Letter Writing: Life in Letters—A Method of Qualitative Inquiry

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Introduction

In the digital age, letter writing is a dying social practice (Stanley 2015). This chapter explores the ways in which this dying art has and can be used as a method of research, particularly useful in engaging hard to reach groups. Drawing together a disparate literature from English literature (Chandler 1995), criminology (Knight 2012), geography (Milligan 2005) and health care (Letherby and Zdrodowski 1995), I present an overview of the handwritten letter methods legacy; offer vignettes from my own research practice involving the experiences of criminal record holders within the labour market; provide a how-to guide for those interested in using this method to explore their own research objectives; and finally present a critical reflection that attends to the core methodological issues including analysis, ethics and data presentation.

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Letter Writing as Research Practice

According to Stanely (2015), letter writing is a dying social practice. The time, dedication and resource involved in writing letters has given way to email, Tweets, Instagram posts, Facebook and other digital social media platforms that offer instantaneous communication at virtually no cost. In the digital age, few of us write letters. Why, then, might we consider letter writing as a method of research?

Much of the development of the method has taken place within health-related studies, exploring delicate and personal issues with participants. In what follows, I present an overview of a number of research projects that use letter writing to explore how and why letter writing is a fruitful method of qualitative inquiry. Anonymity, time, reflection and distance are all cited as valuable qualities of letter writing as a method for eliciting emotional and self-reflective participant responses.

Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) provide a detailed account of how they used letter writing to explore women's experiences of body image, and the impact of infertility and voluntary childlessness from a feminist perspective. Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) found the geographical distance between their participants problematic—participants living relatively close by were interviewed, those far away were engaged in a series of written letters. Recruiting research participants through a range of newspapers, journals and magazines, Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995: 577) selected the correspondence method on the grounds of geographical accessibility and 'self-selection and self-definition through experience'. Committed to 'participatory research' (Reinharz 1983), the methodological priority for Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) was for research participants to respond to their recruitment advertisement because they not only felt strongly about the research topic, but also because they self-identified with the sampling criteria presented. The sample was selected by the participants, rather than the researchers. Over the two separate participant requests, 228 letters were received. The letters were in narrative form, and the researchers wrote back to participants to further explore participants' thoughts and feelings. Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995: 585) suggest that in comparison to face-to-face interviews, letter writing 'allows a greater

degree of confidentiality; research subjects may feel less exposed, as people, if they write, rather than speak'. This '*distanced rapport*' (ibid.: 585) was seen as the most significant difference between letter writing and face-to-face interviews, allowing researchers to explore issues and interact with participants that may otherwise be difficult to reach.

Similarly, Kralik et al. (2000) used the correspondence method to explore the impact of chronic illness on the lives of 'mid-life' women. The primary justification for this methodological decision, however, was based on geographical access and extended data collection over time. Kralik et al. (2000) aimed to access participants across a wide geographical location, and continue to collect data over a 12-month period. Using a range of magazines and newsletters, 80 participants were recruited. Of the 80 initial replies, 16 participants continued to be involved in the correspondence, through a mixture of handwritten letters and email. With a similar methodological priority of geographical spread, Milligan's (2005) study of carers' experiences in New Zealand also served to open geographical boundaries. Corresponding with 20 informal carers, Milligan (2005: 2015) found the correspondence method a useful method of eliciting 'meaningful insights into the experiences of health and impairment amongst vulnerable groups' across New Zealand. By reaching informal care-givers through written letters, Milligan (2005) was able to transcend the geographical boundaries produced by the sparse landscape of New Zealand. Similar to Letherby and Zrodowski (1995), Milligan (2005) highlighted the anonymity involved with written letters. In comparison to face-to-face interviews, the 'distanced rapport' (Letherby and Zdrodowski 1995) and anonymity provided by written letters 'offers opportunities for respondents to reveal thoughts and feelings that they may find difficult to express in face-to-face research encounters' (Milligan 2005: 222). These benefits are argued to be particularly useful when exploring the experiences of vulnerable groups.

Both Milligan (2005) and Harris (2002) argue that the correspondence method facilitates access to vulnerable groups such as informal care-givers and people who engage in self-harm. Similarly, letter writing seems particularly useful for exploring sensitive issues such as infertility (Kralik et al. 2000), self-harm (Harris 2002) and child cancer (Grinyer 2004). Each of these studies demonstrates letter writing as offering a space in which

participants feel able to open up, reflect and share difficult experiences and feelings in a way that feels comfortable and safe. Indeed, Milligan (2005: 215) argues how letter writing as a method of qualitative inquiry '[places] decisions around the form of participation, the extent of the data given and the ownership of the data, more firmly in the hands of the researched' (ibid.: 215). Writing in the absence of the researcher (Grinyer 2004) is perhaps an empowering experience, as it allows participants to remain in control of the process (Milligan 2005). The letter writing method allows participants to decide when and where they feel most able and willing to explore their experiences, to reflect on what it is they want to share and how they want to express those feelings. Letter writing provides an emotional safety zone (Kralik et al. 2000: 915), wherein participants can be reassured that they will never have to meet the person they are disclosing their intimate thoughts and feelings too. Knowing this gives participants a sense of control to the point at which the process can even become cathartic (Meth 2003).

Letter writing is a form of dialogic communication, however, and it is important to consider not only the effect the process has on the research participant but also on the researcher and therefore the research process. The correspondence method often continues for a number of months, and a rapport can be built between researcher and participant. As Kralik et al. (2000) report, the relationship between the researcher and the participants turned into one of 'pen pals'. Over time and with each response, it is possible that the participant will become increasingly comfortable. With increased comfort, often comes more strongly guarded disclosures and emotions, a particularly useful consequence for those exploring sensitive issues and the lived experience of participants.

Whilst participants may feel a greater degree of control over the research process and form a relationship with the researcher over time which in turn has been argued to lead to richer, more reflective and more emotional accounts (Grinyer 2004; Harris 2002; Milligan 2005), it is also important to consider this experience from the researcher's perspective. In Harris' (2002) study of self-harm using a letter writing method, she reported receiving extremely detailed letters, disclosing detailed accounts of self-harm practices that would have been 'harrowing' (ibid.: 3) in a face-to-face conversation. Harris (2002) is largely critical of this degree of

'invisibility' involved with sending and receiving letters as a researcher. A lack of face-to-face interaction she argues creates a frustrating 'one step removed' dimension to data collection, making the reading of emotions, and the researcher's expression of concern, empathy and consideration 'impossible' (ibid.: 6). Rautio (2009), however, attributes Harris' (2002) success in gaining rich, detailed data to the heightened degree of anonymity provided by letters. What is interesting here, then, is that letter writing simultaneously works to empower the participant but also protects the participant and the researcher in relation to researcher reactions. It can be very difficult to control micro-reactions, subconscious thoughts and facial expressions at the moment, however, the time, distance and space provided by letter writing provides the researcher with the opportunity to craft a more empathetic and supportive response without the fear of offending the participant.

