

## RESEARCH NOTE

### THE EFFECT OF INTERVIEWER'S GENDER ON THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS: A COMPARATIVE ENQUIRY<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract* This paper is drawn from a study of the work and family experiences and aspirations of young adult women who were interviewed by either one or the other of the authors in 1992. A comparison can thus be drawn between interviews conducted by a man and those by a woman. This is attempted in a systematic and empirical way. The initial intention was to learn from the literature on gender and the interview to minimise the impact of the interviewer's gender on the data generated. In the first section this is reviewed and we put a case that this intention was achieved. This was, however, only to an extent, as we indicate with material on the revelation of abortion experience to the two interviewers. Whilst there was a similar pattern of response to our direct questions, there was a marked difference in the voluntary addition of further personal experience. The final evidence we deploy comes from re-interviews done in 1994 in which the interviewees were asked about their perception of the significance of the original interviewer's gender. This indicates the importance of interviewees' concepts of gender as well as the intentions of researchers.

*Key words:* gender, interview, abortion, fieldwork, reflexivity

#### *Introduction*

In the summer of 1992 the two authors began a pilot study on the experience and aspirations to work and family of a small group of young adult women.<sup>3</sup> The thirty-nine women in the study group were all aged between 18 and 24 years, were single, childless and employed full-time. The jobs they held covered a wide range of occupations from routine work in a supermarket, bar or cinema, through clerical jobs to managerial and professional work needing advanced education. Our research was conducted by semi-structured interview in which we encouraged interviewees to speak freely in response to a carefully structured set of questions covering their work and household histories and their aspirations for the future with regard to both work and family formation. The interviews were shared, Ian Procter conducting twenty and Mo Padfield nineteen.

We are thus in a position to compare the interviews conducted by a man (Ian) and a woman (Mo) and enquire whether our respective genders had an effect on the interviewing process. This is of interest because, although various

claims are made about the effect of gender on the interviewing process, there is little empirically based comparative evidence to go on. Until recently most discussion of gender in field research was based on anecdote (Warren 1988:13). Much of this centred on what Warren calls the 'focal gender myth of field research' (1988:64):

It is almost a truism of interview research, for example, that in most situations women will be able to achieve more 'rapport' with respondents because of their less threatening quality, and better communication skills. (1988:44)

For many years this claim justified mainly male sociologists writing on the basis of interview material gleaned by often anonymous female interviewers. However, the myth proved to have a sting in its tale when taken up in more recent feminist discussion of research methods (Oakley 1981; McKee and O'Brien 1983). Rather than feminine 'rapport' being a convenient and taken for granted feature of interviewing, the much stronger claim was advanced that the interviewer's gender mattered and that male and female researchers would generate different kinds of 'knowledge'.

Since this claim was advanced, discussion has moved forward from anecdote and myth. One line of debate is at the level of epistemology and methodology in the philosophical sense in which debate rages about the possibility and desirability of a feminist method of research (Harding 1987; Stanley and Wise 1993; Hammersley 1992). A second line of thought reflects on the place of gender on the practice of field research. Yet although this is empirically oriented, what is lacking is a comparison between male and female researchers in the 'same' situation rather than independently reflecting on different situations. Thus, in the collection by Bell, Caplan and Karim (1993), fifteen anthropologists reflect on the impact of gender on their field research and *vice versa*. These include both men and women but all are single person accounts without comparison. Third, sociologists are now constructing research designs to draw upon male and female perspectives. Hanmer and Hearn (1993) describe two parallel projects on male violence to women, one focusing on men who were violent to women and the other on women's experience of violence. Here the assumption was made that men should be researched by men, women by women. There was no controlled comparison of the two. Yet a comment from one of the few male-female research teams which actually reflect upon the impact of gender, however briefly, raises questions about such an assumption. In their study of dual-career families the Rapoport (1976) tell us:

The interviewers, ordinarily a male and female, worked with each family, with one primarily oriented to the husband and the other to the wife. Characteristically, we had a joint interview on the first occasion – both interviewers with both spouses – followed by separate interviews for the second and subsequent sessions, and a further joint interview at the point of integrating the material into a case write-up. At first we considered it probable that there would be a pairing by the same sex for

the separate interviews. We soon discovered, however, that this was by no means to be taken as axiomatic. In some cases the wife preferred to be interviewed by the male interviewer and the husband by the female. On reflection this seems to us to be understandable as many professional women are accustomed to relating to males and often prefer to do so and, as it turned out, many of the men are particularly responsive to women (1976:32).

