The joys and challenges of semi-structured interviewing

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Abstract

Semi-structured interviewing is an important tool for gathering data in qualitative research. This paper explores some of the joys and challenges associated with research interviewing. It discusses some of the basic skills required to do interviewing well, some of the difficulties associated with interviewing on a practical and emotional level, and how to address them. Being a good interviewer in a research context means to be aware of the responsibility for the participants’ wellbeing as well as one’s own. Good listening skills and emotional control are among the most crucial skills to develop. This paper summarises some of the skills needed to remain or become a professional, empathetic and ethical interviewer in the context of community practice. If some basic guidelines are followed and combined with practice, the craft of interviewing can become an art.

Key words

Interviews, qualitative research, ethics, reflective practice

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Introduction

Interviewing has become a staple technique in qualitative research. It is also ubiquitous in other contexts such as the media, which might lead to the belief that interviewing is easy – only requiring some questions to be fired at the opponent. However, this is not true of journalistic interviewing, and even less so of interviewing in a research context. Good interviewing requires empathy, knowledge of the subject and other basic skills such as listening, time management and organisational skills. Interviewing in a research context also has important ethical dimensions. This is never more important than in a health and community practice context, where practitioners are often working with vulnerable groups and children.

This paper will delve into much detail about the epistemological basis for qualitative research, or provide an answer to the question of why (or why not) to interview. It will also not discuss the analysis of interview material in any detail. Rather, this article will explore some of the joys and challenges associated with research interviewing. It will discuss some of the basic skills required to do interviewing well, and how to remain or become a professional, empathetic and ethical interviewer in the context of primary care and community practice.

The main premise for this article stems from one of the seminal textbooks on interviewing by Kvale, namely that Interview research is a craft that, if well carried out, can become an art (p.13).1 A good research interview can feel magical. An intensely concentrated researcher who is open toward the participant’s experience and a participant who is willing to share their experience freely can together create a situation where the researcher becomes absorbed in their lifeworld, for the duration of the interview at least. And the participant may for the first time have the experience that they are truly being listened to. Especially in situations where participants may have perceived a lack of acknowledgment or attention, as may be the case for clients with chronic illness or living in isolated circumstances such as care homes, this may have a profoundly positive effect.2 While by no means all interviews reach this level of intensity, it does nevertheless point to the fact that power dynamics are at play in interviews that the researcher needs to be aware of, and carefully manage in order to fulfill standards of ethical practice.

Key Issues

What are interviews, and why do them?

Interviews are one of the main methods of data collection in qualitative research. Mostly, they are used in types of research that do not produce objective or quantifiable data. One exception is the use of structured interviews (where an assessor is administering a questionnaire to participants instead of them filling it in themselves), which is often used in clinical situations such as psychological assessment.3 However, this paper focuses on semi-structured interviews, which aim to explore in-depth experiences of research participants, and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. Such interviews are a particularly useful research tool in situations where little is known about the topic of interest – where the topic of interest may be particularly sensitive, such as supporting vulnerable parents4 or postnatal depression,5 and where the variability rather than commonality of responses is the focus.6

One useful definition of such types of interviews is that they are ‘conversations where the outcome is a coproduction of the interviewer and the subject (p.xviii)’.7 However, while interviews share a number of features with conversations, they also have several features that clearly distinguish them.

An interview, as opposed to a conversation, has a clear purpose and structure, and goes beyond a spontaneous exchange of views. Whereas in a conversation topics might bounce back and forth and speakers take turns in voicing their opinion, an interview is normally about a set topic. The researcher normally sets the agenda.
and knows which topics they would like to cover. The researcher would also aim to maintain a controlled and professional exterior, and to refrain from spontaneously expressing their own views (see also below for further discussion of the skills needed). An interview is a careful questioning and listening approach, and is not between equal partners. The last point is particularly pertinent for ethical considerations in interviewing.

Much of our knowledge of interviews may be shaped by the type of interview that can be witnessed daily in the media. However, a research interview is quite different from a journalistic interview. The main points of divergence hinge on the ethical background to a research interview. Researchers are bound by a different code of conduct than a journalist, and have a duty of care toward their interviewee that differs from that of a journalist. For example, the first principle of the journalists’ code of conduct is to ‘‘at all times uphold and defend the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed.”8 It also outlines that material should be obtained by ‘‘honest, straightforward and open means”, but this statement is then diluted because it can exclude investigations ‘‘in the public interest.”9 Journalists are expected to abide by their code of conduct, and if they join the National Union of Journalists they must sign that they ‘‘strive to adhere to it, but there are no clear repercussions should a journalist choose not to.”7 Compare this to the code of conduct of the NMC that health visitors, nurses and midwives adhere to, which states as the first principle that ‘‘the people in your care must be able to trust you with their health and wellbeing’ and also that you must be ‘‘open and honest, act with integrity and uphold the reputation of your profession.”8 Importantly, the NMC’s code of conduct contains no qualifying clause and outlines that the professional is ‘‘personally accountable for actions and omissions” in their practice. Failure to comply with the code can endanger a professional’s registration and question their fitness to practise. Ethically, then, conducting an interview as a healthcare professional is very different from a journalistic investigation.

**How to conduct a semi-structured research interview**

A number of key considerations need to be taken into account before, during and after conducting a semi-structured research interview (see Box 1).

**Preparing for the interview**

This may seem obvious, but for an interview to go well, good preparation is crucial. Being well prepared includes having thought about the location of the interview – does the space allow for privacy, is it a pleasant environment, will it allow the participant to relax? It also means having prepared both technically (is there a recorder, is it charged, are there replacement batteries, and pen and paper for notes?) and contextually (is all relevant information about the participant to hand, for instance their mobile phone number in case of delays, and might there be something specific about them that ought to be raised in the interview?).

It is also important to consider the safety of the researcher and the participants, and to have adequate safety protocols in place. It is particularly important to safeguard participants when conducting research on sensitive topics or with particularly vulnerable populations, but it is also important to ensure the safety of the researcher. For instance, when a researcher is conducting interviews away from their workplace, a co-researcher or their supervisor should have all relevant contact details and have agreed a safety protocol that states what steps should be followed if the researcher can not be contacted within an agreed timeframe.

**During the interview**

**Listening carefully**

Some general skills are needed to conduct a successful research interview. These include being a good listener and holding oneself back – the interview is supposed to explore the participant’s experiences, and jumping into the conversation too quickly will mean asking more in-depth explorations. One of the golden rules of interviewing is ‘‘listen more, talk less.”11 Listening in an interview takes place on several levels. It requires the researcher to listen to the actual content of what the interviewee is saying, to make sure they understand and can ask further questions if necessary, and to follow interesting avenues that may open up. It also simultaneously involves active listening and awareness of the process of the interview – the timing, the wellbeing of the interviewee, and cues for moving the interview forward.

**Managing silences**

Most people are skilled communicators – they intuitively take turns in conversation and fill silences.12 Prolonged silence is very unusual in normal everyday conversation, and something most people feel uncomfortable with. However, silences can be a very useful tool in interviewing. By allowing a silence to expand, the researcher creates a space for the interviewee to fill. However, this offering needs to be managed carefully. Silences can take on different meanings, such as an absence of understanding, or disapproval of what was said.13 It is important to not give participants a feeling of disapproval, but silence can prompt them to further explain and explore what they have said.

**Being non-judgmental**

An important aspect of a good interview is for the researcher to manage their own emotional responses to what they may hear and to remain professional and non-judgmental. A participant may have strong views and make offensive remarks (such as remarks that the researcher may find sexist or racist) in an interview context. This may be difficult, but if the researcher challenges offensive remarks immediately, the participant may become non-responsive and the interview prematurely. A better solution may be for researchers to explore responses they find offensive at the end of the interview, and to ask the interviewee in an open and non-judgmental way to explain them further.

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**Box 1. Conducting a semi-structured interview**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation:</th>
<th>During:</th>
<th>After:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Listening carefully</td>
<td>Extensive field notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical:</td>
<td>Managing silences</td>
<td>Supervision or discussion</td>
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<td>Contextual:</td>
<td>Being non-judgmental</td>
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<td>Safety:</td>
<td>Allowing the participant to guide</td>
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<td>Focus, professionalism and emotional control</td>
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Being non-judgmental is also important when the interviewee may have made choices you disagree with as a researcher. To give an example, imagine you are a health visitor and you decide to conduct a study with women to explore their experiences with breastfeeding. As a health visitor, you are used to giving women advice about breastfeeding, and to encourage them to breastfeed. However, a woman you visit tells you in the interview that she does not want to try breastfeeding because she is worried it will make her breasts sag later on. You may find this difficult and may want to give her more information on breastfeeding, but at this stage it may be more prudent for you to remain silent and give her the space to explore her concerns around breastfeeding in detail before you respond. This may allow her to become clearer about her own motivations and concerns, and may help you to respond better.

Allowing the participant to guide

Although interviews are always a ‘coproduction’ of the interviewer and the subject as discussed above, this coproduction can be either guided by the interviewer or the interviewee. In qualitative explorative research it is generally preferable to let the interviewee guide the conversation, as it is their experience that is the focus of the interview. Being non-directive includes keeping reinforcing and affirmative responses, such as ‘yes,’ ‘right’ or ‘uh huh!’ to a minimum. This can be challenging because of the aforementioned conversation conventions that come naturally, but it is important because even such small responses can potentially influence the participant’s responses.11

Focus, professionalism and emotional control

Staying focused in a research interview can be challenging. And yet, it is crucial so that important aspects of the interview are not missed, and so that the researcher remains a good listener on all levels, as outlined above. There will be situations in the interview where it is appropriate to share some personal information, for instance when asked directly, but this should only be done within clearly defined boundaries. It is also important to bear in mind that any information that is disclosed may have implications for the participant’s assessment of the researcher, and what information they choose (or not) to share in turn. Consider the following example:

Hannah: I always say you’re a graduate woman when you’re a mother. I’m an undergraduate woman. But women with kids, you have children?
Eike: No.
Hannah: Women with children, absolutely and they do it in the nicest possible way but they do it... believe they know more than women without children.

There is no way of knowing for certain, but this extract from an interview conducted for my PhD research with women who became infertile after breast cancer treatment suggests that Hannah may have reacted very differently had I said that I had children.

Lastly, it can be crucial to maintain a sense of emotional control. Sometimes, interviewing participants about their experiences can be upsetting, especially in healthcare settings. It can be very challenging to witness someone become very upset during the interview. In my experience, the most useful response is to tell participants that they can take their time, and then remain calm and silent, giving them some space to collect themselves. Emotional control can be difficult to maintain for the researcher in very sad interviews, and may require techniques such as pinching oneself. I have used this technique in some interviews that were particularly emotionally challenging, for instance in one situation where a man was talking in tears about the loss of his son and daughter to cancer. While potentially difficult for the researcher, it is crucial for the sake of the interview, because it is important to allow the participant to talk freely without having to worry about the researcher’s feelings. This was highlighted by a woman talking about her experiences of a mastectomy for breast cancer when asked about the experience of taking part in the study and being interviewed:

Quite cathartic I would say. I’d imagine that’s why people would want to do it in a way, it’s kind of a positive way of offloading your reasons for decisions, where there’s no emotional involvement and the person’s asking you purely out of interest not because they have any take on what you should do or shouldn’t do, so it’s a relief too, quite emotional.

It is important for the researcher to maintain emotional control during the interview, but equally crucial for them to judge the lasting emotional impact that it may have, and respond to it appropriately.

After the interview

One useful task after the interview is to write extensive field notes. These may discuss the context in which the interview took place, the space where it was conducted, and any features of the interview that were considered noteworthy, such as particular phrases or sentiments, or aspects the researcher may have found surprising. This process of writing field notes may also help the researcher to ascertain their emotional wellbeing after the interview. If the interviews are likely to be upsetting, it may be worth setting up regular supervision with a professional to discuss the impact, but even if this is not in place, the researcher should be able to contact another professional to discuss their experiences, be it another member of the research team or a colleague.

The joys of interviewing

After the lengthy discussion of the challenges of interviewing, it is worth highlighting some of its joys.

Most people who agree to be interviewed are very generous with their time and their stories, and researchers feel frequently humbled and privileged to be allowed to get this insight into sometimes difficult experiences. At the same time, a researcher can make a positive difference by giving people space to talk – as described in the abstract above, it can be ‘cathartic’ to talk to a stranger about your life. In relation to cancer patients, it has been highlighted that talking about their feelings at length can be therapeutic for patients who may not get the chance to do so in a time-pressured healthcare system.2 This is most likely also true of clients in other situations, such as single mothers14 or older adults in care homes.15 It may become problematic if the line between a counselling session and a research interview is blurred, but as long as the researcher remains watchful of observing professional boundaries, then this should not become an issue.

Professional boundaries in an interview situation can be maintained by setting the scope of the interview from the outset, giving clients contact details of external agencies in case of distress, maintaining confidentiality and not divulging information about other clients, or too much personal information about oneself.16,17

By giving participants space to talk, a researcher can also broaden their own
horizons in terms of the topic under research. One of the major advantages of qualitative interview research is that, rather than relying on the research team to define all topics of discussion and possible responses in advance (as in quantitative research), new insights can be gained from the perspective of the participant.

Gaining these participant-centred insights can be crucial in understanding the breadth of human experiences, or when designing interventions, so that they can be individually tailored. Highlighting the importance of individual and collective experiences of an issue can be a vital step in improving policy and clinical practice.18,25

Ethics

Being a researcher means having an ethical responsibility for the interviewee as well as oneself. Each discipline's code of conduct generally outlines the particular responsibilities in detail. In addition, research including human participants usually needs to be at least approved by the research ethics committee of the institution where the research will take place. Ethics committees play an important role in ensuring that principles of responsible and ethical conduct are upheld in the research design, but it is also important that the researchers remain reflective about their work. Ethical responsibility should not be offloaded to the ethics committee, and in some situations, ethical responsibility may go beyond the requirements of the ethics committee. For community practitioners, research normally also has to be approved by the NHS National Research Ethics Service (NRES), part of the National Patient Safety Agency. NRES aims to promote ethical research and to protect the rights, safety, dignity and well-being of research participants.20 Its website provides useful guidance on local research ethics committees.20

Conclusion

This paper has outlined some key principles, challenges and joys of semi-structured interviewing. Interviewing can be a very rewarding and positive experience, and it can allow the researcher access to a broad range of experiences and perspectives on any given topic. Interviewing can be a very useful tool, especially in unexplored areas or very sensitive topics.

However, some skills are needed to conduct interviews in a responsible, professional and ethical manner. Good listening skills and emotional control are among the most crucial skills to develop. When some basic guidelines are followed, and with practice, the craft of interviewing can indeed become an art.

Further Information

Several textbooks are available that give detailed guidance to interview skills. Two of the most commonly referenced books are by Kvale1,21 and Seidman.11 Many books on qualitative research more generally also have useful sections on qualitative interviewing, such as Denzin and Lincoln22 or Miles and Huberman.22 Finally, there are some useful textbooks on qualitative research in health care more specifically, such as Pope and Mays23 or Green and Thorogood.24

References