Letter writing methods have not solely been used for researching sensitive issues with vulnerable groups, however. Indeed, Rautio (2009) adopted a correspondence method to explore individual's aesthetic engagement with their surroundings. Rautio (2009) recruited four participants from a Lappish village to correspond with. Whilst many other studies utilising the correspondence method have used third party publications and organisations to recruit participants, Rautio (2009) actually went to the Lappish village and 'asked around' to find her research sample. Further deviating from the examples previously presented, Rautio (2009) asked each participant to correspond not only with herself, but with the other participants too. If correspondence between a researcher and a participant can be considered an alternative to the face-to-face interview, Rautio's (2009) approach might be best considered as an alternative to conventional focus groups. This 'collective writing' approach was argued to be the most enjoyable aspect of the participants' research experience, even though 'the letters could almost be read without realising they had been written to everyone' (ibid.: 20). What Rautio's variation on the letter writing method presents is the flexibility of alternative methods of qualitative inquiry. Whilst the lack of procedural norms and instruction can often be posed as a criticism to arts-based methods of research it can also be constructed as an opportunity for creative engagement and methodological improvisation. This is particularly true of letter writing methods, wherein a

number of variations have been practised including digital variants (email) (McCoyd and Kerson 2006; Parris 2008; Cook 2012; Brewis 2014) and one-off approach (Knight 2012).

Described as a method of 'computer mediated communication', McCoyd and Kerson (2006: 396) argue that despite concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction, the email correspondence they received from participants was 'genuine, thoughtful and insightful, whilst still conveying emotion'. McCoyd and Kerson (2006) recruited 30 participants to engage in a series of emails to explore the decision-making and bereavement processes of women who terminated desired pregnancies after diagnosis of a foetal anomaly. Email correspondence was chosen because potential participants 'spontaneously requested email interviews' (ibid.: 30). McCoyd and Kerson (2006) suggest that in comparison to the face-to-face and telephone interviews that produced the rest of their research data, email seemed to generate particularly thoughtful and detailed insights. Similarly, Brewis (2014) explored experiences of and attitudes towards sexual relationships, motherhood and life–work balance through email correspondence with six participants. Whilst both Brewis (2014) and McCoyd and Kerson (2006) suggest that using email correspondence to collect qualitative data was a successful strategy, there are a number of critiques to be raised. Computer-based writing allows for modification at the click of a button. The relative ease of editing likely results in a more polished and rehearsed response. Additionally, it is often the subtleties of handwritten letters that provide a more personal feel. Spelling mistakes, crossing-out, doodles, underlining and highlighting provide a materiality akin to artwork. As a researcher, sympathetic to the value of arts-based methods, a handwritten letter provides a wealth of rich data that could not be produced through email.

By far the most common form of correspondence method, including email variants, have each adopted an approach that involved a number of exchanges between the researcher and participants over a number of months. On that basis, despite their obvious differences, these studies could be collated as 'on-going correspondence' approaches. There are, however, existing studies that make use of a 'one-off' approach to the correspondence method. Knight (2012) utilised this approach to gain insight into prisoners' experiences of in-cell television. An advertisement

was placed in a prisoner newspaper, asking inmates to write in with their perspectives and experiences of television in prison and what it means to them. Differing to a postal survey, the participants had the freedom to present their ideas however they pleased, and the researcher received narratives, poems and drawings from over 100 individuals. Further studies that have utilised the 'one-off' correspondence method include Milligan (2005), Grinyer (2002) and Thomas (1998, 1999). Adopting a 'one-off' approach, however, potentially reduces some of the advantages of the correspondence method. As Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) argue, the distanced rapport built during on-going correspondence potentially produces a level of trust and disclosure that may not be possible with a one-off correspondence. Kralik et al.'s (2000) likening of the correspondence method to the relationship of 'penpals' perhaps supports this argument. Over time and repeated correspondence, the relationship between participant and researcher is likely to evolve from that of 'strangers' to one of the distanced acquaintances. Whilst the 'one-off' approach may have the advantage of gaining a relatively quick 'snap-shot' of the phenomena under investigation, the level of depth is compromised. To achieve a depth akin to face-to-face interviewing, to produce rich, qualitative data, a number of letters to and from both researcher and participant is arguably required.

Letter writing methods offer an interesting and rich opportunity to engage with particular participant groups. However, there has been limited engagement with the method in the business, management and humanities fields. Given the 'emotional' or 'affective turn' (Ward and McMurray 2016) seen in organisational research and the social sciences more generally (Cromby et al. 2010), the correspondence method offers an alternative method of inquiry that allows researchers to get close to participants and explore their thoughts and feelings. The difficulty, perhaps, is knowing where to start. With such a limited number of existing studies for reference, the 'how to' section below provides a detailed guide for those considering letter writing as a method of qualitative inquiry.

How to Use the Correspondence Method in Your Research

The correspondence method is a relatively rare data collection method that has been utilised in two distinct ways—'one-off' and 'on-going' correspondence. Whilst Thomas (1998, 1999), Grinyer (2002), Milligan (2005), and Knight (2012) have adopted the 'one-off' approach, this how-to guide will focus solely on on-going correspondence.

Based on my own experience of using the on-going correspondence method to research criminal record holders' experiences of disclosing their criminal record within the labour market, this guide offers practical and contextual advice and guidance for those considering letter writing as a method of qualitative inquiry.

Disclosure and Desistance: Criminal Record Holders' Experiences of Gaining and Maintaining Employment

Extant literature identifies significant structural barriers to 'ex-offender' employment such as employer discrimination, a lack of education and a criminal record. These structural barriers impact criminal record holders through the act of disclosure (Soloman 2012; Harris and Keller 2005). However, my research focus is not on the structural barriers themselves but the subjective experience of the act of disclosure for criminal record holders.

The participants I wanted to involve in the study were those with experiences of the labour market who had at least one serious criminal conviction. In order to gain a holistic picture of the subjective experience of criminal record holders it was important for me to understand the act of disclosure from the perspective of those who are (1) on probation (2) post-probation and (3) reconvicted and sentenced to incarceration.