Janet Finch, in a seminal contribution to the above debates about field work and gender, makes the observation:

But systematic comparisons of men and women interviewers, in a range of research situations, are not possible because we lack sufficient studies of accounts of the research process which consider the relationship of the gender of the interviewer to the research product (1993:170).

This paper attempts to make a contribution in the spirit of this comment. We offer an empirically based comparison of the interviewing process as practised in a situation where a man and a woman conducted the 'same' interview schedule. However, we should be clear that this is not 'any' man or 'any' woman but rather two sociologists working in partnership. Certain features of our 'selves' are crucial to the account which follows.

- (a) We are both middle aged in chronological age and a generation ahead of our interviewees (aged 18–24). However, generational differences are plainly socially constructed (Jones and Wallace 1992: Chap. 1) and we were sometimes struck by the way in which interviewees identified with us, as adults, in talking about their past when they saw themselves as 'but kids'.
- (b) We both regard ourselves as reasonably experienced and competent field interviewers and as such take matters of dress, demeanour and presentation of self in the interview situation very seriously in our general approach to field work.
- (c) We are both aware of feminist critiques of research methodology and the impact of feminism on our understanding of society. We have both learnt from this, in particular, gender as routinely constructed in social relationships. Insofar as this is the case the possibility of modifying behaviour to avoid stereotypically 'masculine' or 'feminine' pre-suppositions seems to us to be open.
- (d) The schedule of questions we interviewed from was worked out by our co-operative endeavour. To a high degree we had a common and detailed understanding of the objectives of the interview.

We were thus two sociologists of different genders, but with common research aims. One of these was to generate interview material which was consistent between the two of us. That is, in principle it should not matter whether Ian or Mo conducted a particular interview with a particular individual. To achieve this aim we did not ignore, but tried to learn from, the feminist

literature on research methods. Thus, although our schedule of questions was detailed, the intention was to get our interviewees to feel free to talk in response to our questions. Our research interests were ones which our interviewees could easily share. We regarded each other as colleagues engaged in a common undertaking and tried to extend this spirit to our interviewees.

We will proceed by outlining three items of evidence from our research. Each of these suggests rather different answers to the question of whether our genders had a material effect on what Finch calls the 'research project'.

- (a) The 1992 interviews can be monitored in terms of a number of formal features of the interview and a key item of content (views on abortion) where we might expect a gender difference. Our evidence here suggests that there was little effect arising from our different genders. This can be understood in terms of the consistency of our preparation as interviewers to work to a common agenda of relevance to our interviewees, and take account of our knowledge of gender roles. In effect this evidence suggests the importance of interviewers (male and female) being aware of the importance of gender in the interview situation and working to eliminate it as a differentiating factor.
- (b) Our second piece of evidence contradicts the first. We found one matter (the experience of abortion) in which there appears to be a marked gender difference in the interviews.
- (c) In 1994, 35 of our original 39 interviewees were interviewed again and we were able to ask the women themselves whether they felt that the interviewer's gender had made a difference. This gives us much further insight but does not entirely resolve the contradiction between (a) and (b). This material brings out the importance of *interviewees'* definitions of gender in the interview process. Insofar as this is in accord with the interviewer's then some consensus is established, whether the interviewer is male or female. But just how much is an unknown and unknowable feature so that anomalies, such as the disparity in revealing abortion experience, do occur.

### *The 1992 Interviews – Evidence for Gender Neutrality*

The overall argument we will pursue in this section is that there are many reasons why we might claim that our respective genders had little effect on the interviews. This is not because interviewer gender is unimportant but rather the opposite. As researchers we assumed that our genders would be important and we sought to take account of this in our research practice. We will begin with the arrangement we followed in setting up the interviews. By various means we obtained the names and telephone numbers of women with the demographic and economic characteristics we required. The details of accessing the respondents do not matter here but we had taken pains to (a) convey

an impression of informality and empathy; and (b) be clear that one of us was male, the other female.<sup>4</sup>

What we anticipated was that potential interviewees would more likely wish to be interviewed by a woman than by a man. We thus established a procedure to accommodate this. Initially, Mo was to conduct twenty-six interviews, Ian thirteen. When the interview was arranged, by telephone, one of the items we raised was the interviewee's preference for a male or female interviewer. On the basis of our anticipation, our procedure was that if a woman were preferred, Mo should take the interview, if a man were preferred, or if the woman said she did not mind, then Ian would do it. We had to change this procedure very quickly indeed because Ian was doing all the work! Quite simply, the overwhelming response to our interviewer preference question in making the arrangements was 'I don't mind'. The procedure was not employed in our first six exploratory interviews; of the remaining thirty-three, only two expressed a preference – both for a woman interviewer. So, at this stage of the process the very strong impression was conveyed to us that our interviewees did not perceive the gender of the interviewer to be significant.

Length of interview might also be significant. There was considerable variation here as we were asking about work and household histories of differing lengths and complexities. However, on average, it might be the case that an interviewee would tell a woman interviewer more than a man and thus the interviews would be longer. This was not the case. Mo's interviews averaged 76 minutes, Ian's 84. At the end of the interview, respondents were asked if they would be prepared to be interviewed again in a year's time. Again we might expect a gender difference here. Insofar as talking to a man for something over an hour was less enjoyable and more inhibiting than discussion with another woman, we would expect more of Ian's interviewees to refuse a second interview. In fact this was not the case, indeed all thirty-nine agreed to the second interview, most with enthusiasm. (See below for our actual response rate in 1994).

As well as saying something about the two interviewers, this unanimity amongst the interviewees indicated their understanding of the issues we were concerned with. Very few interviewees identified themselves as feminists and a considerable proportion expressed reservations about what they defined as 'feminism' akin to those reported by Griffin (1989), but these women took some aspects of the feminist project *for granted*. The equality of men and women as an *ideal* was simply assumed as self-evident. This is significant for our theme in two ways. First our research interests in how women might combine work and family roles were of concern to our interviewees and hence their willingness to continue their participation. But, second, on the widely held premise that men and women *should* be equal there was no reason, in the interviewees' eyes, why the interviewer's gender should be significant.

As well as these formal aspects we can focus on part of the interview which covered what Brannen (1988) calls a 'sensitive subject' on which the

interviewing is generally undertaken by women. We have selected the women's views on abortion. This should be a useful test of whether we get very different material generated according to the gender of the interviewer.

### *Views on Abortion – Consistency Between Interviewers*

Towards the end of the interview, when asking about plans for the future, we asked the women for their views on abortion, followed by a supplementary question asking about the circumstances under which they would consider terminating a pregnancy. Data was gathered for thirty-seven out of the thirty-nine cases, with one woman having no opinion to offer. Thus the following data is from thirty-six cases, eighteen for each interviewer. The interview group was largely in favour of abortion, albeit with qualifications. Although there were those who would not consider having an abortion, there were no instances of any who would want the legislation changed. Only one woman, interviewed by Mo, was against it in any circumstances. She attributed her views to discussions during her training in child care and her mother's experience of an abortion, which she had since regretted.

So, of the individuals for whom we have data, all eighteen of Ian's interviewees and seventeen of Mo's interviewees declared that they were in favour of women's right to abortion. However, simply saying this does not capture the complexity of the issue, as expressed to both interviewers. A common theme is the range of considerations that a woman should take into account. The women were for choice but the choice was rarely seen as simple and required the resolution of multiple possibilities. Was the pregnancy the result of rape? Was the woman 'ready' for motherhood? Could the woman provide a decent life for the child? Was she only 16 or 17 years of age? Was she using abortion as a form of contraception? All of these points came across consistently to both interviewers.

### *The Critical Exception – The Experience of Abortion*

The general theme of the material presented so far is that gender does not appear to be a factor generating noticeable differences between the interviews. This is not, by any means, to say that interviewer gender is irrelevant in interviewing. Rather we have achieved the degree of consistency above by learning about gender in social relationships and interviews in particular, not by ignoring these issues. It is through reflecting on the nature of interviews, working together to a common understanding, and putting what we have learnt into practice that we feel we can make this claim.



There is, however, an exception which complicates what we have said in the previous section. As we noted earlier, we asked women about their views on abortion and in what circumstances they would consider terminating a pregnancy. We did *not* ask them directly whether they themselves had aborted a pregnancy. Nevertheless some did tell us, or rather, they told *Mo*. In Ian's twenty interviews, no woman spoke of having terminated a pregnancy. However, six of *Mo*'s interviewees told of their own abortions, and one had miscarried in the early stages of an unplanned pregnancy. Furthermore, when re-interviewed in 1994 by *Mo* (see below), two of Ian's original interviewees mentioned that they had had abortions. Both of these had occurred prior to the interview with Ian. This seemed to confirm that the unlikely distribution of abortion experience between the two groups of interviewees was not a coincidence – there was an effect arising from the interviewer's gender.<sup>5</sup> The difference lay in what the woman volunteered herself, without being asked, about a sensitive subject. The women's response to our actual questions were very similar to each interviewer but women added their own experience when responding to *Mo*, confining themselves to the question when interviewed by Ian.

