consent. The main reasons why Jon did not (and does not) believe that he needed to ask the corporal to sign a consent form were that 1. she was not a "full" participant, or if she was, she was a very minor one; 2. he did not know at the time whether she was going to be any kind of participant; 3. these data were not sensitive or controversial; 4. it would be been impracticable, burdensome and unnecessary to request her to sign a consent form; and 5. she remained anonymous and her data were not used in any meaningful way in the end-of-project report. The main methodological issues (although many of these overlap with, and can be found in, the field of ethics) discussed were around 1, the asymmetrical power relations; 2. the quality and status of the data; 3. the relationship between the size of data and the requirement to gain consent; 4. the need to accommodate "key" moments; and 5. the practicalities involved in carrying out inductive approaches to research. [46]

Many of the ethical concerns have been debated in this journal over the last 15 years (see earlier in the article for a list of contributory authors) and they have included discussions around a wide range of issues, such as, for example, consent, anonymity and confidentiality, research with vulnerable participants, participants' rights, concerns around power, the need for continual reflexivity, reflection and transparency, and the role of ethical research boards and ethical guidelines. In particular we wish to stress the fact that ethics needs to be viewed as an ongoing practice, not just some set of rules, which is ever present throughout the research process (ROTH, 2005). This article adds to these debates and presents new areas of discussion, which have both an ethical and methodological dimension, and which, it is hoped, will promote further conversations in the community. These include, how much is a researcher is obligated, or should, inform participants about the aims and purpose of the research, new issues around power relations, the status of the data produced, and at what point does a person the researcher comes across in the field become designated as a research participant? [47]

Conducting fieldwork in natural settings involves researchers negotiating a complex moral and ethical territory, and unanticipated ethical dilemmas will frequently emerge that necessitate immediate decisions and resolution. The chance encounter with the corporal could not have been foreseen and required intuitive and instinctive decision making and situational reflexivity. We agree with WHITEMAN (2012), who argues for an *embedded approach* to research where researchers remain agents of their practice, and where decision making of the researcher is situated within the local context, and is informed by issues which cannot always be predicted in advance. WHITEMAN also stresses the *dynamic nature* of the qualitative research process, which may be contingent and fluctuating, as part of an ongoing, critical and dialogical engagement (CANELLA

& LINCOLN, 2011): in other words, in inductive research approaches, ethical decision-making usually occurs in motion throughout the research process. [48]

The final section of the article looked at the increasing bureaucratization of research, including the expansion of ethics committees and the publication of an array of ethical guidelines, which "take clinical research or biomedical experimentation as their paradigm cases" (MURPHY & DINGWALL, 2007, p.2). Issues of ethics pre-date research ethics committees and go beyond their requirements (DELAMONT & ATKINSON, 2018), and a main argument is that current models are institutionalized, bureaucratic, rigid, reductionist and sanitized, and based on anticipatory regulatory regimes that are not fit for the purposes for which they are intended (VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018). They have created a series of, what HAGGERTY has called, "ethical road blocks" (2004, p.412): for example, the preoccupation, or even obsession, by ethical review boards of obtaining prior informed consent has made conducting some types of studies much harder, if not impossible within unstructured research situations in the real-life contexts (VON UNGER et al., 2016). Researchers sometimes do not know how important or significant the data are going to be, and whether they will include it in their findings, until after the conversation or interview, and this type of work cannot be accommodated within a model that relies on fixing consent in writing at the outset (MURPHY & DINGWALL, 2007). Consent forms during informal conversations can seem alien, unduly formal, and occasionally unworkable (VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2002), and can transform routine, informal, and essentially, exploratory, encounters into unnecessarily official and legalistic exchanges. They can also overcomplicate forms of social behavior that can be judged as being entirely natural and therefore unproblematic. Like MURPHY and DINGWALL (2007), our argument is not that informed consent is unimportant, irrelevant or inappropriate; it is, rather, that in some models of inductive research, where unexpected situations and chance encounters continually arise, it is neither achievable, demonstrable, nor always necessary. [49]

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