For Groups 1 and 2—probation services and ex-offender charities were helpful in finding suitable participants who were interviewed face-to-face. Those serving prison sentences, however, are much harder to reach group. Gaining access to prisoners can be a lengthy and challenging process. Finding willing gatekeepers and participants, arranging interviews and

travelling to any number of prisons posed significant challenges to the project. However, imprisoned re-offender experiences of the labour market and the act of disclosure are vital in understanding how disclosure impacts labour market experiences.

To further complicate the matter, my additional sampling criteria made my participant sample increasingly niche. I sought prisoners who had previously been released from prison, and then reconvicted. Furthermore, I sought individuals with either level 3 qualifications (or above) or a stable history of employment. I was therefore faced with three distinct problems—access, geographical accessibility and sample selection. The correspondence method offered access to a hard to reach group (Harris 2002), across a wide geographical area (Milligan 2005), in which suitable participants 'self-selected' (Letherby and Zdrodowski 1995). I turned to letter writing as a potential method of accessing incarcerated prisoner experiences.

To begin, I set up a freepostNAME service with the Royal Mail. This would allow prisoners to write to me for free, simply by writing freepost EMPLOYMENT PROJECT on the front of any envelope. Once set up, I arranged to place an advert in the freely distributed prison newspaper 'Inside Time'. The advert was published in the newspaper in January, informing the audience of the research I was conducting, and asking them to write in to express their interest. To help focus the sample group, potential participants were also asked to provide a brief overview of their educational and working background. The advert was quite specific about the employment/qualification history I was looking for in my participant sample. I stipulated a cut-off date, mid-February, to allow enough time for potential participants to reply, but also to manage the expectations of both the participants and my research.

By the cut-off date, I received 30 replies, with most of the participants indicating that they fitted the participant brief. Specifying the participant brief in the original advertisement helped to keep the potential sample relevant and focused, although participant selection remained a challenging task. It would have been useful to have a rigid selection criterion for participants, however due to the novel nature of the correspondence method and lack of existing studies utilising it, the selection process became a long and complicated task. Eventually, I used the information provided

by the potential participants to reduce the sample down to 15 individuals (see Step 3 in the next section for more details). The intended number of participants was 10, therefore pursuing 15 individuals left room for discontinued correspondence.

Having overcome the task of selecting 15 participants, detailed project briefs were sent out, along with a personal, handwritten introduction and participant consent forms. As expected, a number of consent forms were never returned, bringing the sample down to 12. The correspondence then began in March with handwritten letters exchanged in an intermittent fashion. It would have been beneficial to set out some expectations on the frequency and timing of the letters, perhaps one exchange per month.

Over the following 6 months, a significant number of letters were exchanged with 10 participants. The letters received ranged from 3 to 12 pages of A4, and participants wrote between 4 and 9 times each. The data was direct and relevant, and by the end of the data collection period I had a large and rich data set.

Participants were keen to write about their experiences, thoughts and feelings, and over time the relationships developed and became increasingly friendly. Rapport was built; however, it was during the later stages of the correspondence that I began to be uncomfortable with the thought of ending the exchange. Thankfully, I had stipulated in the participant brief that the data collection period would last for 6 months—I had actively managed expectations. Although I would have liked to continue writing to the participants, I knew that as a researcher I had a duty to analyse and disseminate the data that my participants had provided. I ended the correspondence by sincerely thanking each participant, wishing them well for the future. I then went on to transcribe and analyse the data, making the best possible use of the unique and rich data set I had been presented with.

The correspondence method, therefore, proved to be a 'valuable and productive means of gathering data in an otherwise intractable field' (Harris 2002: 4). The following step-by-step guide will provide some useful and practical tips on how the correspondence method could be utilised, addressing considerations of sampling, recruitment, selection, correspondence, storage, transcription and analysis.

Step 1—Sampling

The first thing to consider when using the correspondence method is the participant sample. You must ask yourself whether the method aligns with your research question i.e. will it be useful for exploring this issue, and whether the participant sample is first accessible by this method and secondly, whether they will be receptive to it. Considerations of disability, lifestyle, age, literacy levels and the geographical location of your participant sample are all useful points of reflection when deciding if a letter writing method is suitable for exploring your research questions. Below are some useful questions and issues that you might find helpful to consider.

- Accessible—the use of written correspondence is not universally accessible. Those with visual or physical impairment, enhanced learning and/or development needs may find the writing of letters challenging or impossible. The same is true for those who speak a different language to the researcher or for those participants too young to engage fluently in writing. Furthermore, individuals possessing certain mental health problems may find the correspondence method difficult or distressing. You must think carefully about the basic principles of the correspondence method—who are you automatically excluding by requiring research data to be in a written format? How important are those groups to your particular study? Simultaneously, be prepared to make reasonable adjustments. One of my participants expressed concern at his severe dyslexia—requesting correspondence be typed in a particular font and left-justified.
- Receptive—letter writing is time consuming and requires a degree of commitment on the part of the participant. You need to think about how receptive particular groups might be to this process. For example, teenagers, busy professionals, international participants may feel that the time commitment is too burdensome and engagement with the method may breakdown. On the other hand, individuals serving time in prisons, or those who are unemployed at home may be more receptive to the method. There are significant differences in the lifestyles of different participant groups, and you must consider the context of your research. In addition to the participant groups' anticipated lifestyle, you must

also consider the value of your topic and research from the participants perspective.

- Interest and enjoyment are key elements of the correspondence method—if the participant does not take enjoyment and/or see importance in the topic, they are unlikely to engage. As can be seen from the examples in this chapter—TV use in prison (Knight 2012), beauty in the participants' home town (Rautio 2009), finding employment with convictions, self-harm (Harris 2002)—although varied and not all pleasant, all topics are close to the heart and likely of great importance to the participant. The correspondence method requires commitment, time and effort over and above that of face-to-face interviews, therefore the topic needs to be interesting or important enough to both the participant and the researcher to be worthwhile.

This list of considerations is not exhaustive; however, it does provide an idea of the level of consideration you must give to your participant sample. The key point to take away is that each research problem and participant sample is different—context is everything. For some participant samples, the correspondence method may be a perfect methodological choice. For others, it may not work at all—think carefully about who you wish to correspond with and whether or not it will be viable. Once you have determined that your participant sample is appropriate for the correspondence method, it is time to start thinking about the recruitment of the sample.

Step 2—Recruitment

Recruiting a participant sample to engage in the correspondence method can be approached in a number of ways. In much the same way as face-to-face interviews, potential research participants can be invited to engage via some form of advertisement.

