

# Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology

Putting theory into practice

Dennis Howitt



Fourth  
Edition



INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY:  
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

## Step 2

**Rough transcription** Study Box 6.1 which provides basic advice on how a transcription should be laid out, and also look at the transcription provided earlier. Remember that these are style guidelines and that some things are probably better left until last. Inserting line numbers is one such late task. The precise layout of a transcription involves judgement, not simply the application of rules. Line length in transcription is constrained by the need to insert overlapping speech clearly. This may involve trial-and-error until a satisfactory solution emerges. Although in some transcription systems the line number refers to an individual speaker's turn, in Jefferson transcription the line lengths are arbitrary. Usually they are kept to a moderate number of words. One way of doing this is to use the natural groupings of words that occur in speech such as the number of words spoken before a breath. But, clearly, there is room for variation in terms of how things appear on the transcript. This, normally, is of little or no consequence.

At the end of the rough transcription the transcriber should have recorded the following:

- The names of the speakers for each turn in the conversation or interaction. It is best if aliases can be used to avoid data management issues as much as possible.
- All of the words spoken, usually attempting to use the word sounds as spoken by the speaker rather than how they would appear in standard English. For example, 'summat' for 'something' or 'yer' for 'you' or 'your'. But this is not an area where standardisation among transcribers is apparent. Many features of accents can be represented reasonably accurately using conventional orthography (methods of

## Box 6.1

## PRACTICAL ADVICE

## How to lay out a transcription

According to Potter and Hepburn (2009), the following is the best way of laying out a Jefferson transcription:

- *Font* It is important to use a proportional font otherwise the spacing of overlapping conversation, for example, is very difficult. Their recommended font is Courier in 10pt size.
- *Line numbers* Each line of a Jefferson transcription includes a line number. Although these can be typed in manually, they can also be inserted automatically by Word. The important steps are (a) end each line of transcript by pressing the Enter key to force a line break; (b) select all of the lines which you want numbered using your mouse; and (c) you will find numbering in the options for paragraphing. Remember that line lengths are arbitrary so you can force line breaks where you feel that it is convenient. The line numbering convention helps you identify an excerpt from a transcript since the line numbers will be part way through the sequence. The line numbering is fairly arbitrary and the same recording transcribed by a different researcher may have lines of different length and perhaps more or fewer lines for the same amount of the original recording. This arbitrariness is important in that it gives the flexibility needed to be able to indicate overlapping speech.
- *Layout* (a) Use 25 mm (1 inch) margins at top, bottom, left and right of the page and (b) use a code number for the extract and ideally include some indicator of the source of the extract.
- *Speaker's/contributor's name* Have the speaker's/contributor's name in **bold** and try to clearly separate this from what they say with some space.
- *Blank space* Because you may wish to make notes on the transcript, it is important to include a copious amount of blank space to the right of the text. Judicious use of the Enter key will help you with that.

writing down words). Phonetic spelling systems could also be used but these require that the reader has some sophistication. Alternatively, use ‘pseudo-phonetic’ forms as used in comic books (e.g. ‘b’cuz I luv ya’). All of these things make transcription increasingly unreadable. There are circumstances where the precise pronunciation of words may be crucial, for example, where one speaker speaks mocking the accent of another.

- Any non-transcribable features e.g. when the speaker coughs or clears their throat. These are put in double brackets ((clears throat)).
- Remember that capitals are not generally used in Jefferson transcription other than for proper names which with a capital letter. However, you will find this ‘rule’ ignored in some transcriptions. Capitals are used for words spoken distinctly loudly.
- Points where there are any pauses. You will probably find it easier to mark these with brackets enclosing x’s (e.g. (xx)) as an indication that the fine timing should be entered in the next phase.

The rough transcription may not meet all of these criteria at this stage. This is not particularly important. The final transcription phase provides opportunity to correct any remaining inadequacies. Two important things to consider throughout this stage are issues concerning effective communications with the reader and how the transcript contributes to this.

Transcription technology has improved rapidly since the typewriter’s era and magnetic recording. Digital recording equipment (and video recorders) mean that digital files are readily available for computer processing. These, generally, are of a very high quality. Computer software is available which make for easy copying and editing of these files together with easy search facilities. Faces and voices may be disguised and names edited out of the recording for ethical reasons. According to Potter:

The simplest way to transcribe is to work with two windows on a computer screen, one running the audio file, the other running the word processor. Audio programs are available that allow a stepwise movement through the file using a physical representation of the wave form that is ideal for timing pauses and noting overlaps. (Potter, 2003, p. 82)

### Step 3

**Adding Jefferson symbols and transcribing sequencing accurately** This transforms the intermediate transcription into its final form by inserting detailed Jefferson transcription symbols as appropriate. Up to this point you have done the basic straightforward work, including adding some of the Jefferson notation. However, there may be fine detail to add and the initial layout may not be the ideal for the reader to follow what is happening. This final stage concentrates on the detailed sequencing of the conversation and not merely the words said. These symbols include the square brackets indicating overlapping or simultaneous utterances by two or more people. Examples are to be found in the Stokoe (2003) excerpt (cited earlier in this chapter) but they are so important in Jefferson transcription that they bear repeating. So look at the following, which uses square brackets []:

