Interviewing in qualitative research

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Interviewing in qualitative research: The one-to-one interview

Frances Ryan, Michael Coughlan, Patricia Cronin

Background: The one-to-one interview is a commonly used data collection method in health and social research. Increasing attention has been given in the literature to the process of conducting an interview, particularly with respect to the role of the interviewer and the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. The individual interview is a valuable method of gaining insight into people's perceptions, understandings and experiences of a given phenomenon and can contribute to in-depth data collection. However, the interview is more than a conversational interaction between two people and requires considerable knowledge and skill on behalf of the interviewer.

Content: Interviews vary in type and structure depending on their philosophical orientation. This article examines the process of conducting the interview from a generic point of view, while making reference to different approaches. Considerations are also raised regarding interviewing in challenging situations. **Conclusions:** Several important stages need to be followed when conducting an interview. The nature of the questions, questioning techniques, listening and the interviewer-interviewee interactions are crucial to obtaining a successful outcome. Similarly, ethical considerations and the protection of participants are fundamental aspects of interviewing. Although interview data may be used as evidence about people's perceptions and understanding, it is pertinent to remember that responses may be shaped by variables such as if and how the interviewer has influenced the interviewee, and the level of trust and rapport between the two people. Hence, it is essential that interviewers are

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cognisant of the various techniques underpinning the interview process to maximize results.

ualitative research is concerned with the nature, explanation and understanding of phenomena. Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data are not measured in terms of frequency or quantity but rather are examined for in-depth meanings and processes (Labuschagne, 2003). Interviews are widely used as a data collection tool in qualitative research. They are typically used as a research strategy to gather information about participants' experiences, views and beliefs concerning a specific research question or phenomenon of interest (Lambert and Loiselle, 2007). Sandelowski (2002) purports that one-to-one interviews are the most commonly used data collection tools in qualitative research.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the interview as a data collection tool in social sci-

ence and health-care research. It acknowledges the main types of interview, including some discussion on discovery interviews, and focuses on examination of the one-to-one interview. Focus group interviews are a further form of interview; these are in-depth open-ended discussions that address a predefined topic of interest to the group and researcher (Goodman and Evans, 2006). Discussion of focus groups is beyond the scope of this article however, and readers are referred to earlier articles in this series by Plummer D'Amato (2008a; 2008b) for details of this approach.

Three broad perspectives of the one-to-one interview are examined; the process of interviewing, the role of the interviewer and interviewee, and interviewing in challenging situations. Methodological and ethical considerations are also explored.

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TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Three major categories of interviews are identified by Babbie (2007); the standardized interview, the semi-standardized interview and the unstandardized interview. The differences between each type are largely concerned with how the interview is structured.

Standardized interviews

Standardized (or structured) interviews employ the use of an interview schedule which contains structured and explicit questions that do not allow room for veering off the topic in question. Interviewers pose the same exactly worded questions in the same order to interviewees. Berg (2009) suggests that this form of interviewing is based on the premise that responses to questions will be comparable. Standardized interviews are formally structured and are similar in nature to a questionnaire survey whereby there are no deviations from the sequence of questions or the language used. They may also be used in the case of literacy difficulties, for example, if the respondent does not have the ability to read a questionnaire. Standardized interviews generate predominately quantitative data but may also incorporate some qualitative questions.

McKenna et al (2006) make the important distinction between the interview schedule and the interview guide. Standardized interviews employ an interview schedule that contains a set of predetermined questions that are adhered to throughout the interview process. In contrast, interview guides adopt a less formal approach to questioning and allow the interviewer to explore a number of different issues around a specific subject. Standardized interviews are based on the assumption that questions are worded in a clear unambiguous manner that is clearly understandable to the interviewee.

Semi-standardized interviews

Semi-standardized (or semi-structured) interviews offer a more flexible approach to the interview process. While they may use an interview schedule for predetermined topics, they allow for unanticipated responses and issues to emerge through the use of open-ended questioning (Tod, 2006). The flexibility of the semi-standardized interview allows the interviewer to pursue a series of less structured questioning and also permits the exploration of spontaneous issues raised by the interviewee to be explored. The wording of questions is flexible and facilitates different levels of language to be used and clarifications to be made by the interviewer (Berg, 2009).

Discovery interviews are an example of a semistandardized approach to interviewing. These are one-to-one interviews which use open-ended ques-

tions and probes, based on the principle of allowing the interviewee control over the interview process. The focus is on permitting the interviewee to tell his/her own story rather than answer a series of structured questions. Underpinning the discovery interview is the principle that participants understand the world in varying subjective ways. Therefore, issues are explored from an individualistic perspective. A 'spine' of themes is devised by the interviewer to act as a framework to guide the interview process and reflect the interviewee's personal experiences of the topic in question (Bridges et al, 2008). This facilitates the collection of richer more textured data from the participant than that obtained through formally structured scheduled questions.

Unstandardized interviews

Unstandardized (or unstructured) interviews do not engage a specific framework for questioning. During the unstructured interview the interviewer and interviewee have a conversation about a specific topic in response to the interviewer asking broad, open-ended questions. There is no set answer to the questions and the interview follows the direction of the participant's responses (Moyle, 2002). This type of interview is non-directive and while it may use an interview guide, this usually comprises themes rather than specific questions. Unstandardized interviews are underpinned by the assumption that little knowledge exists about the topic of interest therefore there are no predetermined questions to pose. To this end unstandardized interviews may be conducted to supplement field work observations.

Conduct of one-to-one interviews

One-to-one interviews are usually conducted face to face. This offers the researcher the opportunity to interpret non-verbal cues through observation of body language, facial expression and eye contact and thus may be seen to enhance the interviewers understanding of what is being said. To this end it permits the researcher to probe and explore hidden meanings and understanding. However, telephone and email interviews are increasingly being used in qualitative research. Telephone interviews are seen to be more cost effective than face-to-face interviews, requiring as they do less travel. Meho (2006) argues that email interviewing offers a less threatening and more sensitive approach to interviewing. Some potential problems associated with one-to-one and face-to-face interviewing, such as interviewee self-consciousness and perceived status differences between the interviewer/interviewee, may be minimized through the use of email interviewing. However, regardless of the chosen approach, it is pertinent that the type of interview is congruent with the research question and aims and objectives of the study.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Developing the interview schedule

The development of the interview schedule is an important first step in the construction of the interview process. The schedule or guide is determined by the structure of the interview, the nature of the research and the aims and objectives of the study. Polit and Hungler (1995) suggest that it should consist of an outline of categories that are relevant to the research and on which interview questions are ultimately based. Easy, non-threatening questions such as demographic information are useful for starting off the interview in a relaxed sensitive manner. Essential questions which directly concern the main focus of the study should follow. The sequencing of questions should allow the interviewee to be aware of what specific areas he or she is being asked about. More sensitive questions should be kept for when rapport and trust have been established and the interviewee is relaxed (Trochim, 2005).

Generally, the sequencing of questions comprises the initial introduction to the study and verification of consent. This is followed by non-threatening, factual questions that precede the essential interview questions. The more sensitive difficult questions come later. Robson (2002) advocates the use of prompts by the interviewer if appropriate. Prompts are useful in permitting the interviewee to expand on a particular issue or in getting them to re-engage with the interview process if they lose their train of thought. For example, asking 'what happened next?' can help to focus the interviewee on the subject matter. Similarly, probing questions enable interviewers to draw out more information by requesting the interviewee to elaborate on a particular issue: 'Can you tell me more about that please?..'. Probing questions allow the researcher to uncover deeper levels of meaning and seek clarity on the topic of interest. Short unambiguous questions are important in eliciting clear answers. Berg (2009) suggests that it is important to pre-test or pilot the interview schedule before the actual interview takes place. This can be done with other researchers or people familiar with the topic in question, and facilitates the identification of unclear or inappropriate questions. Poorly worded questions can subsequently be refined. It is important to ask questions that will answer the research question, therefore caution needs to be employed with the use of general or closed questions. Closed questions that require a yes or no answer from the interviewee are generally not helpful in eliciting useful information. Descriptive questions such as: 'Tell me what happened' or 'How did you feel when ... ?' tend to encourage interviewees to talk and expand on their stories.

Conducting the interview: The roles of the interviewer and interviewee

The one-to-one interview is a social interaction, and the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is of paramount importance in ensuring the process is successful. Kvale (1996) however, cautions that although the interview may be seen as a conversation between two people, the relationship between those two people is not equal. Therefore it is necessary to establish rapport and trust from the outset. Legard et al (2003) suggest that the demeanour of the interviewer is crucial in implementing this. A relaxed, confident and attentive approach demonstrated by the interviewer will help a good interview relationship develop. The role of the interviewer is to ensure that the interviewee is at ease and not threatened; hence the correct comfortable environment is also important.

Another important aspect of the role of the interviewer is that of active listening. Active listening is communicated through both the verbal and non-verbal medium; that is an open posture, appropriate facial expressions and good eye contact. The importance of letting the interviewee talk is also significant when conducting one-to-one interviews. The nature of the interview is conversational; however, the interviewer does not offer comment or judgment on the answers to questions, except perhaps to probe for clarification or elaboration. It is pertinent therefore for the interviewer to allow the interviewee to talk uninterrupted at their own pace while responding with comments and probes where appropriate. This allows the interview to flow smoothly (Roulston et al, 2003). Kvale (1996) argues that the use of silence is also an important facet of the interviewer's repertoire. The use of silence while maintaining good eye contact allows the interviewee time to pause and reflect and in some instances may be useful as a device to enhance data collection during the interview process. Similarly, the use of echoing or repeating what the interviewee said conveys that the interviewer is listening, thus encouraging the interviewee to proceed with the conversation.

The role of the interviewee is equally important to consider during the process of the one-to-one interview. Berg (2009) suggests that participants have diverse and complex reasons for agreeing to be interviewed which they may or may not express to the interviewer. They may also experience anxiety regarding how they are perceived by the interviewer and how their responses are being evaluated. If the person's responses are shaped by the context of the interview and influence of the interviewer, then it is incumbent on the interviewer to be aware of this and to convey behaviour that is

non-judgmental. The social interaction that takes place between the interviewer and interviewee is shaped by the verbal and non-verbal messages that occur between them during the interview process. Should the interviewer ignore what he or she has interpreted as a very sensitive area and continue on with questioning, then there is a risk that the interviewee will withhold information owing to either a reluctance to divulge such detail or an anticipation that the interviewer will disapprove. If however, the interviewee is confident that the interviewer will not offer judgment then the likelihood is that the interview will continue (Gorden, 2003). Hence, the cues and signs that are offered by the interviewee during the social interaction of the interview are important interpretations for the interviewer to make.

Analysis of the interview data

It is important to gain a verbatim account of the interview in order to analyse data from interviews. This is usually done by either tape or video recording the process and then transcribing the recording. The transcript should then be given to the interviewee to check that it is what they had said and that they are happy for it to remain unchanged. This helps ensure the validity of the data and interpretations made by the interviewer. Lathlean (2006) suggests that analysis of qualitative data needs to be rigorous and systematic and how it is carried out will depend on the particular chosen approach. How data are interpreted will also depend on the theoretical focus of the study. Qualitative data are usually reduced or condensed by a system of coding. Analysis then entails the development of subsequent themes and categories from the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) identify three major activities involved in data analysis:

- Data reduction: data are transcribed, simplified and focused. This occurs throughout the data collection process
- Data display: data are visibly presented on a graph or chart perhaps to show possible relationships and similarities
- Verification: possible conclusions and explanations are made from the data.

Data analysis and collection usually occur concurrently and the analytical approach adopted will require the data to be presented in different ways. The use of computer software packages such as NUD*IST and NVivo can also aid the process of qualitative data analysis, particularly where there are large amounts of data. Lathlean (2006) argues that the process of analysing qualitative data is not linear and is influenced by the aims of the research and the methodological underpinnings of the study.

Issues of rigour

The accuracy of data collected from an interview will vary according to how structured the interview is. Tod (2006) argues that even with semi-structured or unstructured interviews, a consistent approach and well-designed questions will help achieve rigour. Rigour, or trustworthiness, refers to the concepts of credibility, transferability and dependability (Koch, 2006). Interviews have the potential for bias to occur in relation to how the interview is conducted, how the interviewees are selected and if and how the interviewer has influenced the interview process. It is necessary for the interviewer to be aware of and reflect on these issues to minimize the risk of bias and enhance the rigour of the data. Clear accurate interview schedules and documentation will help to address these issues (Tod, 2006). Similarly, the use of a reflective diary of the interviewer's experience and observations during the interview process may also help to enhance rigour.

Ethical considerations

Protection of participants' rights is a fundamental aspect of conducting an interview, and the issues of informed consent and anonymity and confidentiality are of paramount importance. Potential participants should be given full explanations as to the nature of the research and the format the interview will take. It is necessary to obtain written consent before the interview and potential interviewees should be given ample time to reflect on whether they wish to partake or not. Verification of consent is required just before the interview commences. Should sensitive issues arise or if the interviewee becomes distressed then it is important to confirm consent throughout the interview process by asking the interviewee if they wish to continue. It is important to ensure interviewees understand the study and also to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality by not disclosing their identity. Interview tapes or transcripts should contain no identifiable features and all data should be stored securely and on password protected computers.

Interviewing in challenging situations

Undertaking interviews with vulnerable populations can be challenging both for the interviewer and interviewee. Moyle (2002) considers the interviewer/interviewee relationship when interviewing people with a mental illness. While it is important that a trusting relationship forms with interviewees, it is also prudent that boundaries are made explicit and that the role of the interviewer is understood to be that of researcher and not therapist (Moyle, 2002). Interviewing people with communication impairments may also pose difficulties and requires a re-thinking of strategies used to elicit data. Philpin

et al (2004) propose various strategies to overcome such obstacles to communication. A flexible approach to gathering information, such as the use of lip reading and the interviewee's written notes, are seen to enhance the interview process. Similarly, posing questions in a manner that requires a less detailed response and including carers and partners in the interview allows the interviewer to capture a more complete picture of the interviewee's account. Using interviewers with experience in interviewing people with communication difficulties is also seen to enhance the process (Philpin et al, 2004).

Chapple (2006) also notes the emotional and practical difficulties associated with interviewing people who are terminally ill. Questions should be worded in a manner that does not cause distress and the importance of careful listening and non-verbal cues cannot be over-emphasized. When interviewing someone who is extremely ill, it is important to pace the interview so that the interviewee has the opportunity for frequent rests. Comfortable surroundings are vitally important as is good recording equipment as seriously ill participants may not be able to speak loudly. Informed consent may clearly be a difficult issue for people who are seriously ill and the cognitive capacity of potential participants should be evaluated and assessed (Chapple, 2006).

Lowes and Gill (2006) contend that it is important for interviewers to be aware of the potential problems associated with interviewing participants about emotive issues. While some participants may find it difficult to speak about emotional or distressing issues, many find it helpful to be afforded the opportunity to speak about their experiences. The authors caution that it is necessary for interviewers to be cognisant that the purpose of the interview is not to offer any sort of therapeutic intervention. However, Kvale (1996) posits that although interviews are not purposefully therapeutic, they do provide a forum for participants to unburden their feelings to an interested listener and thus may be construed as helpful or healing in some instances. Lowes and Gill (2006) furthermore purport that it is important for interviewers to note that interviews do not necessarily cause distress but may provide a medium through which interviewees can express their distress. The potential outcomes of the interview for the interviewee need to be considered from the outset and as the interview progresses. Ethical issues such as protecting the participant from any potential harm or distress need to be carefully considered. Similarly, the impact of the interview on the emotional wellbeing of the interviewer is a salient point to reflect on and Lowes and Gill (2006) suggest that it may be pertinent for qualitative researchers to seek clinical supervision as well as academic supervision when interviewing in very emotive situations.

CONCLUSIONS

Interviews are a flexible and useful method of data collection and are especially appropriate for collecting information on participants' experiences, beliefs and behaviours. Tod (2006) suggests that the flexibility of the interview structure is one of its greatest strengths. The interview facilitates the collection of large amounts of in-depth data, however, it is pertinent to note that it may be a costly and time-consuming method of data collection and analysis. Similarly, the introduction of bias through the use of inadequate questioning is a potential disadvantage. The roles played by the interviewer and interviewee and the effect they may have on the interview process also need to be considered.

One-to-one interviews provide valuable information about the social milieu in which people exist. They also provide insight into people's attitudes, experiences and perspectives and are thus a useful data gathering tool in qualitative research. Andersson and Öhlén (2005) provide a useful example of how one-to-one interviews are effective in gaining an understanding of participants' personal meanings and experiences of a given phenomenon. One-to-one interviewing is more than just a social interaction—it is a process that has a distinct purpose that is constructed to derive meaning from a particular situation. It is a performance that requires skill and forethought. If the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to capture specific meanings and interpretations, then it is necessary for the interview to be understood in the context of the processes that underpin and guide it. To ensure a successful and meaningful outcome, the complexities of planning and implementing the interview need to be viewed from the perspective of both the interviewer and interviewee. **IJTR**

Conflict of interest: none

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KEY POINTS

- One-to-one interviews are a valuable method of collecting rich in-depth data about participants' experiences and perspectives.
- Interviews vary in structure and the approach chosen will depend on the aims and objectives of the study and the research design.
- It is necessary to consider the interview schedule, questioning techniques and the role of the interviewer and interviewee when conducting the oneto-one interview.
- Interviews are time consuming and costly, and have the potential for bias.

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