Newspapers and Magazines

Printed newspapers and magazines provide a useful and targeted recruitment avenue for the correspondence method, and have been utilised by Knight and Stamper (2016), Letherby and Zrodowski (1995), and Kralik et al. (2000). When advertising in printed newspapers and magazines, you can be confident to some extent, that your potential participants appreciate the aesthetics of printed media. With virtually all publications now available in some digital format, those purchasing printed versions are perhaps less reliant on the internet and email, potentially making the concept of reading and writing letters a little more comfortable. Secondly, printed newspapers and magazines are often specialist, or incorporate specialist sections. On that basis, if the publication relates to your research topic, it is more likely to be received by your desired participant sample. My research into prisoners' experiences of disclosure used prisoner newspaper *Inside Time* to advertise for participants. This was no coincidence—a prisoner newspaper, written for and delivered to prisoners, about prison and prisoners' lives… it was the perfect placement for the advertisement. Think in terms of the publications target market—are they also your target sample group?

Online Publications, Websites and Social Media

Whilst the readers of printed publications may be assumed to appreciate the aesthetics of 'paper' to some extent, online publications and websites should not be overlooked as a valuable participant recruitment possibility. Today's internet has multiple websites for almost every thinkable topic, interest or problem. This can be used to your advantage when recruiting participants. Speak to website owners, about both their website and their mailing list. Contact administrators of Facebook groups closely related to your area of interest. Present your research in a positive light, help them to see that your research is of interest and value to them as an organisation, and at the same time you may raise awareness of your research in the process. In many cases, your research will be valuable to these organisations—present the advertisement as a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Remember that for both printed publications and online recruitment avenues, when using the correspondence method, the organisations you use to host your advertisements are not gatekeepers to your research participants—they are gatekeepers to the advertisement. Many of the organisations that may be useful for participant recruitment survive on advertising revenue. On that basis, some organisations may insist on payment for their services, and whether or not this is reasonable depends both on the organisation and your own institutional circumstances. Beyond the 'advertisement gatekeeper', however, your sample will be self-selecting, therefore a great deal of thought needs to be applied to the writing of the advertisement.

Advertisement

Much in the same way that an advertisement for goods or services needs to attract customers, your advertisement needs to attract your target participant sample. Placing your advertisement for research participants in front of an audience is not much use if it does not attract attention or relay the necessary information. You inevitably want your potential participants to respond, and there are a few key points that make this outcome more likely. Take a look at the advertisement in Fig. 1.

This is the advertisement published for my prisoner correspondence project. Notice the following key factors that have been included.

- Title—the first thing any reader will see is the title. To continue reading, the reader needs to find some interest or relevance in the title. It also needs to be clear and simple enough not to put people off. Imagine if the title to this advertisement read 'A phenomenological, interpretive study of prisoners' subjective experience of disclosing their criminal record within the UK labour market'. It describes the same research, but it does not give the impression of an easy read. You want your title to be accessible and relevant.
- Introduction—try to introduce yourself and your institution early on. This example very quickly introduces the advertiser as 'researchers', and the institution.

The Hub

Prisoners' experiences of finding and keeping a job

Off the back of their study into the value of letter writing in prison, researchers at De Montfort University are looking to use letters as a way of hearing about prisoners' experiences of the labour/job/employment market

We would like to invite you to share your experiences of gaining and retaining employment after release. We are interested in hearing about your experiences of finding, doing and keeping a job whilst holding a criminal record. Whilst we will also be speaking with ex-prisoners, we want to get the input of those of you that have gone on to re-offend.

We are interested in your experiences of work because we want to learn more about what life is like on the outside for those with a criminal record. The government is currently calling for prison reforms to make prisoners more 'employable' on release. Whilst education and training within prison is undoubtedly valuable and needed, we are interested in exploring the assumption that underpins this government strategy. Will more training and more courses really help you get a job on the out? Is your level of education, qualifications and certificates really the thing that prevents you getting a job, keeping a job or being able to do a job? Rather than assuming that this is the case, we want to hear your experiences first hand.

For this first stage of research, we ask that readers register their interest by writing to the address below with a name, correspondence address, and a brief summary of your work experience, level of education and sentence/s lengths. We do not need specifics at this point – for example, simply stating some of the job roles you have previously occupied, the level of your achieved qualifications and overall sentence lengths are all that is needed.

All letters received by 7th February 2017 will be considered by the research team, and we will be sending a letter to some of you which describes the project in more detail. This will also include a questionnaire. Please understand that we simply do not have the resources to conduct in-depth research with everybody – we will therefore select individuals that represent the broadest range of backgrounds and experiences.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please write to us with your brief introduction using the exact following address:

Freepost EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

De Montfort University

This is all that needs to be written on your envelope, please copy it exactly. Your details will be kept securely, and any information given by you during the research will be kept anonymous. Thank you for reading this and we look forward to receiving your letters.

Fig. 1 Advertisement published for prisoner correspondence project

- Project brief—the project brief should make up the main body of the advertisement. Be clear and concise, yet detailed and accessible. Avoid jargon, and have friends or colleagues critique your drafts. This will be similar to a conventional participant brief usually provided prior to face-to-face interviews—yet considerably shorter. You want to provide enough information that the potential participant knows a reasonable amount about the project, what it is about, why it is being conducted and what are their rights.
- What is required—you should be very clear at this point about what you require from potential participants. Without doing so, you may get such a vast variety of content that the project becomes unmanageable.
- Set a deadline—it is very important to set a deadline or a cut-off date. Doing so will not only aid your project time-line planning, but also actively manage the expectations of the participants. The deadline for this example was the 7th February—it was clear that letters after this date may not be considered by the research team, creating urgency whilst managing expectations. Without a deadline, readers may have been writing in for some time, even though the research had progressed significantly. On the other hand, be considerate that you allow enough time for individuals to reply—a one-week deadline for a monthly publication is not going to produce the best possible response rate.
- Provide an address—perhaps the most obvious thing, you will need to provide is a correspondence address. It is not advisable to use your home address—always use your institutional address. Participant letters have more chance of being accessed by people other than the researcher if a home address is used. Furthermore, as a researcher it is often best to keep work and personal life separate. You will notice that the example in Fig. 1 makes use of a freepost address. There are a number of reasons a freepost address was used for this particular project. Firstly, it allowed for a set, private address within the university—letters were only delivered to the researchers. Secondly, there were ethical issues to consider. The cost of participating in research activity should almost always be covered by the researcher/their institution (Silverman 2013). Rarely is it seen as ethical to expect the participant to pay for their own research-related costs. Stamps and stationery add up, and can be particularly limiting to groups such as those serving prison sentences. On that basis, a freepost service

is a practical solution to reduce both the cost and time commitment of your participants (it takes time to buy postage stamps!). The major postal service in the UK is provided by the Royal Mail, and whilst your institution may have a freepost licence that you can use, many will not. There are a number of different services on offer from the Royal Mail, and each will have its own advantages and disadvantages.