11 Gary: where do you think that we ought to [go out tonight?]

12 Sarah: [is there anything] on the television?

Square brackets are used to show when Sarah and Gary are speaking together at the same time. Single brackets are used to indicate when two people start talking at the same time:

17 Sarah: I wouldn't mind watching something  
 18 Gary: [well  
 19 Sarah: [like a documentary

Equals signs (=) are used to indicate latching, which is where another speaker takes over the conversation from another speaker without a pause:

28 Sarah: you always want what you want on=  
 29 Gary: =what m↑e?

Things can be more complex in conversation and more than one speaker can latch at the same time in which case square brackets ([]) might be needed to indicate this. For example:

28 Sarah: you always want what you want on=  
 29 Gary: =[what m↑e?]  
 30 Shane: =[too right]

Of course, there are other speech characteristics which could be included – those which indicate how individual words are said in the recording. These are common in Jefferson transcriptions and explained in Table 6.1. Refer to this for clarification whenever necessary but it can also serve as a memory aid to ensure that you have considered all of the different transcription possibilities. As with most things, experience is essential in order to ensure quality transcriptions which are useful both to the researcher but also to the reader.

Pauses in conversation are common. Largely in Jefferson transcription they are signalled using (.) or (0.5) to indicate different lengths of pause (see Table 6.1). However, look at the following:

38 Sarah: you choose  
 39 (.)  
 40 Gary: i'm not bothered  
 41 (.)  
 42 Sarah: are you sulking?

In this exchange the pauses are not attributed to either Sarah or Gary since they are given a separate line. They are pauses in the conversation and *not* pauses in what either Sarah or Gary are saying individually. If the pause was clearly attributable to, say, Sarah, then it would appear in a line indicated as being said by Sarah.

Remember that there are limits to any transcribing system and the features of speech that you wish to include may not be part of the system. If you need to add additional transcription features, which may not be part of the Jefferson system, then this is a choice open to you. Of course, you need to carefully describe and explain any such additional coding.

Certain computer programs are often recommended to students to help them with the process of analysis though you can if you prefer to leave this aside until you have developed basic transcription skills. They do have advantages like enabling a degree of ‘noise reduction’ to improve sound quality. They also permit editing of sound excerpts. Perhaps more importantly, they can display the waveforms of the recorded sound. This allows very precise measurement of pauses in conversation and where sounds are exceptionally loud or soft. The main programs to consider are Audacity and Adobe Audition. See the Additional Resources section at the end of this chapter.

## When to use Jefferson transcription

The decision to use Jefferson transcription rather than an orthographic, secretarial or playscript word-for-word record should be a serious consideration (Table 6.3). If the research takes a conversation analysis perspective then the Jefferson transcription system is essential since there is an intimate association of Gail Jefferson’s work with the development of conversation analysis. But not all researchers, by any means, are interested in the approach to conversation taken by Jefferson and her colleagues. Some qualitative researchers may be interested in what the participants in the conversations have to say about topics relevant to their research question. For example, if the researcher is interested in the life histories of sex offenders it is the substantive material about each offender’s life history which can be found on the recording which is important to that researcher. Issues such as how the offender ‘recovers’ from errors made in telling his life history are not likely to be a particular interest of the researcher. So it is questionable whether using Jefferson transcription would be beneficial in this instance. The economic cost of using Jefferson transcription has to be evaluated against the likely research gains of using it. The resources spent on the Jefferson transcriptions might be better spent on other things.

It is mainly where speech is being researched as social action that Jefferson transcription comes into its own. This does not mean that all qualitative researchers *always* gain from using such a fine-grained transcription. There is, in research, always a question of the level of analysis which needs to be employed. For example, in general, Jefferson transcription is not too useful when the data analysis employed is thematic analysis. Such an analysis is based on developing relatively broad categories which describe the contents of interviews, focus groups and so forth. A secretarial or playscript transcription will be almost certainly all that is required in these

TABLE 6.3 When to use Jefferson transcription

Definitely use Jefferson transcription	Possibly use Jefferson transcription	No advantage in using Jefferson transcription so use orthographic transcription
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversation analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discourse analysis (especially Potter and Wetherell version)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrative analysis</li> <li>• Interpretative phenomenological analysis</li> <li>• Thematic analysis</li> <li>• Grounded theory phenomenological analysis</li> </ul>

circumstances. Research in the interpretative phenomenological analysis tradition (Chapter 13), narrative analysis (Chapter 14), grounded theory (Chapter 8) and thematic analysis (Chapter 7) does not usually benefit from Jefferson transcription.

Given that transcriptions are often available for further analysis by other qualitative researchers, there is a case for fully transcribing the data using the Jefferson system. This is simply because Jefferson transcription maximises the additional information accessible to the secondary analyst. Without it, the value of the transcript is reduced. It is also an argument against using ‘stripped down’ (less complex) versions of Jefferson transcription such as Jefferson ‘Lite’ which is recommended by some (e.g. Parker, 2005). But these are issues of some controversy in qualitative psychology for which no definitive answer is available.