One further point is appropriate here regarding the manner in which the two women revealed their abortions to *Mo* in the second interview. Neither made a big issue of 'confiding' in a woman, indeed, both assumed that they *had* told Ian about the abortion, just as they had told him of other harrowing experiences in their lives. We mentioned earlier that most of the women interviewees saw it as self-evident that the gender of the interviewer should not matter. At the second interview, Ian's former interviewees did not respond to *Mo* in a self-conscious manner of 'Ah, here's a woman – now we can speak our minds'. Nevertheless the difference above appeared and it stands out as a gender difference.

### *The 1994 Interviews – Interviewees Reflect on Gender in the Interview*

In the summer and autumn of 1994 we were able to re-interview 35 of the original 39 interviewees. At the time of writing, four women have prevaricated or refused a second interview (two originally interviewed by Ian, two by *Mo*). In this phase of research, virtually all the interviewing is being done by *Mo* who is now a full-time researcher on the project.

At the beginning of the second interview we asked the interviewee to look back to the first interview. We asked how people had felt about the interview, had it been 'enjoyable, boring, too nose-y'? We then asked if afterwards they had been glad or regretted having been interviewed. To these questions we got an unanimously positive response, unsurprisingly from repeat interviewees.

From these initial questions we had established the interviewee's general

feeling about the initial interview. We then asked a much more specific question.

**You were interviewed by Ian/Mo. Do you think the interview would have been very different if the interviewer had been a man/woman?** (Deleting as applicable according to the gender of the first interviewer).

In Table 1, we show the basic responses to this question expressed simply as:

NO – i.e. the gender of the interviewer had made no difference.

YES – i.e. the gender of the interviewer had made a difference.

YES/NO – some ambiguity in the answer given.

The table also breaks these responses down by the original interviewer.

**Table 1**  
**Response to ‘Does gender of interviewer make a difference’ by gender of interviewer**

	YES	NO	YES/NO	TOTAL
Ian	1	16	1	18
Mo	3	7	7	17
Total	4	23	8	35

We can see that twenty-three of the thirty-five women felt that the gender of the interviewer had not made a difference to the interview. However, rather more interesting than this overall figure is the difference revealed between those who had been interviewed by Ian and those interviewed by Mo. Ian’s interviewees almost all say No, the gender of the interviewer did not make a difference (sixteen out of eighteen). But Mo’s interviewees are much more spread, with seven saying No, but only three saying Yes, while a further seven displayed a more ambiguous response.

To pursue this further, we can introduce the reasons the women offered for their response, beginning with Ian’s Nos. One woman took an ‘in principle’ stand here saying that she did not change her views according to whom she was speaking (LW). However, the responses of the remaining individuals implied that the interviewer’s gender might have made a difference in other circumstances. These were twofold.

First, if the interviewee’s experience had been different then the interview might have differed. Here, women were thinking of their own capacity to deal with men which had arisen from their life experience. TR worked with men and was ‘not fazed by chaps asking personal questions’. SM was used to working with both men and women and both could be ‘empathetic’. HK could be ‘relaxed in both male and female company’ and RM had ‘no



difficulty talking to men'. The second set of circumstances under which the interview would have been different relate to the interviewer's behaviour. Here women said that 'Ian was easy to talk to' (RD), she 'felt comfortable, he was nice' (RR), he 'wanted to listen' (AL).

These responses imply that gender does make a difference but not automatically. Rather, the influence of gender, as these women see it, is through the handling of gender roles in the interview situation.<sup>6</sup> If the interviewee perceives herself as skilled in dealing with men then that can counter the implied influence of 'maleness'. If the interviewer puts aside 'maleness' then women could respond. Both of these can apply at the same time.

The one woman who felt that Ian's gender had made a difference (JS) fits with this theme. She commented that she had been 'relaxed' in the interview but that she had been 'younger' then and it probably had made a difference. The interviewer's manner had been a factor but since then she had become more experienced and would be more skilled now.