When calculating estimated costs, remember that it is important to consider the volume of letters you expect to receive. Previous projects have received between 30 and 200 initial replies from participants. Be sure to factor estimates of on-going correspondence and/or acknowledgement replies into your budget. In addition to postage charges, there are stationary costs to consider, such as envelopes and paper. Dependant on your participant sample group, you may want to supply paper and envelopes to them—be sure to calculate the cost. Research staff and students often have access to limited departmental/university-wide research assistance funds—these funds can be a great place to start as previous experience suggests that in comparison to travel expenses for face-to-face interviews, the correspondence method allows for a larger, wider and more geographically spread participant group. With careful planning, the correspondence method provides a relatively low-cost solution to qualitative inquiry, however, the practicality of using this innovative method must be considered.

Step 3—Selection

So, you have identified your participant sample, drafted your advertisement and placed it in a targeted recruitment space. Hopefully, you will receive interest from your target participant sample group. Of course, this may not be the case. If you find yourself with a lack of potential participants, carefully consider why. Is the target participant sample suitable for the correspondence method? Was your advertisement placed in the most appropriate place? Discussion with peers and fellow researchers can be very beneficial in these circumstances. Assuming, however, that you have a suitable participant pool to choose from, there are now any number of participant selection choices (provided you do not intend to correspond

with all potential participants that respond to your advert), and it is advisable to have a robust participant selection model to aid this process.

Your participant selection model will almost always be based on your sampling criteria. Knowing how and why you will select certain participants and reject others is a critical process, particularly if you receive more interest than originally expected. The ideal participant sample consists of the individuals best suited to answer your research questions. Logically, this will often be individuals with characteristics highlighted by your sampling criteria. Table 1 shows a selection model used for my prisoner correspondence project.

Table 1 is a very simple participant selection model used to ensure participants chosen for on-going correspondence meet the required sampling criteria. If a participant's characteristics fit into the 'yes' box for each criterion, they are more suitable as a research participant than those who do not meet all criteria. The participant selection process becomes more complex, however, when the number of potential participants that perfectly fit the sampling criteria is greater than the number of individuals that you wish to correspond with. For example, if you intend to correspond with 15 people, yet have 30 participants to choose from, it may be useful to develop a points-based selection model, as shown in Table 2.

In Table 2 the ideal participants are those with multiple convictions, who are actively seeking to gain/retain employment, and who's educational and/or working background defies that of the stereotyped offender. On that basis, the participants who score the highest amount of points are likely to be the closest to the 'perfect' participant sample. Whilst these examples provide a useful tool when selecting a participant sample, be wary of using simple tables in isolation.

Table 1 Selection model for prisoner correspondence project

Sampling criteria	Yes	No
Participant has 2 or more convictions?		
Participant has experience of gaining/retaining employment with a criminal record?		
Participant has a high level of education and/or a long history of employment?		
Participant is located in the UK?		

Table 2 Points-based selection model for prisoner correspondence project

	1 (Lowest)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Highest)
To what extent does the participant have multiple convictions?										
How active has the participant been within the labour market with a criminal record?										
To what extent does the educational/working background of the participant contradict stereotypical notions of offenders?										

As a qualitative researcher, interpreting and evaluating your participants and data is crucial. In addition to the objective sampling criteria you may impose on your participant sample, also consider each potential participant on a case-by-case basis. Do your participants provide a wide range of backgrounds and experiences? Do some individuals indicate a particular passion for the topic? Are there gender/ethnicity implications that you had not previously considered? Issues such as these would be very difficult to explore in a simple table. Qualitative researchers interpret and evaluate their participant sample, and combined with the objective tools detailed in Table 2, you should be able to justify each participant that you select for correspondence. Having selected your participant sample, the next section will provide guidance on the practical aspects of writing letters.

Learn from My Mistakes…

I would like to stress the importance of the selection stage. For me, participant selection was far more challenging than recruitment. The example tables shown in Tables 1 and 2 were the result of a long and complex process of participant selection, and in future projects I would aim to have something similar constructed prior to advertisement.

On placing my advertisement in '*Inside Time*' magazine, I did not expect such a quick and large response. Inexperience left me under the impression that I would have a number of weeks to construct a selection strategy before responses were received. In reality, letters started to be delivered to me within a few days, and I soon found myself overwhelmed with the volume of participants to choose from.

I attempted to select participants on a 'letter-by-letter' basis. By the time the deadline had passed, I had narrowed my sample from 30 potential participants to 23. I was, however, aiming for 15—yet with no clear means of comparison I found it challenging to decide which participants were most suitable. At this stage, I constructed the tables shown in Tables 1 and 2. Although a relatively basic way of displaying data, the tables really helped me to see 'what and who' I had to choose from, and from them I was able to narrow down my participant sample. I would certainly recommend

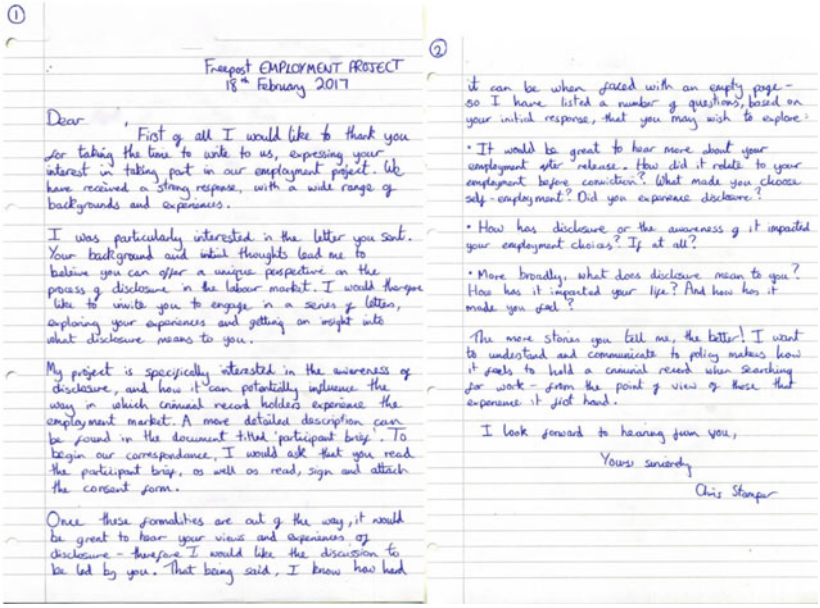
that anyone considering the correspondence method devises a selection strategy prior to advertisement and receiving letters.

Step 4—Correspondence

The correspondence method involves multiple letter exchanges between the researcher and the participant. On that basis, the emphasis of the recruitment advertisement for a correspondence approach should be on clarifying the participant sampling criteria. Ensure that potential participants' initial replies contain the information required to select a suitable sample with which to extend the correspondence. Once participants have been chosen, good ethical practice dictates that participants be given an extended project brief, outlining the key aspects of the research and what it means for them. Most universities have project brief templates that can be easily edited and printed. Additionally, upon reading the project brief, a participant consent form can be included for participant authorisation.

Along with the project brief and consent form, the researcher's first correspondence with chosen participants should include a personalised letter. One of the aims of the correspondence method is to build rapport with participants—a generic, typed letter is unlikely to provide the maximum possible rapport. The personalised letter should introduce the researcher, and provide some guidance for the participants' first reply. The example shown in Fig. 2 was sent to a chosen participant, during my research project exploring the impact of disclosing a criminal record to employers.

There are many pointers to be taken from this example. Notice first, how the letter begins by offering thanks to the participant for their time spent replying. The second paragraph speaks to the researcher's interest in the participant's response—making it clear that the participant has an interesting story to tell and inviting them to share it. Next, a little more information was given about the project, and specific details about the project brief and consent form attached. The letter then moves on to explain that the researcher wants the correspondence to be led by the participant, however, a few questions are presented to make the task less daunting. Finally, the letter concludes by reassuring the participant that the more stories they can tell of their experiences, the more useful the data



① Freepost EMPLOYMENT PROJECT
18th February 2017

Dear ,

First of all I would like to thank you for taking the time to write to us, expressing your interest in taking part in our employment project. We have received a strong response, with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences.

I was particularly interested in the letter you sent. Your background and initial thoughts lead me to believe you can offer a unique perspective on the process of disclosure in the labour market. I would therefore like to invite you to engage in a series of letters, exploring your experiences and getting an insight into what disclosure means to you.

My project is specifically interested in the awareness of disclosure, and how it can potentially influence the way in which criminal record holders experience the employment market. A more detailed description can be found in the document titled 'participant brief'. To begin our correspondence, I would ask that you read the participant brief, as well as read, sign and attach the consent form.

Once these formalities are out of the way, it would be great to hear your views and experiences of disclosure - therefore I would like the discussion to be led by you. That being said, I know how hard

② it can be when faced with an empty page - so I have listed a number of questions, based on your initial response, that you may wish to explore:

- It would be great to hear more about your employment after release - How did it relate to your employment before conviction? What made you choose self-employment? Did you experience disclosure?
- How has disclosure or the awareness of it impacted your employment choices? If at all?
- More broadly, what does disclosure mean to you? How has it impacted your life? And how has it made you feel?

The more stories you tell me, the better! I want to understand and communicate to policy makers how it feels to hold a criminal record when searching for work - from the point of view of those that experience it first hand.

I look forward to hearing from you,

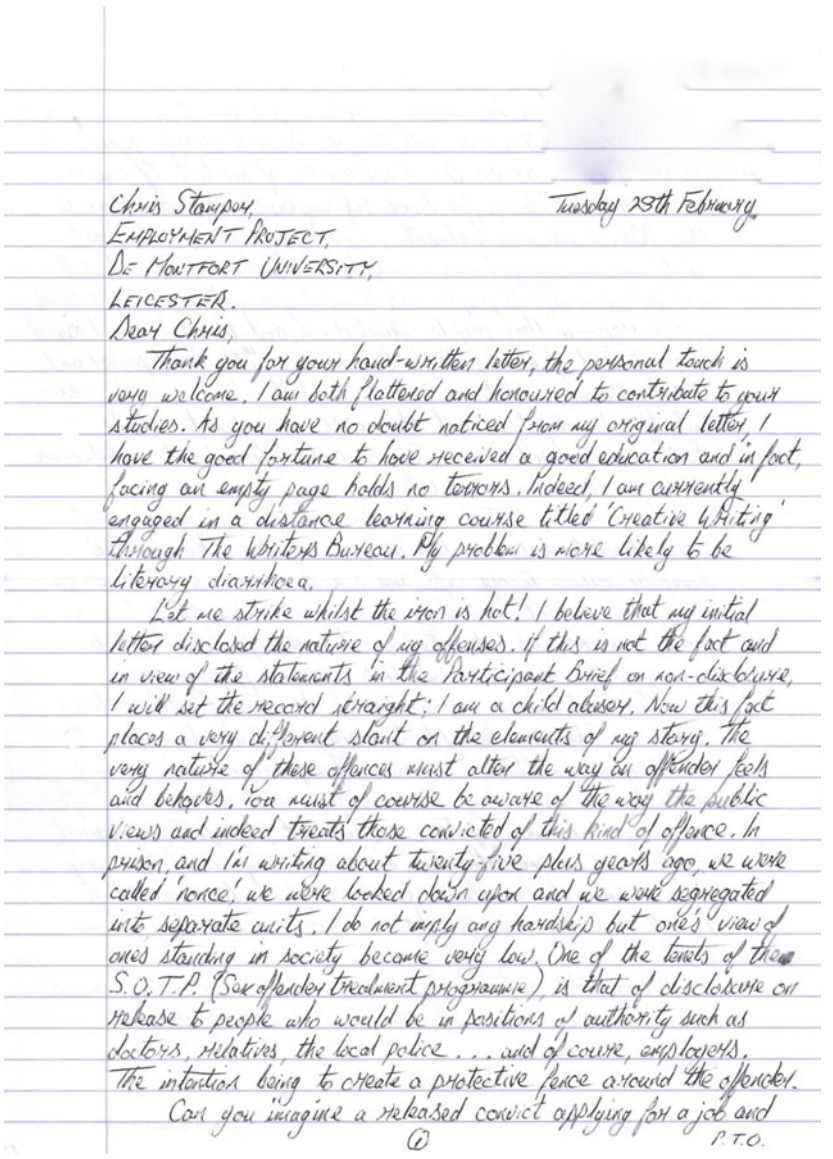
Yours sincerely

Chris Stamper

Fig. 2 Researcher's response to a letter from a prisoner participant

collection will be. There is a final point that hints to the motivation of the research, and although this was covered in the project brief, the letter potentially provides some additional motivation for participation.

It is important to consider at this stage, the way in which the letters are written. The example in Fig. 2 was purposely handwritten for two reasons. First, the participant sample group were serving prisoners. Only a small proportion of serving prisoners have access to word processers or printers, therefore there was an element of ethical responsibility to hand-write the researcher letters. Secondly, there is a distinct difference between handwritten and typed letters. Many of the participants of this project commented on how the handwritten nature of researcher letters made the correspondence feel personal (more on this in the analysis section below). If you are handwriting your letters, however, ensure you take digital copies! For analysis, you will require both sides of the correspondence, and once a letter is sent, you cannot get it back easily. Figure 3 shows part of the handwritten response to the researcher's letter in Fig. 2.



Chris Stanyon,
EMPLOYMENT PROJECT,
DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY,
LEICESTER.

Tuesday 28th February.

Dear Chris,

Thank you for your hand-written letter, the personal touch is very welcome. I am both flattered and honoured to contribute to your studies. As you have no doubt noticed from my original letter, I have the good fortune to have received a good education and in fact, facing an empty page holds no terrors. Indeed, I am currently engaged in a distance learning course titled 'Creative Writing' through The Writers Bureau. My problem is more likely to be Literary diarrhoea.

Let me strike whilst the iron is hot! I believe that my initial letter disclosed the nature of my offenses. If this is not the fact and in view of the statements in the Participant Brief on non-disclosure, I will set the record straight: I am a child abuser. Now this fact places a very different slant on the elements of my story. The very nature of these offences must alter the way an offender feels and behaves, you must of course be aware of the way the public views and indeed treats those convicted of this kind of offence. In prison, and I'm writing about twenty-five plus years ago, we were called 'nonce,' we were looked down upon and we were segregated into separate units. I do not imply any hardship but one's view of ones standing in society become very low. One of the tenets of the S.O.T.P. (Sex offender treatment programme), is that of disclosure on release to people who would be in positions of authority such as doctors, relatives, the local police . . . and of course, employers. The intention being to create a protective fence around the offender.

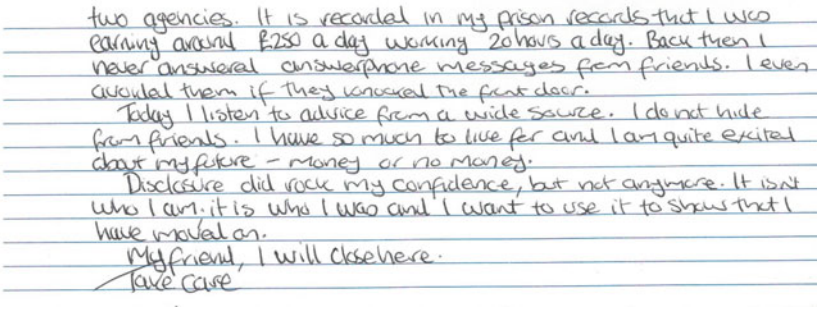
Can you imagine a released convict applying for a job and

(1) P.T.O.

Fig. 3 Participant response 1

Notice how the first sentence of the participant's letter thanks the researcher specifically for handwriting their response. The participant speaks of a 'very welcome personal touch', potentially indicating that trust and rapport has been built simply by handwriting the letter. Trust and rapport are arguably demonstrated in the second paragraph, where the participant describes, in quite graphic detail, the nature of their offences—a very stigmatised and socially hostile act. Whilst the participant may have disclosed such information through other forms of qualitative inquiry, the personal touch and 'pen pal' feel (Kralik et al. 2000) of the correspondence method arguably contributed to the openness of the participant to discuss their past. This rapport building was particularly noticeable during this specific correspondence project; early letters were signed 'yours sincerely', whilst later letters from the same participants were signed in a more personal way, as can be seen in Fig. 4.

This significant shift in the way the participant addresses the researcher potentially indicates that the relationship has developed to one of friendship, moving beyond the researcher/participant association to one of trust and openness. Whilst this developed relationship aids in providing rich, emotionally charged data, it makes ending the correspondence a difficult task that requires sensitivity and compassion. In most cases, qualitative data collection can only continue for a limited period of time. That time may be two months, or two years, yet eventually budgetary and time constraints require the researcher to 'move on', from data collection to data analysis and dissemination. Whilst in some circumstances, the researcher


two agencies. It is recorded in my prison records that I was earning around £250 a day working 20 hours a day. Back then I never answered answerphone messages from friends. I even avoided them if they knocked the front door.

Today I listen to advice from a wide source. I do not hide from friends. I have so much to live for and I am quite excited about my future – money or no money.

Disclosure did rock my confidence, but not anymore. It is not who I am. It is who I was and I want to use it to show that I have moved on.

My friend, I will close here.

Take care

Fig. 4 Participant response 2

could happily continue corresponding for a prolonged period of time, there is a responsibility to the participant, the institution and the researcher themselves to complete and disseminate the findings. What use is a huge, rich data set that never gets analysed or presented? On that basis, there must be an 'end' to the on-going correspondence method.

Ending the correspondence, however, can be challenging for both the participant and the researcher. During my prisoner letter project, I experienced feelings of guilt; I had formed a distanced rapport with my participants and felt that I had become a safe outlet to whom they were able to disclose some of their most guarded thoughts and feelings. Subsequently, it is highly advisable to ensure you manage expectations from the beginning. As suggested earlier, you should clearly indicate a time-scale of the on-going correspondence at the point of recruitment. By informing participants of the time-scale of the correspondence, and how long it will go on for, you are actively managing participant expectations from the recruitment stage. If the participant knows from the beginning that the correspondence will be for a limited time, there are no surprises when the researcher ends the process. There are many ways to end the on-going correspondence method as a researcher, yet a sincere 'thank you' letter is arguably the most ethical and polite. By the end of the data collection period, your participants have likely invested a great deal of time and energy into providing data for the researchers' project. Whilst there may be therapeutic or cathartic participant advantages, the researcher will ultimately benefit most from the correspondence. On that basis, the researcher's final letter should not only thank the participant for their input, but also advise them on what will happen with their data, and where they can gain access to the completed research.

Step 5—Storage

If the previous steps have been successful, you will hopefully have a plentiful and rich data set by the end of your data collection period. As with all qualitative data, letters from participants must be kept with confidentiality and anonymity. The paragraphs below provide some useful tips for

securely storing the data you have collected and offer advice on ways to minimise the risk of losing any correspondence.

The original letters you receive from participants are not only textual—they are material, aesthetic artefacts and should be treated as such. The first consideration, therefore, is not anonymity or confidentiality, it is of respect and care. In many cases, your data may be handwritten—it is a form of art that your participants have taken the time and effort to create. On that basis, great care should be taken of the material aspect of your data. When you receive letters, open them carefully, read them delicately—do not fold, tear or spill coffee on them! Similarly, do not write notes on the original letters. To write on or highlight over a material artefact not only defaces the artwork that has been created for you, but it also shows a lack of respect for the time and effort spent in its creation. Treating letters in this careful way, however, does raise some ethical questions around confidentiality and anonymity, an issue overcome with the use of modern technology.

