**Article Title-**

Bridges and Doorways; Using interviews to build relationships

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**Abstract-**

This article explores the use of interviews as a tool for relationship development in the context of conducting mixed methods qualitative research during the 2020 covid-19 pandemic in the UK. It demonstrates that beyond being a source of data, interviews can be instrumental in opening doors to hard to reach informants and form bridges between phases of fieldwork. This paper draws on my PhD project which is looking at a single case study charity working with asylum seekers and refugees. The research is being undertaken through the view of a Leadership-as-Practice lens but the implications for how we view interviews may be of relevance to a wide range of mixed methods qualitative research. In particular, researchers whose work requires them to gain and maintain access may benefit from a more explicit consideration of the normally implicit ways interviews are used as tools in research.

**Key words-**

interviews, qualitative methods, Leadership-as- Practice, asylum seeker and refugee charities, Covid-19

**Word count-**

3,171 (plus 144 word abstract)

# Article

This paper makes the case that interviews are not only tools for data collection in qualitative research but can also be used for building relationships. It explores my experience of conducting research as a PhD student during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK in 2020. It outlines what the research design was at the outset and how I adapted it in light of changing circumstances. It particularly draws out how I have made use of interviews as a relationship development tool that has enabled access and has helped form a bridge between the first and third phases of my fieldwork, which sit either side of the March-June 2020 lockdown in the UK. This particular experience may be relevant when considering the use of interviews in managing relationships and participant access in a broader range of qualitative research.

As 2020 began, I was due to spend the majority of my year immersed in asylum seeker and refugee charities for my PhD fieldwork. With my thesis I aim to extend our understanding of leadership practice in voluntary sector settings which has thus far suffered a “lack of sustained academic interest” (Terry, et al., 2019, p. 1). More specifically my thesis seeks to explore how leadership is practiced in asylum seeker and refugee charities and for this work I adopt a Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) lens. This means viewing leadership as an assemblage of activities which interact to create meaning by setting, ordering and re-orienting the flow of organising process (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016; Sergi, 2016). L-A-P studies are concerned with observing the micro and the mundane and they focus on how things and people interact with each other (Sergi, 2016). Typically, being physically present with the research subject is central to such studies, so much so that I was told by one of my upgrade examiners to go and ‘breathe it in’, something that as it turns out, was quite a bad idea for a large chunk of 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

My thesis takes a case study approach; looking at individual charities as bounded systems within which leadership practice takes place (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2017). At the outset my plan was to use mixed qualitative methods to gather data that would help build a thick description of how leadership is practiced (Ponterotto, 2006). The methods were to include participant observation in the ethnographic tradition, semi structured interviews and document review. My approach was going to be largely inductive with no plan to privilege one source of data over the other. Originally there were going to be three case study charities and I would spend three months with each. When the national UK lockdown came into force in late March, I had spent eight weeks observing the first case study charity, this was the first phase of fieldwork. A combination of circumstance and experience quickly made it clear that continuing with the three-case study model was no longer the way forward. The likelihood of being able to gain equal access to three separate charities which were based in different local authorities and all of which had to switch to remote working and/or temporarily shut services, did not look realistic. Equally the eight weeks I had spent with the first case study had held enormous promise in terms of understanding leadership practice. It had allowed me to begin understanding the complex web of relationships and interplay of power and resources both within and across the boundaries of the case study charity. What's more, we were entering a crisis with no clear understanding of how it may be survived, and this felt like a fascinating and necessary context in which to understand how leadership changes over time in a charity.

One of the main methodological implications of the lockdown and move to a single case study was a coming to the fore of interviews as a practical tool in developing relationships with participants. Interviews conducted via skype became one of the few feasible ways of accessing individuals, but interviews alone would not give me the range of exposure to practice that I needed if I was to maintain viewing the case study through an L-A-P lens. The question was how I could use interviews strategically to keep the research going and line up the next 'real world' phase of fieldwork. I found little guidance of how to do this in the methods literature, which tends to focus on interviews solely as a method for data collection, not a tool to achieve other practical ends. In this literature there are guides to the practicalities of how to organise and conduct interviews (Flick, 2018; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2017), what type of information to seek (for a full summary see Flick's summary in note 2) and the pros and cons of remote vs face to face interviewing (Irvine et al., 2013). In the literature on case study research specifically the importance of interviews is acknowledged ; Simons lists it as one of three key data sources, Yin as one of six (see note 1) and Stake talks of interviews as an important method for answering research questions (Simons, 2009; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2017). Interviews are also shown to have different purposes through the lifetime of case study research. In the case of initial orientation interviews these are to gain introductory information to an organisation (Hartley, 2004) whilst in depth interviews may happen further into a case study when the researcher has developed a relationship with an individual that becomes a key informant to the study (Yin, 2017). Whilst the experiences I outline in this paper are akin to some extent with developing key informants, here the process is reversed and the interview becomes the tool to start or bridge a relationship rather than the relationship being seen as the means through which to access the interview.

Whilst interviews are not explicitly framed as relationship building tools in the literature on methods, accounts of individual research projects suggest that they are an integral part of a broader process of relationship building. In both the US and UK literature on leadership and the voluntary or social sector there are examples of interviews taking place in the flow of relationship development. Quick's longitudinal ethnographic study of collective environmental leadership in Michigan uses a series of "active interviews" in which she asks probing questions of long term research participants and makes meaning with them (Quick, 2017, p. 4). In their study of leadership in US social change organisations, Ospina and Foldy use a series of "conversations" including phone calls followed up by more formal group interviews to draw out narratives (Ospina and Foldy, 2010, p. 296). In their Real Times study of UK voluntary sector organisations Macmillan et al use interviews or "asking questions" as one of three ways of getting to know organisations and the people who work in them in depth and over time (Macmillan et al., 2013, p. 5). These studies don't talk explicitly about interviews being the tool that enables broader relationship development or vice versa. However, by locating the use of interviews in specific methodological approaches it is clear that interviews are part of a complex process of building the wider relationships on which successful data collection relies. What my experience, explored in more detail next, shows is that interviews can also be understood as instrumental tools that are used intentionally to build these relationships.

With only indirect inspiration to be drawn from the extant literature on interviews, I took a pragmatic approach to relationship development through the lockdown. This meant using the only data collection methods available to me at the time which included skype interviews. The first step was following up on potential interviewees I had become aware of but had been unable to secure an interview with. In total I interviewed nine people who I had not had contact with before lockdown during the second, remote, phase of fieldwork. An example of these was a senior figure in the local authority whose subordinates I had met on several occasions and who had tried to introduce me to, but without success due to the individual's full work schedule. Second was a prominent figure in the church community and voluntary sector who supported work with asylum seekers and refugees in several formal and informal roles. This was another person people recommended I talked to but to whom it proved difficult to get access. In the context of lockdown and simplified work schedules both individuals were happy to take part in interviews. Their insights were useful as additional data to build up the contextual picture around my case study that I had not found by reading the information available in the public domain. For example, I came to understand the rationale behind differing and oppositional views on where asylum seekers should be housed, which had become a point of tension between the voluntary sector and the local authority during my study. The lockdown, having made it impossible to become acquainted and build a rapport in a casual way before requesting an interview, made it feel more possible to approach these individuals and ask for access to their thoughts up front. Throughout phase two I was then able to maintain some level of access and relationship building with these interviewees through online events we all attended and at which we were now familiar to each other, thanks to the interviews. As well as more formal multi agency meetings these events included a sociable weekly women's group and celebratory events for refugee week. Combined, these interactions also laid a foundation for further dialogue in phase three of fieldwork, which at the time of writing is taking place more physically as services re-open.

A second way in which interviews became useful devices to keep the research on track was using them as a kind of bridge within the relationships I had begun building with individuals in phase one and hoped to resume and develop further in phase three. During lockdown I re-interviewed three key figures from the case study charity. These interviews became more conversational and reflective about the current circumstances than the initial interviews. Those earlier interviews, whilst only loosely structured, had clearer aims of understanding each individual's history with the case study and views on key organisational and asylum issues. This second round of interviews was an opportunity for the interviewees to think out loud about their experiences of the pandemic and how the charity had responded to it. In all three cases they expressed their enthusiasm at taking part in the interview as a rare opportunity to sit back and reflect in a time of rapid change. These interviews served several purposes; to chart the changes in practice during the pandemic and deepen my engagement with the case study; to maintain contact and further build rapport with key individuals; and to give insight into others' perspectives on the zoom meetings and activities the case study was holding and which we all attended. In this way we bridged the gap over the spring and early summer during which meeting was impossible.

As the lockdown eased and phase three of the research began, I was able to resume observation of one of these three key individuals' work and maintain phone and email contact with the other two who were shielding and therefore unable to resume 'real world' activities. The individual with whom I ended up working most closely had unexpectedly taken on a substantial role at the charity just before lockdown due to the departure of the chair of trustees at short notice. When the lockdown came into force, he found himself one of the few people able to continue practical work for the charity; delivering support packages to clients and later co-ordinating clothing and food banks. This change in his circumstances gave extra impetus to us both to turn what had been a one-off interview into a series of interviews. For me, I was able to gain insight to an individuals' journey through a turbulent and challenging time. For him, he was able to reflect with a knowledgeable outsider on the circumstances he and the charity was facing and how to best navigate them. By the time I was able to resume observation of activities we had built a rapport and level of trust that meant he often came to me to share his thoughts and seek my opinions. This ranged from the micro-details of what clothing might be most useful to collect for a clothes bank event to the bigger questions of how to begin a process of strategic planning at the charity. This level of insight to the charity's functioning through a period when access was difficult was invaluable to maintaining data collection. It is impossible to divorce the personalities and circumstances from the relationships that developed but it is also important to note that it was interviews that gave the impetus and an ongoing platform to allow that development.

It may be that in practice interviews are always doing more than one thing for a research project, with the data recorded in the transcript being just the most obvious contribution they make. My experience of researching during COVID-19 was to make those implicit uses of interviews more explicit in how I approached and managed my work. Reassessing the role of interviews in this way is of relevance to qualitative research more generally. The challenge of securing and maintaining access to study participants in qualitative research is a topic well covered in the methods literature (Given, 2008; Hartley, 2004). My experience shows that in some circumstances turning the purpose of interviews on their head; from being the result of securing access to the means by which to secure it, can be a valuable way to move a project forward. The use of interviews to develop relationships further, in this case characterised as a bridge between two phases of fieldwork, may be of particular relevance to longer term studies where maintaining and developing access can be particularly challenging (Taylor et al., 2014). Finally, the example of methods adaptation given in this article is part of a growing body of work produced from amidst the disruption caused by COVID-19 including Kara and Khoo's e-book series and Macmillan's article in this journal (Kara and Khoo, n.d.; Macmillan, 2020). From this literature, researchers will have a wealth of experiences from which to develop more resilient methods fit for a changing world.

This article has explored the use of interviews in research during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. During this time, they have been as much a relationship development tool as they have been a method for gathering data. Interviews helped sustain and move the research along both by enabling access or opening doors to begin establishing new relationships and in building a bridge with existing participants to the next phase of fieldwork. In this phase I am digging deeper into what is now a single case study and am tentatively able to once again 'breathe it in'. Although it was the COVID-19 pandemic that triggered me to look at interviews as tools not just methods, it may be useful to consider their utility in this way when planning a wide range of qualitative research projects which require relationship building and longitudinal engagement.

Notes

1-Simons lists interviews, document review and observation (Simons, 2009, p. 5), Yin lists documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts (Yin, 2017, p. 102)

2- Flick summarises this literature and groups them under the headings of phenomenological interviews for understanding lived experience; hermeneutic interviews in which interviewer and interviewee learn together through dialogue; ethnographic interviews which take place over prolonged periods; feminist interviews which authentically reflect feminist interest in order to promote equality; and intraviews which see interviews as an event in which meaning is co-created (Flick, 2018)

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**Conflicts of interest**

"The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest"

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Plain English Summary-

This article explores how interviews can be used as tools to develop relationships with people participating in research. Typically, interviews are viewed as methods for collecting data but in the example given in this paper it became necessary to use interviews as a way to open doors to new people and build bridges between phases of research. The context was a PhD research project exploring leadership in an asylum seeker and refugee charity which took place in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.