## Evaluation of Jefferson transcription

It needs to be remembered what the Jefferson system does. The words said are recorded in ways which suggest something of the way that they sound, though this does not amount to a fully phonetic rendition. So you will see some words written down as they sound in dialect, for example, adding to the difficulty of reading them. Table 6.4 provides an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the Jefferson transcription system.

O’Connell and Kowal (1999) are somewhat critical of some aspects of transcription that appear in the psychological literature. They go so far as referring to some of the ‘standardisation practices’ in transcriptions as pseudo-scientific:

- They point to instances of elaborate Jefferson transcriptions which contribute nothing to the author’s interpretation of their data and which, often, are not referred to in the publication. Why transcribe things that seem to add no value?
- They question the breaking up of words when the transcript is intended to be read by others. Thus indications of the prolongation (e.g. wa::s), pitch movement and

TABLE 6.4    Advantages and disadvantages of the Jefferson transcription system

Advantages of Jefferson system	Problems with the Jefferson system
<div>1. It records talk as experienced by participants in the conversation and so keeps the analysis focused on this rather than merely the words used.</div> <div>2. Analysis of conversational interaction is facilitated by the system compared with a secretarial transcript.</div> <div>3. Even if the words are the focus of their analysis, it allows other researchers to more adequately check the original analysis as the transcript is closer to what is on the recording.</div> <div>4. It has gained dominance over other methods so can be regarded as the standard system of notation.</div> <div>5. By forcing the researcher to spend time in transcribing, it encourages a more thorough approach to analysis.</div> <div>6. It requires skilled transcribers and cannot be carried out by, say, secretarial assistants.</div> <div>7. One can use the line numbers to rapidly refer to a particular part of the transcript.</div>	<div>1. While the Jefferson symbols can sometimes be used very precisely such as times in tenths of a second, other symbols such as : are less carefully defined.</div> <div>2. It is restricted in terms of what aspects of interaction it deals with. For example, it is not good for coding emotion.</div> <div>3. Although the system may be modified, it tends to set the format of and the parameters for what is transcribed.</div> <div>4. Its origins in the days of typewriters mean that it does not capitalise on the potential of computers to use colour and a range of characters, fonts and sizes.</div> <div>5. It is very time consuming for the researcher to use.</div> <div>6. There is disagreement about the value of Jefferson transcription even among discourse analysts.</div>

so forth which occur within words or within syllables interfere greatly with the lexical integrity of the transcript. This occurs frequently in transcriptions using the Jefferson method and its value is difficult to appreciate in circumstances in which these things are not referred to in the analysis of the discourse. They may be useful for the researcher, but are they useful to the reader?

- They dislike the use of the same notation symbol to mean different things. For example, this has occurred in the Jefferson system during its evolution when a – was used to indicate a cut-off word but also a brief, unmeasured pause.
- Measurement of such things as variations in pitch generally lack objectivity. Even the recording of pauses in speech is problematic since Jefferson transcription usually involves measured pauses in terms of tenths of seconds. The problem with this is that the objective and the subjective are very different. Half a second of pause when someone is speaking very fast may subjectively appear to be much longer than the same length of pause when someone is speaking slowly. So some researchers prefer to count the pause in terms of the ‘beats’ of the speech (the speed of the speech).

Probably the most vexed issue to do with transcription is that of whether it is necessary at all. While Jefferson transcription is *de rigueur* in conversation analysis and some forms of discourse analysis, it is not regarded as so important or it is even regarded as unimportant by other qualitative researchers including Foucauldian, phenomenological and narrative analysts. A good example of the criticisms of transcription can be found in Hollway (2005):

Once the face-to-face situation is reduced to a visual and especially an audio record, much is lost. But the audio record is still a far richer record than a Jeffersonian transcript. For me, the interruption of flow that is involved when I read such a transcript, even if I am familiar with all the symbols, means that I lose much more meaning than I gain. When analysing interview data I regularly go back to the audio record to check my progressive sense-making. (p. 314)

Hollway’s reluctance to employ transcription may not be too surprising given that she broadly works in the Foucauldian tradition (Chapter 11) where the detail of ordinary conversation is not so important. She also hints at the problem of using Jeffersonian transcriptions – once the transcript has produced the detail that it does then just how can it be used in order to understand the richness of the data? Given that she argues that a Jefferson transcription is less rich than the audio tape recording then the consequences of transcription are likely to be somewhat negative in her view. However, just how her own method works is also unclear. No matter, many qualitative researchers do find transcription invaluable. Furthermore, you will struggle with some qualitative studies if you do not have the basics of Jefferson’s method whether or not you are enamoured of it.

## CONCLUSION

The process of transcribing recorded speech is regarded by many qualitative researchers as having benefits. It ensures the close familiarity with one’s data which is essential in qualitative

research. For this reason, researchers are encouraged not to delegate transcription to assistants. Transcription is: