

# A LITERATURE REVIEW: LISTENING ROOMS AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, conventions of research have been rapidly evolving to better understand participant responses and experiences. 'Listening Rooms' is a non-invasive research methodology (Heron, 2019), which situates itself in the heart of this advancement, aiming to capture genuine student experiences, with the researcher removed from the participant environment. This method involves recording conversations between two students (usually friends/ course mates) using topic prompts rather than interview-style questions, allowing students to lead the conversation and focus on areas that are significant to them, rather than their institution. The researcher briefs and debriefs participants, but is not present during the discussion, which is recorded and transcribed, and later analysed in full.

## AIMS/OBJECTIVES

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Analyse Listening Rooms as a data collection method
2. Explore it as a listening method to capture lived experience
3. Explore the impact of it being conducted online
4. Determine if the Listening Rooms methodology empowers marginalised students

## METHODOLOGY

A thematic review was undertaken in July and August 2022, focusing on the themes of friendship, online research, power dynamics, researcher positionality and data authenticity.

Literature analysed included articles within the Journal of Further and Higher Education, Qualitative Research, Communication Education, Sociological Research Online and the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography.

All relevant information was collated thematically and systematically into a spreadsheet, in preparation for the creation of the end of project report, which would be published as part of a larger review paper.

## RESULTS

### Reduced researcher influence

The review revealed that although reduced researcher influence had a positive effect on the power asymmetry often arising in qualitative research, it had a negative impact on rapport-building between the researcher and participant due to the minimal contact. This is potentially problematic for the candid disclosure of sensitive experiences, where establishing a relationship with the researcher prompts more candid disclosure from participants.

### Online research

Many articles revealed that the use of video calls for research felt less 'formal' and created a relaxed environment which was useful for allowing both researchers and participants to remain in their own safe location, without imposing on each other's space. However, there was also the suggestion that the narrative or personal experiences can be interrupted by technical issues, and interrupt a student's thought process, thus the intimacy of the conversation.

### Epistemic factors underpinning listening techniques

Several pieces of literature looked at how participants may feel 'testimonial smothering' when speaking out in research studies. This occurs when a speaker limits their testimony 'in virtue of the reasonable risk of it being misunderstood or misapplied by the audience'. This was also linked with the way that friends often speak 'indirectly' to one another due to their often shared experiences which may maintain a distancing effect between themselves and the researcher, especially during the data analysis stage.

### Environment

One of the key aims of Listening Rooms is to create a safe environment for students to share their thoughts. Articles demonstrated that home spaces can provide both environments of 'autonomy' and 'control' for some, whilst being highly 'unstable' and 'unpredictable' for others.

## CONCLUSION

My literature review found that Listening Rooms combat many issues associated with traditional research techniques like interviews, surveys and questionnaires. The question-and-answer structure in some of these can often be unnerving for participants, particularly around sensitive topics. Many articles in my review suggested that the authenticity of data that arises from the use of topic prompts is much higher than other elicitation techniques in qualitative research. My study also showed that 'Listening Rooms' create an environment that encourages reflection and comfort for students by reducing power asymmetry between the participant and researcher, allowing them to control the conversation and speak out about personal experiences. The future application of this method is bright, with the potential to provide deeper insights into not only university life, but the experiences of marginalised groups in several institutions, whose voices deserve to be louder.