Turning to Mo's original interviewees, once again we have 'in principle' responses. On the one hand, HR claimed that 'it would be more dependent upon the individual – whether male or female'. On the other hand, LJ took it as self evident that she 'preferred talking to a lady'. But far more common was the conditional response drawn out above. JL thought that the interviewer's gender would not have made a difference 'as long as he was a good listener'. CW felt it would have because on the basis of her job experience she has become more aggressive towards men and tries 'to beat them at their own game'.

But these women had not been interviewed by Ian and thus had to be more cautious as they could not judge either their own skills or his competence in dealing with the situation. This explains the greater number of ambiguous answers which had to deal with principles and general experiences rather than the specific instance of the first interview.

DW said that she would have approached the interview rather differently but that the 'content' of what she said would have remained the same.

DW Possibly, yeah. I think because I assume, rightly or wrongly, that he had certain prejudices, that I might have explained things a bit differently. In different ways or expanded on certain points. But I wouldn't have changed the content.

Here, her experience tells her that she might well have explained things differently but she wants to stick to the principle that the substance of her own views would have remained unchanged. Another variant of this is that experience tells the interviewee that she will find it easier with a woman but in principle it is the individual that matters.

DC I think it would probably have taken longer for me to have said some of the things that I did say to him. I found it very easy to be at ease with you (Mo) and to sort of talk about all sorts of things. I mean I don't know because I've never met him. He might well have done that as well. But I doubt it. I find it easier with you.

Here the interviewer notes that she had never met Ian and he might have put her at ease but on the basis of experience she doubts it.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has arisen from a small project in which semi-structured interviewing of young adult women was shared between a male and a female sociologist. We thus had the occasion to compare the impact of our respective genders on what Finch calls 'the research product' – the completed interview. It had been our intention to 'standardise' the interview between ourselves not by constructing a supposedly 'gender neutral' research instrument such as a closed questionnaire but by learning from the feminist and research methodology literature on the importance of shared understandings both between researchers and with the researched.

To an important degree the evidence we have presented suggests that we achieved this aim. There was a similar pattern between Mo and Ian as regards the mechanics of the interview and a consistency between the two interviewers in response to *the questions we asked* about the sensitive subject of abortion. The difference appeared in what was volunteered even though not asked about. We did not explicitly ask about the interviewees' own abortion experience, yet in Mo's interviews this was revealed, whilst in Ian's it was not. This is not to say that Ian was not informed about sensitive subjects (including attempted rape, nervous breakdown, fractured relationships with family and boyfriends, debt and all sorts of educational and work-related disappointments). Yet the abortion data showed this clear difference around the volunteering of information.

Our re-interview data on interviewees' perception of the gender of the interviewer throws some light upon this. This made clear that it is not only researchers who participate in interviews as gendered beings but interviewees themselves. Almost all our interviewees adopted the equality of men and women as a *formal* principle and from this, in the abstract, thought that it should not matter whether they spoke to a man or a woman. However, they also recognised that this only applied under certain conditions relating to their own skills and perceptions of the interviewer. Insofar as they were skilled in dealing with masculinity and the male researcher was seen to put aside inappropriate features of masculinity (arrogance, not listening) then the assumption of equality might hold. What this implies is that the interviewee is an active participant in the definition of the interview process. Interviewers may take account of gender in the conduct of interviews. The same applies to interviewees who also define the situation in gender terms. The problem is to know just how the interviewee's sense of gender is influencing the interview. The evidence reported here suggests that interviewees' perceptions do have an

effect. But this is on the basis of retrospective comparison and interviewee reflection. Without benefit of this it is difficult to either predict or to be aware of quite how interviewees' perceptions do shape the interview.

### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the University of Warwick Sociology Department Research Seminar, March 1993. We are grateful for colleagues' comments.
2. Our collaboration as researchers includes a policy of joint authorship whereby both our names appear on our publications, the first named alternating between the two of us. The order of authors here does not indicate seniority of authorship.
3. Our pilot study has now led to a project funded by the Leverhulme Trust to whom we are grateful. This paper includes material from the pilot and the first phase of the current project. Further details of the project can be found in Procter and Padfield (1995).
4. There is the possibility that women who wanted nothing to do with a project in which a man was involved rejected participation on these grounds. We do not know.
5. To be clear, this is *reported* experience as we have no independent check on actual abortions in the group.
6. This is consistent with the argument advanced by Song and Parker (1995).

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