When presenting qualitative data, anonymity is often provided by using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants, comply with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR 2018) and meet institutional ethics procedures. The principle of anonymity remains the same with the correspondence method—identifying names and characteristics are removed to ensure the participant remains anonymous—yet the process is more complex than simply changing the words typed during transcription. To ensure original letters are not damaged or defaced, it is advisable to take digital copies, preferably with a high-resolution scanner. Once digitally imported, software such as Adobe Photoshop or Apple iPhoto can be used to 'touch up' the images, removing all identifying information. Not only will taking digital copies allow the researcher to ensure anonymity, the process will also keep a digital back-up of the data. Whilst great care can be taken to ensure original letters are secure, accidents can and do happen—multiple copies of all data ensure no data is lost.

Original letters, edited letters and back-up copies must be kept securely and ensure confidentiality. For original letters and material copies, a secure, lockable filing cabinet, accessible only by the researcher is essential. Keep

the cabinet locked at all times—there are names, addresses and disclosures in letters that need protecting as a priority. For digital copies, ensure that all files are kept in password-protected folders on encrypted devices. Taking steps to ensure your data can only be accessed by you is essential to maintain confidentiality and ethical practice.

Step 6—Transcription and Analysis

Having collected, stored and anonymised your data, the next stage of the correspondence method is analysis. The letters you receive from participants will likely contain mostly text—and one approach to analysis could be to treat it as such. Whether handwritten or typed, letters received from participants can be transcribed in a similar fashion to face-to-face audio recordings. These transcriptions can then be analysed using common qualitative analysis approaches, such as content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), discourse analysis (Gee 2004) and narrative analysis (Maruna 2001). Whilst this may be a practical and useful utilisation of the data set collected, many of these methods miss the aesthetic value of the correspondence method. The entire experience; opening the letters, feeling and smelling the paper, running your fingertips over the imprint left by the pen—all of these factors combine to produce a closeness over distance (Chandler 1995). Reading a handwritten letter *feels* as though you are reading the thoughts of the participant, rather than a polished, edited version; for example, read the excerpts in Fig. 5.

Transcript of Figure 5

I will never be able to draw a line on my past, even though its nearly 20 years ago and I'm very clearly a different man now. I will consider myself very lucky if I'll be able to find and employer that can see past my history and offer me a position based on what I can being to them. I don't hold out much hope though as I'm not allowed to move on by law.

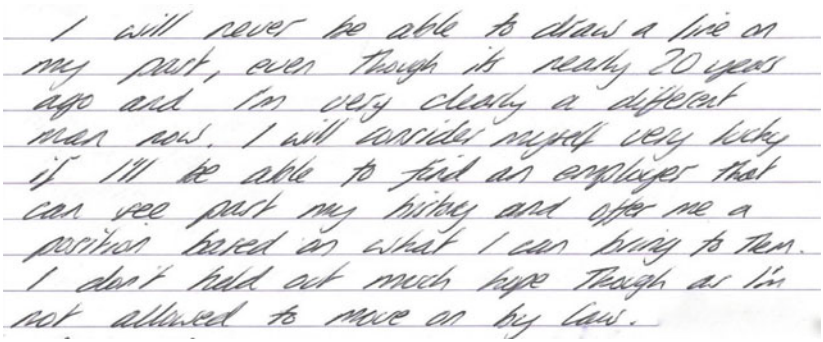


Fig. 5 Analysis example 1

The textual element of these statements is identical. Which version makes you feel closer to the author? Which one makes you picture the person writing the statement? There is something unique about a handwritten letter—the words arguably feel as though they contain more emotion, written first-hand rather than edited and replicated. The aesthetic impact of the letter is reduced simply by reproducing this letter in a textbook—you cannot feel or smell the paper when it is scanned and reprinted. This is one of the limitations of analysing correspondence in this way—only the researcher will ever experience the entire aesthetic value of the letters, and the sensory experience is very difficult to communicate to an audience. That being said, observe the expression of emotion in the example in Fig. 6.

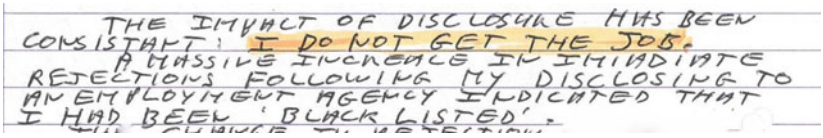


Fig. 6 Analysis example 2

Transcript of Figure 6

> The impact of disclosure has been consistent: I do not get the job [highlighted]. A massive increase in immediate rejections following my disclosing to an employment agency indicated that I had been "black listed".

Which example of the same statement has more impact? Whilst textual transcription can describe to the reader how a statement has been said or written, it cannot duplicate the impact it has on the reader. Reading the handwritten statement, you can picture the author writing 'I do not get the job', feeling the emotional impact of what they have written and deciding that it needs highlighting. Just as emotion is difficult to present through a textual transcription of audio data, so too is emotion portrayed through the transcription of written letters. By analysing the aesthetic qualities, the material aspects of letters received through the correspondence method, the researcher and the audience that the research is disseminated to are able to appreciate the feelings and emotions of participant at the time of writing.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the correspondence method of qualitative inquiry as a practical and innovative data collection method. Through multiple examples of existing studies, the correspondence method has been shown to be both practical and adaptable across a number of research topics and disciplines. Both the participants and the researcher have the time and flexibility to reflect on their responses—with the opportunity to create a rich, in-depth data set. Building a 'distanced rapport' (Letherby and Zrodowski 1995), researchers are able to transcend large geographical spaces to collect data from otherwise hard-to-reach groups. Stigmatised and isolated participants may respond well to the 'pen-pal' (Kralik et al. 2000) nature of the correspondence method, revealing intimate thoughts and feelings otherwise hidden away.

Due care and attention should be exercised, however, as a lack of face-to-face interaction means emotion can at times be difficult to interpret

and empathy challenging to present. In day-to-day life we regularly see text messages and emails misinterpreted and in some instances offence or upset caused. The same potential for misinterpretation exists when using the correspondence method—participants can relatively easily misinterpret the researcher's questions and the lack of face-to-face immediacy makes clarification a slow and sometimes complex process. That being said, I found exchanging letters with my participants highly engaging and rewarding. The experiences of 'putting pen to paper' and receiving letters, each with their own smell, texture and artistic individuality, made the research process both practical and enjoyable and offered a new and exciting way of gathering a rich and emotionally charged data set.

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